Two Worlds
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A year and a half ago, Angela Parker '87 didn't think the United States would have its first black president — but it wasn't because she thought the United States wasn't ready.

"I just didn't think Barack Obama had a chance against the Clinton machine," said Parker, assistant director of classroom support in UDit, the University's information technology division.

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Merely one generation apart, their perspectives seem from different worlds. That's why Parker stayed in Dayton for the historic inauguration, joining her father at his home to watch it.

Parker said her father, who grew up in Greenwood, Miss., recounts vividly the sights, the sounds and even the smells in the air on Aug. 31, 1955 — the day police recovered the decomposing body of Chicago teenager Emmitt Till from the Tallahatchie River near his home, Parker said. Three days before that, Till, visiting family in nearby Money, Miss., had been kidnapped, beaten, shot and dumped in the river with the metal fan of a cotton gin tied with barbed wire around his neck. Till's death, less than four months after the murders of two other black men attempting to cast ballots in Mississippi, became a catalyst for the civil rights movement.

"For my father and people who were around during that time, the inauguration of an African-American president is something they never dreamed would happen," said Parker, who majored in biomedical engineering technology. "This will be a very special day for him."

It was indeed.

"He talked about his father maintaining his dignity," she said. "It took a quiet strength for a man to remain dignified in an environment where people are constantly trying to rob you of your dignity. ... He told me, 'I wish my mom could see this.'"

Parker said her grandmother always voted, but her grandfather never did because he couldn't pass the literacy test required of black voters at the polls.

"He told me how they used to chime a bell when the polls opened and closed," she said. "One time, his father's boss heard the bell and asked him if he'd voted. It was a dig. His boss knew he couldn't have voted."

Though being in Washington for the inauguration would have been a great experience, "I knew I was in the right place," Parker said. "There will come a time when kids will ask why this was a big deal, and I can give witness. I can give witness to what things were like because of what my father told me. I don't take history for granted."