“This is the most exciting thing that’s ever happened here!” one student exclaimed. “I can’t believe the president is coming to our school. It’s such an honor,” said another, as they stood at the front of a line outside the Sports Center for tickets to President Barack Obama’s speech that would take place on campus on April 8. It would be the first visit to the University of Hartford by a sitting U.S. president.

The excitement was palpable. More than 2,000 students, faculty, and staff lined up Friday afternoon, April 5, with hopes of getting one of the 1,500 tickets that the White House had set aside for members of the University community. After a more than four-hour wait, the tickets were all distributed in just 23 minutes.

It had been clear since Monday, April 1, when University of Hartford President Walter Harrison was first notified of the planned presidential visit that something big was about to happen on campus. Secret Service agents and White House advance teams arrived on Tuesday, and the campus buzzed for seven days as vendors staged Chase Family Arena with needed technology, the presidential podium, draping and American flags, and chairs and risers for media and seating behind the president.

On the day of the event, most parking lots on the residential side of campus were closed, traffic was routed one way, afternoon classes were canceled, and orange fencing was installed along campus roadways for crowd control. In addition to the University community ticket holders, about 2,000 tickets had been distributed to state and local dignitaries and residents of Newtown, Conn., including the families of the 26 people killed in the Dec. 14, 2012, shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.
President Obama’s visit to campus was a thrilling and historic event, but its purpose was somber. He came to deliver a high-profile speech on gun control in the wake of the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Family members of the 20 children and six adults killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School were invited by the White House to sit directly in front of President Obama during his speech. Those family members included University alumni Nelba Marquez-Greene ’97 and Jimmy Greene ’97, whose 6-year-old daughter, Ana, was among those killed. Also in attendance were family members of University alumna Rachel D’Avino ’07, who was killed in the attack. D’Avino, 29, graduated from the University of Hartford with a BA in psychology and was working as a behavioral therapist.

A capacity crowd filled the bleachers on both ends of the arena, and additional chairs were added on the floor until the fire marshal said no more could be admitted. At approximately 5:45 p.m., Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy, one of the many local, state, and national dignitaries in attendance, delivered welcoming remarks after very special moments for two University of Hartford students. Maria Arroyo ’13, president of the Student Government Association, led the Pledge of Allegiance. Aja Wilson, a 2010 graduate of The Hartt School and current graduate student in the Barney School of Business, sang a stirring rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” President Obama was introduced by Nicole and Ian Hockley, whose first-grade son, Dylan, died in the Newtown shooting.

The atmosphere in the arena was electric, and the enthusiastic crowd was quick to cheer and applaud. A boisterous roar went up when the president thanked the University for hosting the event. In his remarks Obama called on Congress to pass “common-sense” measures to reduce gun violence. He praised the gun control legislation that was approved by the Connecticut General Assembly a week before his speech with bipartisan support, and he said it is time for Congress to do the same. When the president suggested that some opponents of gun control legislation might use political maneuvering to block a vote on the issue, the audience began loudly chanting, “We want a vote! We want a vote!”

After his speech Obama came down from the podium to speak quietly and give emotional hugs to many of the Newtown family members. Upon flashing a huge smile and wave to attendees seated in the west bleachers—which gestures were acknowledged with cheers, shouts, and cellphone photo-taking—the president left the arena. Several Newtown family members flew back to Washington with him to lobby members of Congress on gun control.

1 The enthusiastic crowd was diverse in age, race, and gender. 2 President Obama spoke for about 27 minutes. 3 After the speech, the president hugs the father of a child who was killed in the Sandy Hook shooting as Hannah D’Avino (wearing white headband) and Mary D’Avino look on. They are the sister and mother, respectively, of Rachel D’Avino ’07, who worked at Sandy Hook Elementary School and was killed. 4 Alumni Jimmy ’97 and Nelba Marquez-Greene ’97 lost their 6-year-old daughter, Ana, in the Sandy Hook shooting. 5 Nelba Marquez-Greene ’97 shows a “Love Wins” sign following the speech. 6 Students seated in the bleachers near where the president exited cheer, wave, and take pictures. 7 President Obama waves and acknowledges the students’ cheers.
Dozens of ticketholders for Obama's speech were asked by White House and University staff to sit on the flag-decorated risers behind the president's podium. Here are some reactions from University staff members who sat on the stage:

“It was a historic moment for the University of Hartford, and to be that close to a sitting president made it even more historic and exciting for me personally. That is something I will be able to look back on for the rest of my life.

“My wife and daughter and I kept getting calls and texts from people saying, ‘I can see you on TV! What are you doing up there?’ I got so many calls and texts that I couldn’t answer them all. Eventually, when the president came in, we had to shut our phones off.

“We continued to get calls for many days after that, and friends sent newspaper articles with our pictures in them. We heard from friends in Florida, New York, New Jersey—they were just stunned to see us up there, right behind the president!”

— Ackley Beaumont, Director of Facilities

“The entire experience was amazing. I am sure that I could have been sitting anywhere in the room and been overwhelmed by President Obama’s words and overall message, but being so close made it all the more worthwhile and memorable. The president of the United States of America was literally only feet away from me.”

— Torshia Maxwell, Resident Director C and D Complexes

“It was so exciting to be sitting so close to the president, and to be at an event of this magnitude was incredible. The seats were fantastic!”

— Shelby Ballard, Resident Director Hawk Hall

“It was incredible. President Obama is a great rhetorician. Sitting behind his podium made the experience even more electrifying than it already was. I will never forget the conviction in his voice or the moment when he turned around to wave at us.”

— Michelle Huston, adjunct faculty member Department of Rhetoric and Professional Writing, A&S

President Obama passed through the women’s basketball meeting room backstage, where he found a message on the white board:

Dear President Obama,
We are thrilled that you will be speaking at the University of Hartford.
We hope you enjoy your visit! Your leadership is inspiring to all of us.
Best wishes and safe travels!
Love,
The Hartford Hawks

In response, President Obama wrote

“Thanks for the hospitality.
Go Hawks!”

followed by his signature. He also signed a basketball with the words “Go Hawks!”