Millions of people around the world watched as President Barack Obama took the Oath of Office during the Presidential Inauguration on Tuesday, Jan. 20.

Though many would have loved to be in the crowd at Washington, D.C. that day, most had to be content with watching the event on TV. Not so, however, for two fortunate people who were among the two million in attendance at the inauguration and who were willing to share their experiences with The Holyoke Enterprise.

Megan Colglazier, daughter of Harvey and Nancy Colglazier and a junior at Holyoke High School, was in attendance as a member of the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference. Also there was Laura Mailander, daughter of Paul and Teresa Mailander and a former Holyoke resident who is now a school teacher in Chicago.

Though they were at the inauguration for different reasons, both described a very similar experience, reporting the feelings of hope, enthusiasm and togetherness that were expressed throughout the large crowd.

Megan Colglazier

Colglazier's adventure began back in March when she received an invitation from the Congressional Youth Leadership Council to attend the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference. "Not knowing the outcome of the election at that time, or the historic event this would turn out to be, I accepted and began making plans to attend," she said.

As a junior high student, Colglazier attended the 2005 Junior National Young Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C., so this was not her first trip to the city. In 2006, she had also attended the National Leaders State Conference in Denver.

Colglazier was among 7,500 other high school scholars in attendance at the conference, as well as 4,000 college students. The gigantic group took up 300 buses and over 60 hotels.

"Meeting students on the trip was very easy, and the groups were broken up in only 20 scholars and 50 kids on a bus at a time," she said.

Colglazier left for D.C. on Saturday, Jan. 17, and conference activities began that night after she got there. They lasted through Tuesday night, and Colglazier returned home Wednesday, Jan. 21.

Besides the inauguration activities they attended, much of the conference took place on the University of Maryland campus. Here, the young leaders learned about the role of the presidency now and in the past, presidential campaigns, inaugurations and held in-depth debates.

Speakers at the youth conference included historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, journalist Lisa Ling, General Colin Powell, Al Gore and South Africa's Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Colglazier said her favorite was Tutu. "He was influential and a good speaker," she said. She especially enjoyed the way he ended his speech.

"He left us by saying that he is proud to live in America today because it is in good hands. Then he paused and we all expected that he meant Obama's hands. But then he said, 'America is in the hands of the youth leaders.'"

Activities outside the University included a drive through D.C.'s historic areas, a dinner cruise along the Potomac River and a tour of the Newseum.

"The highlight of the Newseum for me," said Colglazier, "was that one floor out of six was dedicated to 9/11. This floor included headline newspapers from around the world, a theatre showing video clips from that day and thousands of pictures. There were also artifacts from the Twin Towers."

On Sunday, Jan. 18, conference members attended the Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial, featuring the “We Are One” themed concert. It featured performers such as Beyonce, Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder and Garth Brooks.

However, the highlight of the entire trip for Colglazier was the inauguration itself. Most of the conference members, she said, stood behind the Lincoln Memorial, but she and a friend were able to stand in the Silver Ticket area. “It was closer to the Capitol than I had ever imagined,” she said.

The entire area was packed with people. “There were people standing up on blocks and posts, and sitting on each other’s shoulders so they could see what was going on.”

Despite the large crowd though, she felt very safe. “I was expecting with that many people there would be some kind of violence or protesting, but everyone was completely supportive. There was no violence or arrests. It was fun to see so many people so excited and happy.”

When asked about the chilly temperatures that day, she responded it was cold, but not as cold as she was expecting it to be. “There were kids there from, like, Florida, Arizona and California who didn’t handle it very well, though,” she said.

Following the inauguration, conference members were supposed to watch the Inaugural Parade, but it was running behind and the group had to head back to the hotel to prepare for that night’s activities.

The culmination of the conference was the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference Black Tie Gala Inaugural Ball and Dinner, held at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum. Headlining the gala was the hit band Daughtry. Guys wore tuxes and women were expected to wear formals, according to Colglazier.

Though she returned home Wednesday tired and feeling like the last few days had been a blur, Colglazier said each day of the trip was worth it.

“This trip taught me more about the election, inauguration, past presidents and President Obama in five days than I could have learned over a lifetime,” said Colglazier. “Being able to attend this conference was a once in a lifetime experience and it was unforgettable. It was more than reading books and listening to speakers; it was knowing that I was attending a part of history that made me truly intrigued through the whole trip.”

Laura Mailander

As a teacher at an African-American school in Chicago, Mailander and her students have been following the presidential election closely. “Having an African-American run for and then elected president has meant so much to them,” she explained. “I knew as soon as he was elected that I wanted to be there for them.”

To Mailander, attending the Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C. was a way for her to connect with her students as well as bring the event closer to home for them.

This was not a real touristy trip for her, as she had been to the capital before and there was not enough time for much sightseeing. Nor was it the first time she had seen Obama speak, having attended his election celebration at Grant Park in November.

It was a fast and furious trip for Mailander and the seven other teachers from her school who drove down together. Leaving Saturday and driving through the night, they made it to D.C. in time on Sunday, Jan. 18 to catch the “We Are One” concert at the Washington Mall.

Monday was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—a day that Obama had asked Americans to devote to service. Mailander and her fellow teachers heeded the call. They spent the day doing service projects around the city, including picking up trash and donating blood.

On the big day, Mailander said it took a very long time to get into the city. The group was staying with the family of one of her companions, who lived just outside D.C. Traffic was terrible, but the group managed to make their way in time to get a fairly good position.

“We were right by the Washington Monument,” she said. “We couldn’t really make out individuals, but we could see the pool and the stage. It was a great view, considering.”

Being there in the middle of all the excitement was an experience Mailander found hard to describe. “It was amazing being surrounded by such a wide variety of people—old, young, every ethnicity. Everyone was so happy; people were hugging each other and cheering. Enthusiasm and hope penetrated the mood. There was such a feeling of togetherness—that everyone was there to celebrate with and support Obama.”

The moment was made even more profound for her when she discovered she was standing next to a large group of people who had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the 1960s.

“It was pretty incredible to see them there, knowing what they had been through and what that day must have meant to them. You realize how far we have come. I just stood there soaking in all the history surrounding me.”

In order to be at work the next day, Mailander and her colleagues had to leave immediately after the inauguration speech. When she returned, she shared her experiences with her students, who had watched the event on TV in school the day before.

“Many of them have never even left their neighborhoods, so I spent a lot of time just trying to explain to them how big two million people is and what that looks like,” she said.

She also showed them her photos, talked with them about Obama’s speech and then the class tried to put themselves in the shoes of Obama’s daughters by trying to imagine what it would be like if their dads were president.

“To many of my students, Obama is a hero,” said Mailander. “They are proud of him for being President, being a good speaker and a good father.”