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ROXBURY

## Roxbury 1st-graders joyed by private performance for Obama

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 29, 2012 04:26 PM

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Eighteen first graders from Orchard Gardens K-8 pilot school in Roxbury were featured guests yesterday at the White House where they recited a poem and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech for President Obama. Governor Deval Patrick, who helped arranged the visit, called it an "absolutely flawless" performance.

By Matt Rocheleau and Zachary T. Sampson, Globe Correspondents

After a whirlwind, 28-hour trip from Boston to the nation's capital and back, a class of first graders from a Roxbury school that performed Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech for President Obama were still basking in the White House glow.

"We were elated. It was so overwhelming for the students," said the Darlene White-Dottin, the teacher of class of 18 six-and-seven-year-olds from the Orchard Gardens K-8 pilot school.

After getting a tour of some of the historic grounds at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., the class convened in the Diplomatic Reception Room, where they were welcomed by Gov. Deval Patrick. He helped arranged [the trip](#) after the students performed for him at the State House last month and one student told the governor, a close ally of the President, that it was their "dream" to meet Obama, school administrators said.

Waiting anxiously in the intimate setting, the tension in the room came to a noticeable peak just before the commander-in-chief made his entrance, the teacher recalled.

The President immediately calmed the room with an unexpectedly informal hello, White-Dottin said.

"He came in with this friendly voice and said, 'Hi there, so do you want to take pictures first or perform for me first,'" she said by phone today.

After President's introduction, one excited young girl said she needed to go to the bathroom; she couldn't wait, according to the teacher. Obama noticed, took the girl by her hand and escorted her out of the room where he handed her off to a White House staff member who brought the girl to a restroom.

"We expected him to be really formal. But, he was so laid back and comfortable," she said. "The students liked that."

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White-Dottin said she's been teaching her classes King's iconic civil rights movement speech for the past 18 years, but never before had she seen her students perform the speech with such strength and energy.

"In that place and in that time, I could feel the power in those students' voices," she said. "It was truly amazing. They did an awesome job. I was just so proud."

Aboard the US Airways plane that left Boston early Tuesday morning, the class practiced their performance. Each student – most of whom had never flown before – had a chance to sit in the pilot seat while the aircraft was on the ground. Dressed in school uniforms spruced up with sport coats and ties, the children received a few souvenirs after meeting with the President, including M&M's candies bearing the White House seal, officials said. The class also visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Smithsonian Museum before returning to their Roxbury school mid-morning today.

"It was a lot to take in. The trip started with a bang. By the time they could inhale what had previously happened, bam, they were on to the next thing," White-Dottin said.

The trip was funded through hastily-compiled private donations, school officials said. The bulk of the \$12,000 raised came from Bank of America.

Along with the teacher and her class, the superintendent of Boston Public Schools, Carol R. Johnson, the principal of Orchard Gardens, Andrew Bott, and three chaperones made the trip to Washington D.C.

One of those chaperones was the school secretary. She is one of just two staff members – the other is on maternity leave – who has worked at the consistently-underperforming school since it opened in 2003, Bott said.

Amid constant teacher and administration turnover, the school has consistently been ranked as one of the lowest-performing schools in Massachusetts. But since being designated as one of a dozen turnaround schools in Boston at the start of the 2010 school year, the school that enrolls about 760 students has seen significant improvement through changes funded by \$3.7 million in public grant money.

School leaders attribute the gains made so far to staff overhaul, instructional changes, an expanded school day, more parental involvement, added art and

sports offerings and partnerships with local organizations.

Gov. Patrick said in a phone interview last night that he had waited with the first-graders in the Diplomatic Reception Room while President Obama conducted business in the Oval Office and recalled how the youngsters were in “disbelief” when Obama greeted them.

Still, he said, they composed themselves to flawlessly recite the “I Have a Dream Speech” for the beaming President.

“I was watching them and fighting back tears and watching the President just absorb it all,” Patrick said. “This school has gone from being one of the poorest performers in the city to being one of the strongest performers in the state. It’s a tremendous turnaround.”

A year-and-a-half ago, the school’s principal said students mocked a teacher when she told a group of seventh and eighth grade students that she was “proud to be teaching there.”

“The students said: ‘Who would be proud to be teaching at Orchard Gardens,’” Bott recalled.

But that attitude has changed, following the school’s improved performance and this week’s presidential invitation.

“The entire school is excited. There’s a lot of pride here now.” he said, noting how a group of eighth graders approached him when he returned to the school this morning and began prying the principal for details about the class’ visit to the White House, curious about whether the nation’s leader had inquired about their school.

“I saw this as an invitation for the whole school,” Bott said.

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