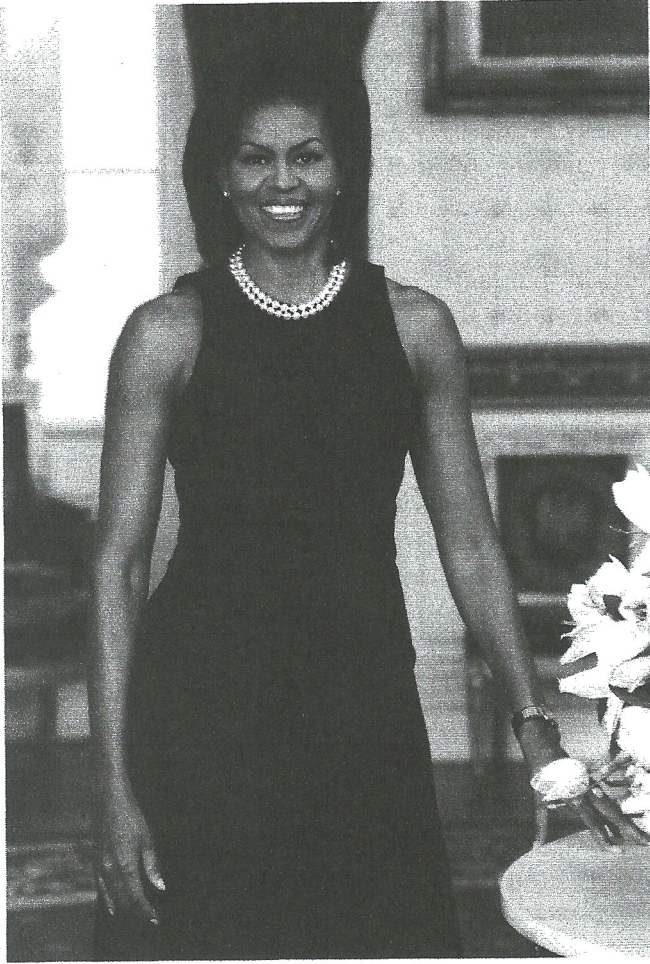


Obama, Michelle

Born in 1964, Michelle Robinson Obama is the first African American First Lady in U.S. history. She is married to President Barack Obama, who was sworn in as the 44th president on January 20, 2009. They have two daughters, Malia and Natasha (Sasha), born in 1999 and 2001, respectively.

Throughout her life, Obama has blazed trails and broken barriers. She has been praised for changing perceptions of African American women and of African American families. She has high approval ratings; in January 2010, 78 percent of Americans approved of the job she was doing as First Lady. Born in the South Side of Chicago six months after President Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, Obama grew up in a home that stressed the value of education and hard work. Her father, Fraser Robinson, was a pump operator for the Chicago Water Department, living with multiple sclerosis.

Her mother, Marian Robinson, stayed home to raise Obama and her older brother, Craig. Obama attended Chicago's first magnet high school, where she was salutatorian, traveling two to three hours each day on public transportation to school. Obama



Michelle Robinson Obama, a lawyer by profession, is the first African American First Lady in U.S. history.

followed her brother to Princeton University, where she majored in sociology and minored in African American Studies, graduating cum laude in 1985. The national debate on affirmative action at the time influenced Obama's years at Princeton. In fact, she has written that it was at Princeton that she first felt self-conscious about her race. When Obama enrolled, there were only 94 African Americans (out of 1,100 students) in her class. She wrote a much-analyzed thesis titled "Princeton Educated Blacks and the Black Community" for which she surveyed African American alumni to determine whether they felt more comfortable with blacks or with whites at different times in their lives—before Princeton, at Princeton, and after Princeton.

Michelle Obama, after Princeton, attended Harvard Law School, from which she graduated in 1988.

At Harvard, she joined the Black Law Students Association and worked in the school's legal aid bureau, providing poor people with legal services.

She returned to Chicago to join the prominent national law firm Sidley Austin as an associate in the intellectual property group. It was there that she met Barack Obama in 1989, when he was a summer associate at Sidley and she was assigned to be his adviser. The Obamas began dating that summer and were married in 1992. In 1991, Obama left Sidley and her career focus shifted. She served as assistant commissioner of planning and development in Chicago's city government before becoming the founding executive director of the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program that prepares youth for public service.

In 1996, Obama joined the University of Chicago, serving as associate dean of student services and vice president of community and external affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center. Obama resisted her husband's entry into politics, chafing at the strain it placed on their family's life. After her husband's election to the U.S. Senate, she and their daughters continued to live in Chicago. When he decided to enter the race for president, she negotiated with him to quit smoking as a condition for his running.

Obama reduced her professional responsibilities by 80 percent to support his campaign. She was an effective surrogate, tasked with explaining his positions on issues, humanizing her husband, and often hosting events and fund-raisers solo. At first, she only worked on the campaign two days a week, but that steadily increased, and by February 2008, she attended 33 events in eight days.

Perceived as polarizing early in the campaign, she was sometimes labeled as an "angry black woman." But by summer 2008, perceptions of her had softened as she increased her focus on the hurdles facing the middle class and empathizing with those challenges.

As First Lady, Obama works to ensure that their daughters have as normal a life as possible. Her mother moved into the White House to assist with child care, and the two girls attend Sidwell Friends School.

She has focused her work on supporting military families, helping working women balance career and family, encouraging national service, promoting the arts and arts education, and fostering healthy eating.

Obama recently launched a campaign to tackle the challenge of childhood obesity, with the ambitious goal of solving the epidemic within a generation.

See Also: Attorneys, Female; Gardening; Nutrition; Political Ideologies.

Further Readings

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