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She's confident and levelheaded, and she carries the nurturing legacy of a close-knit South Shore family, an experience she wanted to re-create in her own home. After years of resenting her husband's political career, Michelle Obama found her voice and flashed her style on the road to the White House

BY CAROL FELSENTHAL



+ THE MAKING OF A **FIRST LADY**

PHOTOGRAPH: CHARLES OMMANNEY/GETTY IMAGES



THE FIRST SATURDAY

Cheek to cheek: (clockwise from top) Michelle with Barack near the close of the primaries last February; Michelle in Denver before the Democratic National Convention; the victors on election night in Grant Park, with their daughters Sasha (left) and Malia



after Barack Obama won the White House, his wife, Michelle (“Miche” to her pals), did what she had been doing most Saturdays for years—joined her friends Sandy Matthews and Yvonne Davila to take their daughters to ballet and soccer and later to a movie. Usually, they went to the California Pizza Kitchen on North Avenue for lunch, but this time Yvonne picked up sandwiches, and they ate in the car en route to see *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*. The friends had kept to their routine through the nearly two-year presidential campaign, so having the Secret Service in tail was nothing new.

It was a last burst of normalcy before the lives of Michelle, 45, and her daughters, Sasha, seven, and Malia, ten, would get turned upside down. But sticking to that prosaic Saturday routine—just four days after the Obama family celebrated a historic ascension before a thrilled audience of tens of thousands in Grant Park and millions more on TV worldwide—suggests something fundamental about the personality and style of the striking five-

foot-eleven woman who was about to become the nation’s First Lady.

Colleagues and friends from every era of her life describe a woman of remarkable consistency in demeanor, looks, objectives, and habits. “Michelle appears to differ very little today from the student I knew in college,” said Derrick Burns, a friend at Princeton University. “Much like now, Michelle did not seek the spotlight in college. When it was on her, she shone brightly.”

Interviews with more than 50 acquaintances portray a South Sider passionately devoted to family, to hard work, and to doing good—and with a deep skepticism of electoral politics, an attitude that at times has caused strains in her marriage. Michelle is someone who relishes order and routine—her husband has remarked on her “strong perfectionist streak”—and the uncertainty of a political career has often conflicted with her desire for a generous family income and a big, comfortable home. Throughout her life, in school and at work, she has gone out of her way to help others, and Barack’s ideals attracted her. She knew from the time she met him that he wanted to change the country and had his eyes on the presidency. But she wanted a husband who did pro bono work on the side of a lucrative legal career, who also helped with the children. (Michelle would not give an interview for this story.)

Dan Shomon, a top aide who traveled Illinois with Barack when he was a state



senator and a U.S. Senate candidate, says that Barack called Michelle once after he had made a particularly rousing speech. “They’re drinking the juice,” he told her enthusiastically. “I feel like I’m inspiring people.”

She replied: “You don’t even have enough money to drink your own juice.”

Michelle’s roots are far more Chicago than her husband’s—she grew up in a South Shore bungalow and attended city schools. Her father worked in the machine of Richard J. Daley, and she put in time at Richard M.’s City Hall. Unlike her husband, she comes from an intact family, one so wholesome and American that Barack has written that visiting them in their apartment was like dropping in on the set of *Leave It to Beaver*.

Friends say the close-knit Robinson home gave Michelle her confidence, her levelheadedness, and her altruism, but the memory of it—steady, warm, reliable—was in large part what made her uncomfortable about her husband’s ventures into politics. Family mattered above all, and she did not want to put it in jeopardy. Still, Michelle eventually came around—particularly after Barack made millions from his books—and a key piece of the story of the 2008 election is Michelle’s emergence on

the campaign trail. After some rough patches at the start, she turned into one of her husband’s strongest assets and a formidable presence on her own. With perhaps a bit of affectionate hyperbole, Malik Nevils, a former employee of Michelle’s, puts it this way: “We could potentially see another Obama in the White House before we see another Clinton.”

IN

THE EARLY DAYS OF BARACK Obama’s political career, perhaps no one outside the family had a better window on Michelle’s disdain for politics—“a waste of time,” she once told a reporter—and the tensions in her marriage than Dan Shomon, who was

Barack’s staff person in Springfield and a key campaign aide through Barack’s 2004 run for the U.S. Senate. In conversations with Barack and Michelle, and in long drives with Barack around Illinois, Shomon learned that the young politician’s wife worried about her family’s financial security and often resented the demands placed on her by Barack’s state senate job. She thought that serving in Springfield was little more than a selfish indulgence of her husband’s. “She still didn’t really understand why he was not at a law firm, where he could be making \$700,000 or \$800,000 a year or a million or two,” Shomon says, “and why he was

lowering himself to the state legislature.” It’s not that she didn’t believe in Barack and his ideals. “She believed in him 500 percent,” says Shomon. But politicians and their petty dealings dismayed her. She would tell him, “Barack, this business is not noble.”

Within two years of his election to the state senate in 1996, Michelle had Malia, their first child. The new mother would have liked to stay home with her daughter, but the family needed her salary. Meanwhile, Barack was downstate three days a week and still teaching law at the University of Chicago. “Tired and stressed, we had little time for conversation, much less romance,” Obama later wrote. “I found myself subjected to endless negotiations about every detail of managing the house, long lists of things that I needed to do or had forgotten to do and a generally sour attitude.”

Shomon remembers the lists. “OK, Barack, you’re going to do grocery shopping two times a week. You’re to pick up Malia. You’re going to do blah, blah, blah, and you’re responsible for blah, blah, blah.” So he had his assignments, and he never questioned her, never bitched about it. He said that Michelle knows what she’s doing—I trust her child rearing and the family rearing.”

Michelle later told a reporter that she had gotten some advice from her mother—essentially to let Barack be Barack: “He’s a good man; don’t be mad at him.” Still, ac-



Michelle, his belle: The couple commune after she introduces him in Iowa in August 2007, months before the primaries.

So there was Barack, “trying to herd these two little kids, and they’re knocking things over and taking pamphlets and throwing them. And here he is trying to be this dignified Senate candidate.”

After Barack gave his bring-down-the-house keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Shomon needed surrogates to make appearances for the candidate. “We didn’t have anything,” Shomon explains. “We had Michelle.” He picked five or ten events a week that he wanted her to go to and got her for half of them. But by then Michelle was finding her voice. The speech was always the same, Shomon recalls: “I’m Michelle Obama. I love my husband. He’s a brilliant person. He stands for the right issues, and you know what? He’s got his flaws, too.” Then she would say, “Barack leaves his underwear in the kitchen. . . .”

