

Becoming Michelle

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Michelle Obama |I|

Although she was not elected to the position, Michelle Obama effectively became one of the two public faces of the United States of America when her husband Barack was elected President in 2008. After more than ten years of public scrutiny, she decided to tell her own story in her memoir, *Becoming*, and a series of high-profile public talks around the world.

The role of First Lady is a difficult one. With no electoral mandate, the First Lady nevertheless has a very public position. She's expected to be a gracious hostess when foreign leaders visit, and to champion charitable causes. Her role at the White House is generally considered to be non-political (Hillary Rodham Clinton was heavily criticised when she led of President's Task Force on Health Care Reform, actively participating in lawmaking). Yet it is also considered essential that she make speeches and campaign for her husband, in his initial campaign and also if and when he tries for re-election.

In Michelle Obama's case, Barack's choice to run for President didn't just turn her life upside down, it would inevitably effect the couple's two young daughters, Sasha and Malia, who were just seven and 10 when the White House became their new home. Even while he was just a candidate, they had been assigned Secret Service protection, and were followed everywhere by



Michelle Obama watching her husband Barack at his Inauguration for his second term in office, 2013.

Official White House Photo by Sonya N. Hebert



The First Family in 2015. Malia, Michelle, Barack and Sasha with dogs Sunny and Bo.

Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

agents with earpieces and guns. Obama confides in her book, “Sasha generally referred to them as ‘the secret people’.”

Mrs Obama remembers the 2008 election campaign:

“We were never alone. We had staff around us, agents guarding us, members of the press waiting for interviews, onlookers snapping pictures from a distance. But this was now our normal. Over the course of the campaign, our days had become so programmed that we’d watched our privacy and autonomy slowly slip away [...] If I needed something at the store, I had to ask someone to get it for me. If I wanted to speak to Barack, I usually had to send a request through one of his young staffers.”

Leaving the White House

U.S. Presidents are limited to two electoral terms, so Barack Obama couldn’t stand again for election in 2016. The family would leave the White House, and return to something closer to a “normal” life, even though they still have Secret Service agents protecting them 24 hours a day.

For Michelle Obama, it was a relief to leave the spotlight. Their White-House years corresponded with the explosion of social media. Never had the First Family been so visible.

And yet, she chose to write an autobiography, because her story was always being told by other people anyway. At least this way she got to tell her side and use her fame to support causes and values she cares about. ■



Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy

Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign encouraged children to take exercise. Here, magician John Cassidy shows the First Lady a very unusual way to get fit!



Primary-school children help Michelle Obama with the White House Vegetable Garden she started to promote healthy eating.

Official White House Photo

"So far in my life, I've been a lawyer. I've been a vice-president at a hospital and the director of a non-profit that helps young people build meaningful careers. I've been a working-class black student at a fancy mostly white college. I've been the only woman, the only African American, in all sorts of rooms. I've been a bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter torn up by grief. And until recently, I was the First Lady of the United States of America— a job that's not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined."



Biobox

Michelle Robinson was born on 17 January, 1964 in a working-class neighborhood of Chicago. Her mother, Marion, stayed at home to look after Michelle and her older brother Craig. Her father, Fraser, worked for the city's water company, and continued working for years with the debilitating condition multiple sclerosis.

Michelle and Craig did well at school, and Craig's talent for basketball helped get him a place at the prestigious Princeton University. Michelle also studied there, and went on to Harvard to do a law degree, like Barack Obama. The couple met when she was working as a lawyer and he was an intern. They both abandoned law for public-service jobs. Michelle worked for Chicago town hall, a youth training-programme, and the University of Chicago.

Barack was elected to the State Senate in 1996 as a democrat, and to the national Senate in 2004. He was the first African American President of the United States, serving two terms from 2009 to 2017.

While First Lady, Michelle Obama created Let's Move, a campaign to fight child obesity through exercise and healthy eating. She also campaigned for support for military veterans to help young people access professional training and education, for girls' education internationally.

First Lady

- **Patricia Nixon** (First Lady from 1969 to 1974) described it as "the hardest unpaid job in the world".
- It isn't an official title and there is no job description.
- **Martha Washington**, wife of the first President, was the first to be referred to as First Lady, but the term wasn't used until 1843, more than forty years after her death. It was in common use by the late nineteenth century.
- The First Lady who transformed the role was **Eleanor Roosevelt** (1933-1945). She actively supported her husband's politics, giving press conferences, presenting and writing regular radio programmes and newspaper columns in favour of civil rights, education reform and women's rights. After her husband's death, she helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- The Secret Service refers to the President and First Lady as POTUS (President of the US) and **FLOTUS**, and each has a code name. Barack and Michelle Obama were Renegade and **Renaissance**.



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