

Who is Michelle Obama and what is she like?

*By Michal Leon, Executive Coach. **

The official White House website portrays Michelle Obama - complete with a professional uber-flattering photograph - as the mother-first, wife second, lawyer and career person last. It emphasises her strong family and, indeed, community orientation, by highlighting her humble origins, in the modest family home in the wrong side of town, the South Side of Chicago, where she grew up as part of a loving and close working-class family.

Her father, Fraser Robinson, was a pump operator for the Chicago Water Department. He suffered from Multiple Sclerosis from a young age, yet he was diligent, rarely allowing his condition to make him miss work. Her mother, Marian, ran the household and focused on raising Michelle (born January 17, 1964) and her brother Craig. Both parents clearly steered their children to achieve, academically and professionally. Michelle told several journalists that her father never raised his voice. All he had to do was tell the children that he was disappointed with them, and fix them with a cold stare, causing them to collapse in tears, and to try harder.

Craig (today head basketball coach at Brown University) learned to read by the age of four and skipped second grade, excelled as a basketball star player, and, like his sister Michelle, entered the Ivy League Princeton University. Michelle majored in African-American studies, and proceeded to the immensely prestigious Harvard Law School, which she graduated in 1988. (She is, incidentally, only the third First Lady to hold a postgraduate degree after Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton).

Her first job was at the Chicago law firm Sidley & Austin, where she met her future husband, Barack Obama, whom she mentored as a summer associate. But her heart was neither in corporate law nor public office, it was in social change and community upliftment. As an undergraduate student, she chose in her free time, to run a literacy program for kids from the local neighbourhoods. At Harvard Law, she campaigned for enrolling more minority students and professors. Her former professors describe her as low profile, in contrast to the public, charismatic orator that Obama had been in his law school days. Instead of talking from podiums, she went around doing the less visible job of recruiting black undergraduates to Harvard. One of her professors, Charles Ogletree told an interviewer: "For her, politics wasn't so much about being inspirational as it was being practical—about getting something specific done...she was not trying to get ahead."

True to her instincts, she held various public sector positions, from being Assistant to the Mayor of Chicago to an Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Development, to Vice President for Community and External Affairs of the University Of Chicago Hospitals. In her own words," one of the small themes in my professional life, is to try to be the bridge so that more people feel like they have access; that their voice, that

their faces, that their worlds count in places like this [the White House] and that there is understanding across those divides.”

On the campaign trail, however, Michelle Obama had to shed her possible initial dislike of public platforms. Running for the job of First Lady is a high-order call in American public life, despite the fact there is no such official campaign.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Although the first lady’s role has never been codified or officially defined, she figures prominently in the political and social life of the nation. Representative of her husband on official and ceremonial occasions both at home and abroad, the first lady is closely watched for some hint of her husband’s thinking and for a clue to his future actions. Although unpaid and unelected, her prominence provides her a platform from which to influence behaviour and opinion, and popular first ladies have served as models for how American women should dress, speak, and cut their hair”

The title ‘First Lady’ became widely used in the United States only towards the end of the 19th century, possibly coinciding with the completion of the railway system criss-crossing all the states, as well as the expansion of national distribution of newspapers. However, by the end of the 20th century, it has become popular in other countries as well, and was often used, untranslated, to describe the wife of the nation’s leader - even in countries where the leader’s spouse was not publicly exposed and was seen to exert much less influence than in the United States.

Elsewhere, wives of most heads of states are, at best, vaguely recognised, unless, of course, they were a super-model-turned singer like Carla Bruni of France. But she is the exception that proves the rule. When was the last time you thought about Mrs. Brown, for example, and how many people know her first name? (Sarah, by the way).

At home, our new President Zuma has, as been much written about, more than one wife, although he certainly does not have six, as rumours flew before he was inaugurated. The non-debate in the press a few days before his inauguration around “who would be the official First Lady” , gave a strong taste of forcing a tradition that does not really exist in South Africa. In the end, all three showed up at the opening of Parliament.

Michelle Obama has a few extra pressures: she is the first black woman to fill the role of First Lady; after an aspirational campaign, the Obamas are freighted with expectations. For example, they must provide a model of a happy, functional family. Michelle is also – and some would say first and foremost – a mother of two young girls (Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7). Juggling her responsibilities while trying to provide her daughters with whatever can pass, under the circumstances, as a healthy balanced upbringing, is a great challenge.

Every move she makes is reported and dissected in the American media: which school is chosen for the girls (complete with profiles of the schools, how many times the Obamas visited, who else goes to that school, etc. – the answer, by the way, is the

posh private Sidwell Friends school in Georgetown. Chelsea Clinton's old school); what are the girls wearing (J Crew is very popular with them, and every model seen on them flies off the shelves), and what kind of dog would become the First Dog (a Portuguese Water Dog puppy, Bo, who apparently does not take his potty training seriously).

Living in a fishbowl White House, and having mega celebrity status creates its own burdens. For example on the Obama's first official visit overseas, the British media created a frenzy around the enormously crucial question – “did she or didn't she” (put her arm around Her Majesty first or did she just respond to the Queen putting her regal arm around the much-taller Michelle first?) This also tells us something about public priorities. In an historic week when the world's top leaders met to discuss the biggest financial crisis the world has known since the Great Depression, it is hard to believe that a small gesture by Michelle Obama should be the focus of attention. Perhaps it provided a welcome distraction from the grimness of the economic meltdown.