“People loved it,” Shomon says. “It was not a political speech. It rounded Barack out.” That shtick would turn tiresome and problematic during the grueling presidential primary, but Michelle was turning into a terrific campaigner who exuded sincerity and wanted to shake every hand in the room. “There are some people in public life who smile at you, and the smile doesn’t ever get to their eyes,” says Avis LaVelle. “You can clearly see that she’s opening herself to you!”

Michelle was warming up for her next big role—although that role required another leap of faith given that it would take her family farther away from the sort of close, nurturing environment she had known in her own childhood.

According to Shomon, Michelle even asked Barack to give up his beloved basketball, mostly because he kept getting injured. She suggested golf, and he “turned into a great golfer, because he’s a really good athlete,” Shomon recalls. But he continued to play basketball. “She would kind of grouse about it.” Golf went by the wayside because Barack had no time.

In 2000, Barack decided to try to move up, and he ran against the incumbent Bobby Rush for the U.S. Congress—a race that was “very difficult on all of them,” recalls Cindy Moelis, who had worked with Michelle at City Hall. Michelle was skeptical. “She was just not sure where this was all going to lead,” says Shomon, who managed Obama’s congressional campaign. Shomon would ask her to go to fundraisers, and she would almost always say no. Barack would never object, much less insist. “She went to things she had to go to,” Shomon recalls—including her husband’s concession speech. Barack was devastated by the loss. “He went through kind of a rough period after that race,” says Shomon. Michelle was upset about the waste of time and energy.

In 2001, she gave birth to their second child, Sasha, and over the next few years, while Michelle struggled with caring for the girls and her job, Barack and Shomon hit the road. Shomon estimates that between 2001 and 2004, they “put 30,000 or 40,000 miles on the car together.” They went to state fairs; they drove to southern Illinois. Barack would call with reports from the road of a bigger-than-expected turnout, and Michelle would say, “Well, Malia is sick, so that’s what I’m concerned about.”

By Shomon’s account, Barack took his time telling Michelle of his plan to run for the U.S. Senate, and at one point he asked Shomon to talk to her and “kind of lay it out for her.” Shomon recalls her being

calm and asking thoughtful questions about Barack’s chances. But even after it started to look as if Barack might win, Michelle was not enthusiastic. “She wasn’t the one driving him to run,” recalls Avis LaVelle, who was Mayor Daley’s press secretary when Michelle worked for him. “My suspicion is she was not the one at night saying, ‘Barack, you ought to go for the next office.’”

Michelle did campaign this time around, though. *Roll Call*, the Capitol Hill newsletter, described her passionately introducing her husband at a church on Chicago’s West Side. “I am tired of just giving the political process over to the privileged. To the wealthy. To people with the right daddy,” she told the group.

Dan Hynes, one of Obama’s opponents in the primary (and, as the son of the Democratic bigwig Thomas Hynes, someone with the “right daddy”), recalls appearing at a candidate forum one Saturday morning when Barack showed up with Malia and Sasha. Hynes assumes that Michelle told her husband: You’ve been gone all week, I’ve got things to do, you’re taking the kids.

That was then: Barack concedes in the 2000 congressional primary (below); celebrating his U.S. Senate victory in 2004 (right)



PHOTOGRAPHY: (TOP) M. SPENCER GREEN/AP PHOTO, (BOTTOM LEFT) FRANK POLICH/AP PHOTO, (BOTTOM RIGHT) CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTO BY E. JASON WAMBANGS



MICHELLE'S FATHER, FRASER

Robinson III, was born in 1935 and for 30 years maintained the boilers and pumps at a water-filtration plant, eventually becoming a foreman. His work as a precinct captain for Mayor Richard J. Daley was key to keeping his job and being promoted. He didn't make much, but the family managed on Fraser's salary, and Michelle's mother, Marian, stayed home to rear their children.

The Robinsons lived in a one-bedroom apartment in South Shore—a neighborhood that had changed from all white to all black in the late sixties—on the top floor of a brick bungalow rented from Marian's aunt. Michelle and her brother, Craig, older by two years, shared the apartment's living room, which was divided by paneling to create separate bedrooms.

Fraser became progressively disabled by multiple sclerosis, but his determination to dress himself and go to work every morning impressed his children. He walked with two canes and eventually used a motorized cart. "He was my rock," Michelle has said. Disappointing their father, his children say, was about the worst thing they could imagine. As a boy, Arne Duncan, formerly head of the Chicago Public Schools and recently chosen as Obama's secretary of education, played basketball with Craig. "Family means everything to the Robinsons," Duncan says. (Fraser died in 1991, at the age of 56, as he was preparing to leave for work.)

Michelle and Craig attended the neighborhood school, then called Bryn Mawr Elementary, at 73rd Street and Jeffery Boulevard. Both skipped second grade, and Michelle graduated as a salutatorian in 1977. Michelle's teachers recommended that she attend Whitney M. Young Magnet High School on the West Side, the first magnet school in the Chicago public system.

"We were looking for the top kids we could find," says Charles Mingo, then an assistant principal at the school, "and the elementary schools referred their top kids to us." The Robinsons knew that Michelle was mature and ambitious and could handle the transition to a racially mixed school—though she would know virtually no one at the start and would have to ride the CTA an hour and a half each way.

Michelle (right) and her brother attended the Bryn Mawr Elementary School and skipped the second grade.



Michelle with her brother, Craig Robinson, at the DNC; her mother, Marian, listens to her daughter.

The plan was for Whitney Young to be 40 percent black, 40 percent Caucasian, and 20 percent others, but it was about 70 percent African American when Michelle arrived. It drew students from all over the city, and members of Michelle's class of 1981 recall it as largely colorblind, with students united by their ambition and intelligence. "Black students were able to achieve in leadership roles along with white students," recalls Joe Dudley Jr., a black classmate and friend of Michelle's.

One white classmate has a different recollection. In an e-mail, Robert Behar, now a physician, wrote that "many of the African American members of the class were very focused on injustice and racism in America. . . . The Chicago we grew up in was filled with racial tension."

As a student, Michelle was serious, sensible, and straightforward. She worked hard for her good grades, made the honor roll all four years, and was a member of the National Honor Society. Mingo remembers Michelle as "a tall, stately girl, immaculately groomed." Her classmates do not recall a boyfriend. Norman Collins describes her as a "very respectable young lady" popular enough to have won a class office and social enough to attend sock hops in the gymnasium. She sang in the choir and was also drawn to dance. Michelle's closest friend at Whitney Young was the Reverend Jesse Jackson's daughter Santita. "It was clear to me," Reverend Jackson says, "that drifting into mediocrity was never an option for Michelle."



