

Rally brings sisters closer

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Gettings of Chicago. "I came because I wanted to tune into this. It was a sisterhood thing."

Women flooded into Philadelphia on airplanes, trains, buses, cars and vans, filling hotels and doubling up at the homes of friends for an event that many hoped would rival the Million Man March in Washington in 1995. Crowd estimates for that march were 400,000 from the U.S. Park Police, who are now forbidden by Congress to make estimates, to more than 800,000 from a Boston University professor, to a million according to organizer Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam. That march is credited by some with sparking a new sense of responsibility and collective purpose in many African American communities.

"I love it," said a smiling Sheryl Bundle, as she looked over the crowd along Benjamin Franklin Parkway. "I'm so excited to see so many positive sisters. Everybody's excited. Everybody is friendly."

Other women, however, said they were disappointed with an atmosphere that, in places, more resembled an ordinary street festival than the solemn spiritual awakening that was intended. "I actually felt some animosity out here," said Veatrice Blue, 19, who drove from Elizabeth, N.J., with two friends. "You can sense it from some of the women. It is a look that they give you."

Charlotte's Cheryl Ballard, who flew to Philadelphia to meet four friends for the march, said she enjoyed a "very spiritual day."

"I felt a lot of sisterly love," said Ballard, owner of an events planning firm.

But Ballard said she felt a bit let down afterwards. "I felt empty," she said. "Everything went back to the status quo."

"I had already been feeling, not just as females, but as a community as whole needs to come together and be more supportive of each other. (The march) made me feel more of that."

"I was surprised to see as

many young people...a lot of under 20s."

While the event was called for black women, thousands of black men turned out for the march, often escorting their wives, daughters or girlfriends. Also, male vendors came to sell their wares, from earrings to sweatshirts. Men from the Nation of Islam provided a line of security for the speakers.



Ballard

"As far as I am concerned, this day is about family," said Braheem Jeffcoat, a North Philadelphia resident who came to the march with his wife and 5-year-old daughter. "It is about atonement, trying to reconcile differences, all of the good things that we need to be about as a people."

The Million Woman March was the idea of Coney and Phile Chionesu, grass-roots activists who only recently became well known even here in their home town of Philadelphia. Determined to put together an event that spoke first to the needs of women locked in poor neighborhoods, where they watch too many of their men, children and neighbors fall victim to drugs, crime or prison.

In following their vision, the organizers largely excluded mainstream groups, including sororities, which are significant networking groups for black women, and many established civil rights groups.

Chionesu called the march "a declaration of independence from ignorance, poverty, enslavement, and all the things that has happened to us that has helped to bring about the confusion and disharmony that we experience with one another."

In the end, however, the march attracted a broad range of participants, including some nationally known entertainers and political figures. Among them were actress Jada Pinkett, Rep. Maxine

Waters (D-Calif.); singer Faith Evans; Cora Masters Barry, the wife of Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry; and longtime activist Dorothy Height.

Sister Souljah, the rap activist and author, was also there, calling on the women to maintain their commitment and feelings of unity beyond the events of the march.

"I hear a lot of people out there today saying, sister, sister, sister," Sister Souljah said.

"But what is the definition of sister? Some of you ...are here today, but will be ass-butt naked in a club tomorrow."

As was the case with the Million Man March, the exact turnout for the Million Woman March is likely to be the subject of pointed debate. City officials pegged the gathering at anywhere from 300,000 to 500,000 people, while speaker after speaker told the crowd that they numbered well over the organizers' goal of 1 million.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, former wife of South African President Nelson Mandela, said, "We are countless in unity."

Looking out over the huge crowd, Tynnetta Muhammad, the wife of late Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, said the fact that such a large gathering was pulled to gether by relatively unknown grass-roots activists will unnerve the nation's policy makers.

"They're not trembling in the White House. They are actually getting sick," she said. Before the march, the organizers laid down a 12-point platform that called for a broad range of action, including further investigation of allegations that the CIA played a role in allowing black communities to be flooded with crack cocaine; the creation of programs to help women make the difficult transition from prison back to their communities; the establishment of black independent schools and the release of political prisoners.

"We want justice in this country," Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) said.

John Minter of The Charlotte Post contributed to this report.

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