

Lara Gitlin on Michelle Obama

Michelle Obama is an accomplished lawyer, public servant, First Lady, but she defines herself primarily as “Malia and Sasha’s Mom.” Obama’s devotion to her family and to building a career based on public service makes her an excellent example of how a leader becomes a positive force for change in the world by leveraging all four domains in her life.

Michelle Obama grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Her father worked for the Chicago Water Department, and her mother was a homemaker. Michelle’s parents encouraged her to study and do well in school, and she excelled. She was accepting to a prestigious magnet school in Chicago, commuting 90 minutes each way. Her brother, Craig Robinson, explains that hard work is the key to Obama’s success. “Michelle works harder than anyone I know...I’d come home from basketball practice, and she’d be working. I’d sit down on the couch and watch TV; she’d keep working. When I turned off the TV, she’d still be working.” All of her efforts led to acceptance at Princeton University and Harvard Law School.

After law school, she joined Chicago-based law firm Sidley and Austin, where she met her future husband, Barack Obama. From the outside, it appeared that she had it all – a law degree from Harvard, a prestigious job, and a great relationship. However, after her father died of complications from Multiple Sclerosis and she lost a friend to cancer at age 25, Obama began to question her whether the career decisions she had made thus far were the right ones for her. She said, “It made me realize that I could die tomorrow. I had to ask myself, Is this how I want to spend my time? I knew I would never feel a sense of passion or joy about the law. I was on a conveyor belt.” Obama decided to step off the conveyor belt and build a career that focused on public service, her true passion.

After leaving Sidley and Austin, Obama had a series of jobs in the public and non-profit sectors. She worked for the Chicago city government as an Assistant to the Mayor and as Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Development. She served as the Executive Director for the Chicago branch office of Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program that prepares young people for public service. She then moved to the University of Chicago and the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she developed community service and volunteering programs. By recognizing her true passion for public service, Obama was able to align her work and community domains and work on projects that she was passionate about that also improve the community.

Today, as First Lady, Obama continues to align the domains in her life through her official White House duties as well as the choices she makes in her personal life. Her *Let’s Move!* And *Joining Forces* campaigns focus align her professional endeavors with her goals for the community, and her fashion choices, and family activities are all examples of how Obama is able to be true to herself while remaining in the public eye. The Let’s Move! Campaign has been the focal point of the First Lady’s agenda for the past several years. It is an initiative to bring doctors, parents, teachers, and government officials together to end childhood obesity within a generation. By working to increase physical activity and increase access to affordable, healthy food for families and in schools, Obama is tackling one of the biggest social problems of our generation. In addition, by creating an inclusive campaign that involves parents and caregivers as well as health professionals, she is empowering others to get involved and create change in their own communities. Through this initiative, Obama is combining her work with her community goals. She is also benefiting her husband’s social policy agenda, promoting healthy living for her children, and creating a fulfilling career for herself. As she explains, “this isn’t just a policy issue for me. This is a passion. This is my mission. I am determined to work with folks across this country to change the way a generation of kids thinks about food and nutrition.”

Obama’s new Joining Forces campaign – which focuses on mobilizing others to help military veterans and their families – is also a four-way win for Obama. The initiative focuses on three pillars – increasing employment for military veterans and their spouses, improving education for veteran and military children, and increasing

access to health and wellness programs for military families. This initiative builds off of Obama's family values as she hopes to improve family life for military families. It also aligns her work with her goals of improving the community, and she appears to get personal satisfaction from seeing members of the community help each other to improve the community for all of us.

Despite her busy schedule, Obama is an active parent, attending school events and spending time with her kids and their friends. "I like to be a presence in my kids' school," she explains. "I want to know the teachers; I want to know the other parents." Obama's mother, Marian Robinson, lives with the Obama family to help with childcare, which allows Obama the flexibility to work more and travel when necessary without worrying about her kids. She also plans a variety of child-friendly events at the White House, getting her children involved in some of her professional and social events. As Jill Biden describes, Obama "maintains a normal life in an extraordinary time. You only need to be around her girls for a few seconds to know what an incredible mom she is."

Michelle Obama also uses her fashion choices as a way to reflect the values that are important to her. Unlike prior first ladies, Obama mixes high fashion with casual brands like J. Crew, stressing comfort and practicality over high fashion. She says, "I wear what I love. That's what women have to focus on: what makes them happy and what makes them feel comfortable and beautiful." When she does wear designer clothes, she chooses younger, up-and-coming American designers rather than established designers. She also promotes women and minorities within fashion, helping to diversify the fashion world and promote the success of people who are outside the fashion establishment. By pursuing her passion for fashion, Obama is also reflecting her own values in her clothing choices and helping the broader fashion community as well.

By researching Michelle Obama, I learned that it is important to stay true to your values, even if it involves defying convention and taking a risk. When Obama was unhappy at a big law firm, she recognized her true passion and followed it, even though she probably took a pay cut and had no idea where her new career path would lead. As first lady, she creates her own path and focuses on issues that are important to her, and doesn't worry about the fact that her personal and professional choices are different than those made by her predecessors.

Sources:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/first-lady-michelle-obama>

<http://www.letsmove.gov/about>

<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/michelle-obama-the-natural/#1>

<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/michelle-obama-leading-lady/#1>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelle_Obama