Give the Lady What She Wants

MICHELLE'S LIKES AND DISLIKES, AS DRAWN FROM INTERVIEWS AND PUBLISHED SOURCES

LIKES

- + **Bedtime** at 8:30
- + Until recently, a regular Friday-afternoon appointment with Michael 'Rahni' Flowers of the **Van Cleef Hair Studio** on West Huron Street to have her hair and nails done. She has her naturally curly hair processed to make it look straight.
- + **To-do lists.** She relies on them personally and professionally.
- + **Routine.** She's a perfectionist and a stickler for schedules. Barack is neither.



+ Regular workouts.

When she was still at the University of Chicago, at 4:30 a.m. Now with a personal trainer and later in the day



+ **Eating out.** Rick Bayless is a family friend, and the Obamas like his restaurants Frontera Grill and Topolobampo. They also like Roy's, perhaps because the original is in Hawaii, and Spiaggia, the dining room, not the less expensive café.

+ **Stevie Wonder** is her favorite singer.

+ **Television.** She loves it; Barack hates it. Her favorite oldies are *The Brady Bunch* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Her contemporary picks are *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and HGTV.



+ **Writers.** Toni Morrison is her favorite, but Michelle is not much of a reader. No time, she says.

+ **Sudoku.** During downtime on the campaign

DISLIKES

+ **Cooking.** "If you want to sit down for a meal," she once told the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "we're coming over to your house."

+ **Cigarettes.** She and Barack made a deal that if she went along with his plan to run for the White House, he would stop smoking. He still smokes, although not much.

+ **Pantyhose.** Her legs are too long, and they are uncomfortable.

+ **The July 21, 2008, cover of *The New Yorker*,** which depicts Michelle and Barack fist bumping in the Oval Office beside a portrait of Osama bin Laden with an American flag burning in the fireplace



-C. F.

National Honor Society



After Whitney Young, Princeton was an obvious choice for Michelle. Craig, then a sophomore there, had been recruited from his high school, Mount Carmel, by Princeton's head basketball coach. Pete Carril, the coach, had heard about Craig from his team captain at Princeton, John W. Rogers Jr., a Hyde Parker, a graduate of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, and today the chairman of Ariel Investments. (Craig started for the Princeton Tigers as a freshman and became the fourth-highest scorer in the school's history.)

In 1981, the year Michelle entered, Princeton had 94 black freshmen in a class of 1,141. "It was a great place to be from," says Michelle's college friend Hilary Beard, one of the African American students. "It was not always a great place to be if you were a minority student."

Although Michelle might not have known it, suggestions of trouble started from day one—move-in day. Catherine Donnelly, the only child of a single mother in New Orleans, was assigned to room with Michelle. Her mother, an eighth-grade biology teacher then about 45, lived through her daughter. Getting into Princeton "was a tremendous achievement for her, as well as for me," says Catherine, now a lawyer living outside Atlanta. Princeton was not only high prestige but also "the Southernmost in temperament of the Ivies"—a quality that appealed to Donnelly's mother, who did not then hide her racist views.

The mother drove Catherine to Princeton to help her get settled, and Catherine had yet to meet Michelle when Craig Robinson dropped by to see his sister. That night at dinner, Catherine told her mother about Michelle and about meeting Craig. The mother took the situation as a personal affront, as if Princeton officials had placed her Southern white daughter with an urban African American just because they could—Catherine's family had no money or influence or social standing.



The next day, in an effort to get Catherine a new room assignment, her mother headed for the housing office and launched a telephone campaign to influential people in New Orleans who had Princeton ties. There were no rooms, but officials promised that as soon as one opened, it would be offered to Catherine. In the second semester, a room became available, and Catherine took it. She says by then her departure had nothing to do with Michelle—"I thought Michelle was terrific, one of the funniest people I've ever known." Catherine moved because of the crowding in their fourth-floor attic walkup, a tiny space jammed with three beds, three dressers, and three desks.

Catherine says she is sure that Michelle didn't know her mother's feelings. (Both Catherine and her mother voted for Obama.) Catherine came out as a lesbian soon after arriving at Princeton and socialized with her fellow rugby players, all white, while Michelle was always with other African American students. They barely acknowledged each other on campus. "I won the roommate lottery when I was at Princeton," Catherine says today. "I missed an opportunity to form an endearing friendship with somebody I knew then was special. I missed it because I didn't stand up to my mother, and I didn't make the effort perhaps in part due to the color of [Michelle's] skin. How absurd!"



Onward: (top left) in the National Honor Society at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School (top, third from right); a high kicker; graduating from Princeton in 1985

SEVERAL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS at Princeton in that era recall a difficult atmosphere. Michelle's friend Derrick Burns, who later studied computer science at Stanford, wrote in a recent e-mail: "Walking down the sidewalk of Prospect Avenue, passing the eating clubs, to get to the Third World Center and the Engineering Quad, I remember often being completely ignored, to the point that fellow students would not yield the right of way down the sidewalk, forcing me . . . to walk on the adjacent gravel. . . . The education that I received was superlative, but the most generous description of the social experience that I can provide is 'benign neglect.'"

Donnell Lassiter-Stewart recalls inviting six friends to celebrate her birthday. "The next day I got called to the dean's office because I was told that [my white roommate] was intimidated by these big black guys I had in the room." (Most of those guests are physicians today.)

Michelle majored in sociology, with a concentration in African American studies, and participated in a work-study program at the Third World Center, now known as the Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding. She helped start an after-school tutoring program for the children of university employees, many of whom worked in maintenance or food services.

Like Craig, Mi- (continued on page 72)

High-Low Chic

DRESSED UP OR DOWN, MICHELLE STANDS TALL AS A NATURAL FASHION STAR

by Marcia Froelke Coburn

THE HOOPLA OVER Michelle Obama's clothes started during the political primary season, when she appeared onstage with her husband. First, she wore several flirty fitted suits, which prompted Politico.com to ponder whether Michelle was the embodiment of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's fashionably chic style. Then on June 3, 2008, Senator Obama secured the Democratic presidential nomination, and Michelle appeared onstage with him in St. Paul, Minnesota **1**, wearing a royal-purple silk sheath (\$900) by the Chicago designer Maria Pinto. The dress was sleeveless and formfitting; Michelle had accessorized it by cinching an Azzedine Alaïa black patent leather belt (\$350 to \$500) around the dress's Empire waist and wearing a faux-pearl necklace by Carolee (\$50). "The combination of that dress with that belt was amazing," says Sally Singer, the fashion news/features director of *Vogue*. "Her clothes said that she was authoritative and appropriate, yet also very accessible and very refreshing." That night a fashion star—for both the apparel industry and the public—was born.