It did not end with physical proximity to the monarch (we later learned, that the Queen and the First Lady got on famously). The media's interest in what Mrs. Obama wore every day was also extraordinary. Partly, this was because it was her first international visit, and everyone wanted to see what image she would project. Would she opt, again, for good quality, prêt-a-porter clothes sending a message of normalcy and thriftiness in hard times for all, or will she attempt a fashion statement by deploying the access she now has to the best designers money can buy? (She landed up splitting the difference, and to judge from some of the magazines and fashionistas, she pulled it off: Oscar de la Renta's peevisish remark "You don't ... go to Buckingham Palace in a sweater" notwithstanding). Vogue UK, for example, elevated her to “fashion icon status.”

It is impossible to know what stresses she carries in executing and juggling her duties as mother, wife and nation's sweetheart, role model and fashion trendsetter? American success stories tend to come coated in a lot of sugary icing, photo touch-ups and hordes of PR experts whose job is to keep you believing in the image they are paid well to create and preserve.

The glimpses we are allowed to have, however, are revealing.

In a May interview for example, she attempted to show that the President and her are not that unique and special, as a successful black couple. As she elaborated, “there are thousands of Michelle and Barack Obamas all over this nation. And that is true. I know them, I've gone to school with them, I live with them...the truth is that there are thousands of role models like me. I just happen to be the First Lady. So that's why I feel like I have a responsibility because people see me, but every single day there are people doing what I'm doing. When I visit a health-care organization or a youth center or a service project, those heroes are working. They're serving on their boards. They're packing the boxes. They're teaching in the schools.”

David Axelrod, senior strategist for the Obama campaign, told the media that shortly before he took the final decision to run as Democratic candidate, at two meetings with Obama and his political aides, Michelle grilled them about practical details. These had nothing to do with Barack's "sweeping themes of "hope" and "change." Rather, she wanted to know exactly what demands would the campaign place on their lives? Where would the money come from? Could they really take on the Clinton machine and win, or was this just an extended ego trip? Will he be safe? She didn't want Barack to launch some kind of empty effort here," said Axelrod. Moreover, he added, "Michelle has always been in the camp of, 'Let's not forget what we're fighting for'".

A report on Michelle's first few months in the White House noted, "The most striking was that she made it seem natural. She did not spend decades dreaming of this destination, and maybe that's the secret. 'I'm not supposed to be here', she says again and again...asking, "What are the things that we can do differently here, the things that have never been done, the people who've never seen or experienced this White House?" (*Time magazine*, 21 May 2009).

But another interesting viewpoint is that, apparently, the presidential life style enables Michelle to have a family life she always wanted but never had: her husband used to commute to his various places of work and travel a great deal, and she accused him of abandonment and of having to raise a family on her own (as he describes it in his autobiography "*The Audacity of Hope*"). Now that the office and residence are in the same locale the family gets to see each other on a daily basis.

By all accounts, Michelle's greatest concern is keeping her husband connected to the reality of life outside the bubble of the presidency and its vast trappings. He often calls her "my rock". She seems to be much less involved in matters of policy and state than Hillary Rodham Clinton was, yet she clearly has the leader of the free world's ear, and this places her in a position of incredible power.

In a month when we celebrate women's day, we can take stock of many women who have the ears of powerful decision-makers, important leaders in academia, art, media and business, and look at the potent role they play. Like Michelle Obama, many of them are not Stepford wives anymore, on the contrary, these days they are likely to be career women, competent mothers or homemakers, either one or a combination of all three. But then there is the fourth role: to provide their men with a sense of stability, balance, and, dare I say, sanity in a fast-and-faster challenging world. Thankfully, for more and more women today it's a question of choice, not fate.

Five Things You (maybe) Did Not Know About Michelle Obama:

1. Her approval rate at the start of her husband's primaries campaign was poor (35%) - she was seen as a complainer, talked about America as being "just downright mean," and lazy, and cynical", how life for most people had "gotten progressively worse throughout my lifetime." Conservative critics dubbed her 'Mrs. Grievance', depicting a bitter and anti-American. It was so bad that Obama had to defend her patriotism and call the attacks on her "detestable."
2. She is the first cousin, once removed, of Rabbi Capers C. Funnye J., one of United States' leading black rabbis.
3. She loves to touch and hug people and says it is her way of disarming any intimidation people might feel in the presence of "The First Lady".
4. Michelle's salary just before she became a full time campaigner for her husband was \$273,618 (R2 325 800 in today's terms) from the University of Chicago Hospitals, while her husband had a salary of \$157,082 (R1 335 200) as a US Senator. However, the total Obama household income was \$991,296 (R8 426 020!), which included \$51,200 (R435, 200) she earned as a member of the board of directors of TreeHouse Foods, as well as investments and royalties from Barack Obama's very successful books.
5. In 1993, Michelle became Executive Director for the Chicago office of Public Allies, a non-profit organisation encouraging young people to work on social issues in non-profit groups and government agencies. She worked there or nearly four years showing a great talent for fundraising (an activity she later said – in the political context - she absolutely hated).

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