

# Locals honored to attend D.C. event

## Mitchell: 'Once in a lifetime'

By CAROLYN STEEVES

CHARLOTTE — It wasn't until Thursday, when Joel Ford picked up his official inauguration packet, that reality hit home: He actually would be attending the swearing-in ceremony of Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States.

Ford, chairman of the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party, said he took a few minutes to study his ticket, directions and program for the event.

"I was like, 'Wow. This is the real deal here,'" Ford said.

An estimated 2 million people are expected in Washington, D.C., today for Obama's inauguration — just about double the entire population of Mecklenburg County. Among them will be several notables from Charlotte.

City Council Member James Mitchell said he and his family will attend the inauguration and events for the National League of Cities. Mitchell recently was elected NLC's second vice president.

"This is a humbling experience for me, but one I'm really going to cherish — representing Charlotte as well as NLC," Mitchell said. "I think it's fitting that the day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day,

Barack Obama will be sworn in."

Mitchell said he hopes the election of the nation's first African-American president will encourage people to embrace diversity.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience," he said. "I'm glad to be in this unique position."

Mitchell said his daughters — at ages 11 and 8, just a year older than Obama's daughters Malia and Sasha — hope they'll get to meet the president's children.

"We've got a good seat on the parade — I told them that's the best opportunity they'll have," Mitchell said.

His fellow Council Member Susan Burgess, who also serves on the Democratic National Committee, also will be in Washington, D.C., today.

"I feel very honored to be part of this historic event," she said. "I think it's so very significant that we have elected our very first African-American president. ... It's my deep belief that he was elected on merit, experience, wisdom and potential — rather than race. The fact that he is indeed African-American makes this a very special event. I believe we've reached a milestone in our nation."

Burgess said she believes Obama is "off to a fine start" in assembling his transition team.

"I feel very confident in his leadership to guide us through this very difficult time,"

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she said.

Ford, with the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party, said Thursday he was feeling excited and hopeful as he anticipated today's event. Like other leaders, Ford said he is optimistic that Obama's election, together with those of U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan and U.S. Rep. Larry Kissell, also would increase cooperation between North Carolina and Washington, D.C., officials.

"I think (Obama's inauguration) is a symbol of progress and obviously, most notably, change — a change in philosophy in terms of how the country will be governed from a presidential standpoint," Ford said.

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