Any possible doubt about a growing national interest in Michelle's style disappeared two weeks later when she appeared on ABC's daytime talk show *The View* **2**. She did not wear a luxury brand name, but a black-and-white floral cotton dress designed by Donna Ricco and sold at the shopping-mall boutique White House/Black Market. "She was still on *The View* when our phones—both in our corporate headquarters and in our stores across the country—started ringing non-stop," says Jessica Wells,

the director of public relations for White House/Black Market. The dress, which retails for \$148, sold out in 48 hours. "It was purchased by women of all ages and all sizes across the country," says Wells. The same thing happened during the fall campaign, when Michelle appeared on *The Tonight Show* and told Jay Leno that she had purchased her yellow cardigan and her print top and skirt online from J. Crew **3**. This time, the outfit sold out in less than 24 hours, as did the J. Crew floral-print skirt she wore with silver flats while campaigning in Florida.

"This high-low fashion style is the way chic women of the world dress," says Singer. "You have one quality thing, and everything else is a lesser price point. It completely reflects the way people shop. She has the ability to make clothes seem optimistic, which is something we need now. That floral Thakoon kimono dress she wore with flats the last night of the Democratic convention was the sign of a happy, confident woman. And I don't know anyone who isn't happier for seeing a beautiful floral print."

Before stepping into the public spotlight, Michelle Obama had been a fashion plate for years, working without a stylist and putting her own creative touches to high-low ensembles. Many of the high-end fashions came from either Pinto or Ikram, the primo Rush Street boutique owned by Ikram Goldman. (Pinto was profiled in *Chicago*, March 2008; Goldman, in February 2006. Both

articles are available in the archives on the magazine's Web site, chicagomag.com.) Michelle wore Pinto gowns to black-tie affairs for her job with the University of Chicago Hospitals and to Oprah Winfrey's Legends Ball in 2005 **4**. When Michelle was named to *Vanity Fair*'s 2007 best-dressed list, she said her favorite outfit of the past year had been a Sonia Rykiel black suit worn with a white chiffon blouse by Noir and, again, an Alaïa belt—the touches of Noir and Alaïa a strong indication of Goldman's influence.

Michelle reportedly still works without a stylist, but for many of the important moments during the campaign and after the election, she again turned to the two Chicago women who sartorially

know her best. On the night she spoke at the Democratic National Convention **5**, Michelle wore an aqua sheath from Pinto accented with a large brooch by Erickson Beamon, a London-based team whose jewelry is sold at Ikram. On *Larry King Live*, Michelle sported a feathery purple brooch by Carolyn Rosenberg, another purchase from Ikram. She chose an iris-colored tweed top and skirt by Pinto for *60 Minutes* and a coral-red dress with bracelet-length sleeves by Pinto when she went to the White House to meet Laura Bush **6**. For her interview with Barbara Walters, she wore an ivory silk sheath embroidered with black rosettes, an advance production from the 2009 spring collection of the New York designer Jason Wu and rumored to have been special ordered by Goldman.

Goldman declines all questions about Michelle. Pinto says in an e-mail, "Her style is timeless. She possesses a natural sophistication. . . . But what I love most is her brilliance and eloquence coupled by the grace and beauty of a dancer. Style aside, it is her wit and intellect that will make her an extraordinary First Lady."

The clothes won't hurt, though—particularly in this rocky economy. Already the fashion industry is gearing up to tap into a market of sheath-dress-loving, costume-jewelry-wearing women. The designer Elie Tahari (whose clothes were favored

(continued on page 72)



PHOTOGRAPHY: (BOTTOM, FROM LEFT) MORRY GASHI/AP PHOTO, MICHAEL A. MARIANT/AP PHOTO, CHRIS CARLSON/AP PHOTO, MARY F. CALVERT/AP PHOTO/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

HIGH-LOW CHIC

(continued from page 57)

by the Republican vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin) has unveiled a purple floral sheath named “the Michelle dress.” Talbots has added images of Michelle to the image book, videos, and storyboards circulated to its internal design and sales employees. And Mark Mendelson, the president of Ellen Tracy—a brand popular at Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdale’s—recently told *The Wall Street Journal* that his company was considering running ads with photographs of Michelle from the campaign trail. And last fall Pinto reported a 45 percent increase in sales in the past year.

In the blogosphere, fashionistas comment on every clothing choice that Michelle makes. Some are favorable. “She has brought the brooch out of the shadows of tacky Christmas pins and shown it can be a versatile accessory,” says Mary Tomer, a cofounder of Mrs. O, a blog dedicated to tracking everything Michelle wears. And some are not. Wonkette called the black-and-red Narciso Rodriguez cocktail dress that Michelle wore to election night’s Grant Park celebration “hell-colored.” And an online poll conducted by *People* magazine showed that 65 percent of those who voted “hated” the dress. “Oh, I was stunned by that dress—and in a good way,” says Timothy Long, the curator of costumes for the Chicago History Museum. “I thought she looked great.”

“Loved that dress—particularly the little sweater shrug she threw over it,” says Singer of *Vogue*. “We are used to seeing political women—either candidates or spouses—looking just one way: with a helmet of hair and those matched outfits we don’t know where they buy,” continues Singer. “Clearly now there is a change.”

“That red dress she wore to meet the Bushes at the White House announced, ‘I am ready to be page-one, top-of-the-news-hour, insta-blog news,’” says Bonnie Fuller, the founder of Bonnie Fuller Media and a former editor of *Us Weekly* and *Glamour* magazines. “That dress said, ‘I will be a self-possessed First Lady.’”

Of course, any dedicated fan of Michelle’s style already knows that. She is five feet eleven but doesn’t shy away from stiletto heels, even if that makes her taller than her husband. She told the women on *The View* that she might wear tights but never pantyhose. Three days after her husband was elected the 44th president of the United States, she wore workout pants and a baseball cap to take her daughters to school. Her style is less formal and more personal than we are used to seeing in a First Lady, combining a sense of humor with a sense of glamour. She is confident in her clothes—high fashion or low. And that speaks to us. ■

MAKING OF A FIRST LADY

(continued from page 56) chelle skipped Princeton’s most-storied tradition—the eating clubs. Membership at most clubs required interviews, a process called bicker. Instead, she joined Stevenson Hall, which her sociology professor, Howard Taylor, calls “strictly interracial” and Hillary Beard describes as more like a dining facility than an eating club. “All you had to do was sign up, and they welcomed anybody and everybody.”

Howard Taylor, then also the director of the school’s Center for African American Studies, says Michelle was “wrestling with the question of just how to be black at Princeton. Do you socialize pretty exclusively with black students or do you try to integrate and associate relatively equally with white students?” Taylor says that Michelle eventually “came down on the side of hanging not exclusively black but for the most part black.”

To her classmate Beverly Thomison-Sadia, Michelle seemed unusually sure of herself. “Michelle always arrived at her own opinion. It wasn’t the women’s position; it wasn’t the black position. Michelle would take all the information and process it through her experience, her beliefs, her value system, and she would arrive at the Michelle Robinson position or opinion.”

Michelle’s 66-page senior thesis, “Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community,” created a stir during the presidential campaign when Obama’s opponents thought they had finally found the radical document that could derail his campaign. Michelle had sent surveys to 400 Princeton graduates, says Taylor, one of her thesis advisers, and asked them what it was like to be black at Princeton and what they were currently doing—did they buy into the white corporate world or did they return to their communities to try to help the black cause? In her introduction, Michelle revealed the toll that Princeton had exacted: “My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my ‘Blackness’ than ever before. I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong.”

Michelle has not been back to Princeton since she graduated in 1985. She immediately headed to another elite white institution, Harvard Law School. But she would feel more comfortable there.

• • •

ALTHOUGH MICHELLE WAS NOT FINISHED with questions of race, at Harvard she found a way to contribute by devoting

herself to the student-run Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, spending many hours in the Greek revival Gannett House. The building also held the offices of the *Harvard Law Review*, where a few years later, Barack Obama would launch his trajectory to the White House by becoming the first African American president of the prestigious journal.

Dave Jones, now a member of the California state assembly, worked in legal aid with Michelle, a job he recalls as intense and time consuming, as much as 20 hours a week. Although the students were supervised by a practicing attorney, the welfare of the clients rested on the students’ competence. Michelle handled landlord and tenant cases, among others. Many Harvard Law students start out professing a desire to practice public-interest law when they graduate, but only a small percent do, at least in part because the big money and the most sophisticated cases are at the large corporate law firms. Charles Ogletree, Michelle’s and later Barack’s adviser, encouraged students to do well *and* do good by working at a firm and taking on pro bono cases.

After her second year at Harvard Law, in 1987, Michelle became a summer associate at Sidley & Austin, one of the biggest and most prestigious corporate law firms in Chicago. A job offer followed, and after graduation, Michelle headed home. She lived with her parents to save money, but she worked in Chicago’s Loop, a distance much greater in status than in miles.

“The idea of making more money than both your parents combined ever made is one you don’t walk away from,” Michelle recently told Geraldine Brooks of *More* magazine, explaining why she took the job. Also, Sidley had a reputation for supporting lawyers who wanted to do pro bono work. Ogletree points out that Michelle could keep a promise to her parents: “that she would do good even if she did well.”

She joined the firm’s marketing group, which dealt with intellectual property, trademark, and copyright law. “We were the fun group,” says a woman who worked at the firm at the time. “We had good parties, interesting work; we were all very collegial. There was not this blind ambition.” Michelle worked on issues related to Barney the Dinosaur and also on the Coors beer account. Still, vetting scripts for television commercials was a long way from standing up for an impoverished single mother involved in a dispute with her landlord.

Most of her colleagues say that had Michelle stayed at the firm, she would have become a partner. But she was not

happy at Sidley, says her friend Hilary Beard. Michelle didn't feel "like she was making a difference, like the work mattered in a larger sense."

In the summer of 1989, Michelle was assigned to mentor Barack Obama, a 28-year-old who had just completed his first year at Harvard Law. If Michelle, with her two Ivy League degrees and her African American roots, was a big deal at Sidley, Barack was much bigger. He was working on the *Harvard Law Review* and was soon to be elected its president. Andrew Goldstein, a colleague from those years, recalls hearing in Sidley's corridors that Barack could be the first African American president of the United States.

Barack was late on his first day, which didn't impress his mentor. When they had lunch, Michelle later told the Obama biographer David Mendell, "he had this bad sport jacket and a cigarette dangling from his mouth."

"Man, she is hot!" Barack later told Dan Shomon. "So I am going to work my magic on her." Initially, Michelle acted less than interested. "He would try to charm her, flirt with her, and she would act very professional," says Kelly Jo MacArthur, then an associate at the firm. "We would just laugh because he was undeniably charming and interesting and attractive, and the harder he had to try, the harder he had to try, because the less interested she appeared to be."

"I'm his mentor," Michelle told MacArthur. "It would not be appropriate for me to go out with him." Michelle also pronounced it "tacky" for two of the handful of African Americans in the firm to date each other.

When Barack finally won her over, Shomon recalls, "he was very proud." On their first conventional date that summer, they visited the Art Institute of Chicago, walked up Michigan Avenue, and saw Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, followed by ice cream at Baskin-Robbins and their first kiss. Michelle's one big complaint about Barack, her Sidley colleagues say, was that he smoked. She also didn't feel that she knew him well enough to make a commitment. She asked her brother for help. Craig, now the head coach of Oregon State, took his basketball seriously and thought that a man's character could be deciphered by his behavior on the court. "He's confident but not cocky," Craig would later recall reporting to his sister. "He'll take the shot if he's open, he's a team player who improves the people around him, and he won't back down from any challenge."

When Michelle announced that she was leaving Sidley and taking a pay cut to go to City Hall as an assistant to the new mayor, Richard M. Daley, Kelly Jo MacArthur was not surprised. "You just knew that you weren't going to contain her in that law firm. And people knew Barack

wasn't coming back, either. It was obvious that his destiny was one that would affect the rest of our destinies."

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IN JULY 1991, MICHELLE SENT HER résumé to the mayor's office, and it landed in the hands of Valerie Jarrett, then Daley's deputy chief of staff. Jarrett, who herself had left a Loop law firm to work in City Hall, interviewed Michelle and was so impressed, she told a reporter for *Vogue*, that she immediately offered her a job as one of the three assistants to the mayor. The next day, Michelle called to say that before deciding, she wanted Jarrett to meet her fiancé, Barack Obama. "Barack just wanted to make sure that this was substantive, and it was something that would be good for Michelle," says Cindy Moelis, who worked with Michelle at City Hall. Others say that Barack needed assurance that Jarrett would protect Michelle—that she would handle work that she (and he) would be proud of and that she could survive the internecine politics of the mayor's office. After the three had dinner at a seafood restaurant in the Loop, they were all in agreement that City Hall was a good move for Michelle.

Avis LaVelle, then the mayor's press secretary, was also impressed by the way Michelle carried herself: "with dignity—a lot of tall women slump or act like they

+ Mom in Chief?

SHE HAS HER PRIORITIES, BUT MOTHERHOOD WILL NEVER BE HER ONLY MISSION

MICHELLE OBAMA DRIVES feminists nuts by insisting that her main concern when she arrives at the White House will be Malia and Sasha. Michelle's repeated pledge that she will devote herself full-time to making sure her daughters adjust to their new lives has sparked the phrase "the mommification of Michelle"—and that's no compliment.

Despite the criticism, Michelle is expected to establish her office in the East Wing, the traditional venue for First Ladies, as opposed to the West Wing, where the president and the power reside (and where Hillary Clinton installed her office).

Still, friends maintain that Michelle will also tackle issues, drawing on both her background and her campaign experience. One goal is to promote national service, a reflection of her work in the mid-1990s at Public Allies Chicago. "She's going to try to focus on how to get kids from diverse backgrounds involved in community service at a young age," says her friend Cindy Moelis.

A second mission is to find ways for the country to better support military families. During the campaign, Michelle often held women's roundtables and frequently ended up in talks with military spouses. She expressed shock at the flimsy or nonexistent backup for these women, who are left on their own to worry about their husbands' safety while facing issues of childcare, education, and family budget.

Beyond those issues—and especially if there is a second term—friends and colleagues speculate that Michelle could address health

care (drawing on her work at the University of Chicago) and education (former Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan, a family friend, sees her as "a huge force in education" and calls Michelle and Barack "living symbols of what education can do in your life").

In addition to taking on specific issues, Michelle will bring her own style to the more traditional roles of the First Lady. She will

almost certainly travel abroad to help improve America's relations with foreign governments (taking care, though, not to step on the toes of the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton). And many Washingtonians look forward to her bringing glamour to the town's social scene—a return to the Kennedys' Camelot, or, as the *New York Post* dubbed it, "Bam-a-lot."

Closer to home is Michelle's role as Barack's number-one adviser, as he describes her. The Harvard Law School professor Charles Ogletree says that Michelle will tell her husband "not what he likes to hear but what he needs to hear."

Overall, says the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who has known Michelle since she was a teenager, she will help the president sell his agenda. "She will not have some trivial role," he says. "Michelle is capable of having a press conference without notes."

—C. F.



With Sasha in Iowa, July 2007

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don't want to fill their shoes or stand up and be counted. She filled her own shoes; she filled her own space."

Michelle and Moelis worked to develop programs addressing infant mortality, afterschool activities, and immunizations via mobile health units, among other projects. Michelle did not need her legal training, but her personality was well suited to the work, says MacArthur, because Michelle is a careful listener. Within six months, Jarrett was named the city's commissioner of planning and development, and she enticed her young protégée to join her. Michelle became the assistant commissioner of planning and Jarrett's troubleshooter, making sure that projects moved forward. MacArthur recalls Michelle saying earlier of Jarrett, "There's some incredible woman working at the mayor's office, and I'm going to learn a lot from this woman."

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WHEN CINDY MOELIS AND HER HUSBAND had a Bulls basketball party at their house in 1992, she and Yvonne Davila, then Daley's speechwriter and assistant press secretary, met Barack. "I knew he was different," says Davila, "and I can't explain why."

Michelle wanted to get married; Barack argued that marriage was a meaningless formality. One night he took her to dinner at Gordon, an elegant restaurant on North Clark Street, and expounded on the subject. Then Michelle's dessert plate arrived with a box containing an engagement ring. "That kind of shuts you up, doesn't it?" Barack said.

Santita Jackson sang at their wedding on October 18, 1992, and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ officiated. The reception was at the South Shore Cultural Center, formerly a country club that excluded blacks and Jews. It was "one of the happier weddings that I had been to," says MacArthur, "because people understood that putting the two of them together was like putting hydrogen and oxygen together to create this unbelievable life force. Everybody knew it. We understood that together they were going to be so much more than they would have been individually."

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MICHELLE, THEN 29, LEFT CITY GOVERNMENT after only 18 months—she was "taken aback by the slowness of the bureaucracy," says Jody Kretzmann, a colleague—to become the founding executive director of Public Allies Chicago, an organization that trained young people for com-



From law-firm mentor to wife: Michelle and Barack on their wedding day, October 18, 1992

munity-service jobs. Some have speculated that Barack, with the dream of the presidency already in his head, worried that Michelle would be compromised by working in City Hall—perhaps without her even realizing it—and then so would he. "You don't have to think evil of Obama or City Hall," says Quentin Young, a physician and an activist, "to realize that could be a liability to a person who is politically on the rise."

For Michelle, Public Allies represented considerable risk. "She was giving up the financial security and benefits that came with a city job and entering uncharted ground," Moelis says. "She was being asked to start an office in which you were raising the money to pay yourself."

Jarrett, Moelis, and Davila agreed to serve on her board. Michelle and her small staff selected 30 allies ranging in age from 18 to 30, some with graduate degrees and some who had made it only through high school, a diverse mix racially and economically. In any class of allies, says Jody Kretzmann, an adviser to Public Allies, there might be "everything from gangbangers from the West Side to welfare moms to University of Chicago Law School graduates. They've got to figure out a way to work together and do something in a team-service project in a community."

Michelle left Public Allies three years later, in 1996, because she wanted to have a baby, her friends say, and couldn't do that with a 60-hour-a-week job. "She had done with it what she wanted to do," says

Mike Mullins, the group's finance director. "She had started the organization; she had it on a very firm footing."

She used what she had learned from Public Allies in her next job as the associate dean of student services and the first director of community relations and community service at the University of Chicago. Michelle had grown up minutes away from the university, but she told a reporter from *O, The Oprah Magazine* that she had never been on campus: "All the buildings have their backs to the community. The university didn't think kids like me existed, and I certainly didn't want anything to do with that place."

In her new position, Michelle encouraged U. of C. undergraduates to volunteer beyond the boundaries of the campus. She also served on a board that set sexual-harassment policy for the university. Another board member was the director Curt Columbus, who then headed the U. of C.'s University Theater. He remembers Michelle's "low-key, disarming, and wicked intelligence." She was "human in her insights as opposed to institutional," he says. He also recalls her beauty—she was "one of those women you look at and say, 'You look fabulous.'"

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SHE DIDN'T FEEL SO FABULOUS.

While Michelle was working at the university and managing the household, Barack was spending part of every week in Springfield as a state senator. Although she was fond of telling others to follow their hearts, she seemed to have a different standard for Barack. Part of the conflict had to do with the most basic personality difference between them: Michelle had an overriding need for order and routine in her home—her complaints during the presidential campaign that he would leave his socks on the floor and the butter on the counter were real. Not only did Barack keep a cluttered office in their apartment but he was a free spirit and drawn to risk.

In 2001, while Barack was still recovering from his loss to Bobby Rush and Michelle was on maternity leave, she got a call from Michael Riordan, then the president and chief executive officer of the University of Chicago Medical Center. He asked her to interview for a job. She was not enthusiastic, but she took Sasha along and went to the interview. While Sasha slept, Riordan offered Michelle the job, on her terms, which included a big salary and flexible hours.

She started work in 2002 with the title of executive director of community affairs, and

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her goal, says Jody Kretzmann, was to make sure that hospital administrators and professionals understood the neighborhoods around them. She placed volunteers from the hospital in the community, and community people in the hospital as volunteers. Berneice Mills-Thomas, who runs community-based health centers throughout the city, recalls that Michelle came to her office, looking for input. "She's getting down with us," Mills-Thomas says, "and asking us, 'What do you need?'"

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DURING BARACK'S RUN FOR THE U.S. Senate, he and Michelle took out a second mortgage on their two-bedroom condominium on the first floor of a three-story walkup on South Eastview Park, near the lakefront. They had paid \$277,500 for it in 1993. Cindy Moelis describes it as "a spacious apartment that had a nice common room. They decorated it with inexpensive but beautiful things."

Michelle still wanted a house, however—a big house with a big yard. "Barack wanted his family to be comfortable, but he would have been satisfied with three spoons, a fork, and a dish," says an acquaintance who talked to him often about the matter. "It was an issue for her."

But fortune struck when Barack's convention speech in 2004 sent his memoir on-to bestseller lists, and the couple suddenly had money. Michelle had gone along with Barack when he wanted to trade up to the Senate; now she wanted him to indulge her dream of trading up to a grand house. They found one in Kenwood—a \$1.65-million six-bedroom, three-story Georgian revival mansion with a wine cellar and dark wood paneling.

Barack later called the house deal "boneheaded"—to get a bigger yard, they made a deal with Rita Rezko, the wife of Tony Rezko, a onetime financial supporter of Barack's and now a convicted felon awaiting sentencing. But if Barack blamed Michelle for getting him into an embarrassing arrangement, he never mentioned it. Barack never criticized her for "pushing him into doing something," says a person close to him. "Never once [did he suggest that] he didn't love her or respect her."

With more money, Michelle also came to understand that a list of chores was no

longer a viable way to organize their lives. She hired a full-time housekeeper to do "the things I don't fully enjoy, like cleaning, laundry and cooking," she told *People*.

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ALTHOUGH TALK OF AN OBAMA CAMPAIGN for the presidency in 2008 started almost as soon as he entered the U.S. Senate in 2005, within the Obama family there was enormous ambivalence. In September 2006, Dan Hynes, who had ended up supporting Obama's Senate race, released a letter calling on Obama to run for president. Hynes phoned ahead to warn Barack. "Well, Dan, I'm flattered," Obama said, as Hynes recalls, "but . . . Michelle will never forgive you."

Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* columnist Connie Schultz got to know Barack when her husband, Sherrod Brown, was running for the U.S. Senate from Ohio in 2006.

"There was already a lot of buzz about would [Obama] run, and any time that would happen in a group setting, he would turn to me and say, 'You know, Michelle really does not want me to do this.'"

At the same time, Barack thought he could win, and he made his case to Michelle. "She's a logical sort of person, and she came along as a willing partner," says Cheryl Whitaker, a close friend from South Shore. Michelle pointed out to another friend that Barack had always lived up to his promises—to make money writing books, to build a successful political

career. "As she looked back on the list of things he said he was going to do and did them, she realized that she needed to get on board," this friend says.

Michelle became a key adviser to her husband during the run. Charles Ogletree, who consulted with the campaign, remembers conference calls in which Michelle was "very explicit in her views about what he needs to do." According to one report, on a call to discuss debate strategy against Hillary Clinton, "Mrs. Obama interrupted the high-priced consultants to urge, 'Barack! Feel—don't think.'"

She was also his sounding board. "Barack relied on her for the Everyman/Everywoman view," says Shomon, who observed this firsthand during the U.S. Senate race. "He believed that because of Michelle's background, she had a great sense of what people were talking about." Shomon says that Michelle's mother, Mari-

an, held a similar status. "When it came to nonpolitical things, her word was gold to him."

On the campaign trail, Michelle quickly proved to be a crowd pleaser. Jennifer Hunter, then reporting for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, recalls being in New Hampshire when Barack was talking about health care. A young woman told him her story about having trouble getting insurance because she had multiple sclerosis. "His response was to talk about policy," Hunter says. "Michelle's response was to go and give her a big hug." Sheryll Cashin was inspired by Michelle's campaign performance: "She seemed somewhat reticent in law school. I wouldn't have known that she was the amazing public speaker that she is."

As Michelle campaigned in battleground states, usually without Barack, she asked friends to travel with her, though they were required to pay for their own tickets. Cheryl Whitaker says that the invitation was natural because the Obamas take friendship seriously. "Experience this with me," Michelle told Whitaker, who accompanied her to Florida, Wisconsin, Colorado, Nevada, and Minnesota.

Whitaker began to recognize that the campaign was no pipe dream. "It was awesome to see the response to her wherever she went. People were clamoring and lining up, surrounding her, wanting to take pictures, talk to her, and shake her hand. We could all see the movement building."

For Sandy Matthews, the most exciting night was January 3, 2008, when Obama won the Iowa caucuses—eliminating the inevitability of a Clinton nomination. The day after Christmas, several close friends of the Obamas' had decamped with their children to Iowa to work for Barack, canvassing and doing other campaign chores. On the night of the caucuses, Barack suggested that they gather at a restaurant for dinner before going to the hall in Des Moines where he would declare victory or concede defeat. Friends gave toasts, and then Michelle raised her glass. "She talked about her love for Barack," Matthews recalls. It was an emotional tribute, and many of the guests had tears in their eyes. Just as Michelle was finishing, a campaign aide burst in and said that CNN had called the state for Obama.

For Barack, that first victory must have been a relief. Several friends say that Michelle had warned him about his run for the presidency: "If we don't win now, we're not doing this again in four years."

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WHEN BOOKS ARE WRITTEN ABOUT this campaign, Michelle almost certainly

will be seen as an asset. More than her husband—who has a dazzling smile but whose eyes sometimes betray distraction or boredom—she is a natural politician. Barack has said that in a political race against Michelle, she would win, and he means it. “She’s very present with people,” says Hilary Beard. “As busy as she is, when she’s talking to them, she’s with them.”

Cindy Moelis was on a plane with Michelle, watching her fiddle with a speech she was about to deliver to a primarily African American audience. A staffer mentioned that elderly relatives had saved their money to invest in living-room furniture as a way of showing that they had become financially stable, then they had covered it in plastic. “And Michelle said, ‘Oh, my God, that was true for us,’” Moelis recalls. Michelle implored her audience to grab the chance—not to let their fear that some lunatic would assassinate Barack cause them to settle for Hillary. “Don’t put us in plastic,” she said. “Don’t protect us. Help us.”

The campaign recognized that Michelle connected with audiences—she was as popular in nearly all-white Iowa as in diverse urban centers; as election day neared, she drew crowds of 10,000 or more. But it took Michelle time to find her footing. At the start, she continued to riff on Barack’s domestic foibles, but the quips did not work as well on the national stage. People do not want to hear about the intimate lapses—snoring, bad breath in the morning—of their potential commander in chief, and the playful jabs diminished him. When Michelle moved from the domestic to the political, things sometimes got worse. In February 2008, there was the comment, “For the first time in my adult lifetime, I am proud of my country.” And speaking in a black church in South Carolina—a state where her great-great-grandfather Jim Robinson had been born a slave—Michelle called America “just downright mean. . . . The life that I’m talking about that most people are living has gotten progressively worse since I was a little girl.” When inflammatory statements from the Obamas’ pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, saturated the airwaves in March, there was speculation that this, too, was Michelle’s fault, since women usually select a church. (In fact, Barack had joined the church before he knew Michelle.)

Other comments she made were interpreted by critics as faulting capitalism, further feeding the news frenzy. And then there was the so-called “terrorist fist jab,” when Michelle took the stage after Barack secured the nomination. It was spontaneous, cute, and affectionate—and, for a time, a distraction.

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Myra Gutin, an academic who writes about First Ladies, says that Michelle cost Barack “some political capital and threw the campaign off message for a little while.” She underwent a rehabilitation effort—which included concentrating on gentler national media, such as *The View* and celebrity magazines such as *Us Weekly* and *People*. She also learned to parse her language carefully. The Reverend Jesse Jackson says that Michelle came to realize that “she has to weigh the strength of words, how they’re read by others.” Michelle protected herself from some of the criticism, says Cindy Moelis, by curtailing her consumption of news. “She allows staff to filter things that she needs to know so she doesn’t feel insulted by some of the things that she reads.” When traveling with Michelle, recalls Cheryl Whitaker, “we didn’t read the paper and look at polls.”

In a way, the critics did the Obamas a favor—Barack got to jump to Michelle’s defense. “Lay off my wife,” he said. He told CBS’s Katie Couric the Monday before election day that what bothered him most were the “right-wing” attacks on his wife. “I just feel like family are civilians.”

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AT THE START OF THE CAMPAIGN, Michelle had pledged to be home every night by six, to sit with the girls after dinner while they did their homework, to tuck them in, and to be there in the morning when they awakened. “She held to that pledge like clockwork,” says Sandy Matthews. The key was Michelle’s mother, Marian, now 71. If Michelle is the person who kept her dream-big husband anchored, Marian is the one who taught Michelle how to do it—the reason her children’s “feet are always on the ground,” says Avis LaVelle. At a California forum run by Maria Shriver in October 2007, five potential First Ladies were asked, “Who’s your best friend?” Most named their husbands. Michelle said, “Oh, my mother?”

Marian dotes on her granddaughters and is more easygoing than their mother. They get “a little leeway with Grandma,” says Sandy Matthews—a little extra television, rules a little relaxed. Marian got help from the girls’ godmother, Eleanor Wilson, also known as Mama Kaye, who lives in Olympia Fields and is a friend and contemporary of Marian’s. Michelle could stay calm during the campaign, Matthews says, because her mother was looking after the girls, “not missing a beat during the day with anything that they needed.”

Marian had a soothing effect on someone else in the family, too. A photographer who was in the Chicago hotel suite



The winners: His mother-in-law squeezes his hand when victory is assured (above); mother and daughters on that historic night.

when the Obamas and their friends and families were watching the election returns caught an image for the ages—as it became clear that Obama would be the next president, Marian Robinson, seated some distance from Barack on the sofa, reached out and took his hand in hers and squeezed it.

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THE SATURDAY AFTERNOONS IN Chicago with her daughters and her friends are over, at least for now. Heading for the fishbowl of Washington, Michelle has said that she will concentrate on making a smooth transition for her girls. It will help that her mother, Marian, is moving with them. Friends say the sisters are close but different. Malia is “more reserved, more pensive, more thoughtful, more sensitive,” says Sandy Matthews. Yvonne Davila adds that Malia, like her father, does not “get excited about a lot of things; [she’s] levelheaded, and she figures things out.” Matthews calls Sasha “spicy.” She loves crowds and hoopla, clicking cameras—she high-fived Vice President Dick Cheney—pretty dresses, the more frills the better.

Michelle got started on the school search right after the election, although anyone who knew anything about Washington assumed the girls would end up at Sidwell Friends, which has a long history

of political children—Chelsea Clinton, Tricia Nixon, and Albert Gore III, among them. Although Barack did not look at schools with his wife and children, he joined Michelle for a parent-teacher conference at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools the Friday after the election. Michelle has said that just because her husband is the leader of the free world, he doesn’t get a pass on childcare. After the long campaign, she told Steve Kroft of *60 Minutes* that the family could now have dinner together “under the one roof. . . . I envision the kids coming home from school and being able to run across the way to the Oval Office and see their dad before they start their homework, and having breakfast, and he’ll be there to tuck them in at night.”

Given the pace of life in today’s White House, that image of domesticity may be hopelessly naïve and out of date. But it represents the family life that Michelle has worked hard to preserve, even as her husband’s political career has rocketed and pulled her along for the ride. Friends say she will not give up on the effort—and she will have an ally in Barack. “They’re best friends,” says Kelly Jo MacArthur. People who know them describe “the look”—a glance across a crowded room catching each other’s eye—and the greeting reserved for each other, “Hey, you.” In St. Paul, when Michelle gave her husband the famous fist bump, reporters overlooked his affectionate pat on her behind.

Onstage at Grant Park, the night of the victory rally, Michelle and Barack embraced, and she whispered into her husband’s ear, “I love you.” ■