

Who Is Michelle Obama?

Michelle Obama was born in 1964 in Chicago, Illinois. She attended Princeton University, graduating *cum laude* in 1985, and went on to earn a degree from Harvard Law School in 1988.

Following her graduation from Harvard, she worked at a Chicago law firm, where she met her husband, future U.S. president Barack Obama. The couple married on October 3, 1992. As first lady, she focused her attention on social issues such as poverty, healthy living and education.

Young Michelle Obama

Michelle Obama was born Michelle LaVaughn Robinson on January 17, 1964, in Chicago, Illinois.

Michelle was raised in a small bungalow on Chicago's South Side. Her father, Fraser Robinson, was a city-pump operator and a Democratic precinct captain. Her mother, Marian, was a secretary at Spiegel's but later stayed home to raise Michelle and her older brother, Craig. They were a close-knit family, typically sharing meals, reading and playing games together.

Craig and Michelle, 21 months apart in age, were often mistaken for twins. The siblings also shared close quarters, sleeping in the living room with a sheet serving as a makeshift room divider. They were raised with an emphasis on education and had learned to read at home by age four. Both skipped the second grade.

Education

By the sixth grade, Michelle was taking classes in her school's gifted program, where she learned French and completed accelerated courses in biology. She went on to attend Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, the city's first magnet high school for gifted children, where, among other activities, she served as the student government treasurer. In 1981, Michelle graduated from the school as class salutatorian.

Following in her older brother's footsteps, Michelle then attended Princeton University, graduating *cum laude* in 1985 with a B.A. in Sociology. She went on to study law at Harvard Law School, where she took part in demonstrations calling for the enrollment and hiring of more minority students and professors. She was awarded her J.D. in 1988.

Barack and Michelle Obama

After law school, Michelle worked as an associate in the Chicago branch of the firm Sidley Austin, in the area of marketing and intellectual property. It was there, in 1989, that she met her future husband, Barack Obama, a summer intern to whom she was assigned as an adviser.

Initially, she refused to date Barack, believing that their work relationship would make the romance improper. She eventually relented, however, and the couple soon fell in love.

After two years of dating, Barack proposed, and the couple married at Trinity United Church of Christ on October 3, 1992. Their daughters, Malia and Sasha, were born in 1998 and 2001, respectively.

Career

In 1991, Michelle decided to leave corporate law and pursue a career in public service, working as an assistant to Mayor Richard Daley and then as the assistant commissioner of planning and development for the City of Chicago.

In 1993, she became executive director for the Chicago office of Public Allies, a nonprofit leadership-training program that helped young adults develop skills for future careers in the public sector.

In 1996, Michelle joined the University of Chicago as associate dean of student services, developing the school's first community-service program. Beginning in 2002, she worked for the University of Chicago Hospitals, as executive director of community relations and external affairs.

In May 2005, Michelle was appointed vice president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she continued to work part-time until shortly before her husband's inauguration as president. She also served as a board member for the prestigious Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Issues and Causes

As first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama focused her attention on issues such as the support of military families, helping working women balance career and family and encouraging national service.

During the first year of the Obama presidency, Michelle and her husband volunteered at homeless shelters and soup kitchens in the Washington, D.C. area. Michelle also made appearances at public schools, stressing the importance of education and volunteer work.

Ever conscious of her family's diet and health, Michelle supported the organic-food movement, instructing the White House kitchens to prepare organic food for guests and her family. In March 2009, Michelle worked with 23 fifth graders from a local school in Washington D.C. to plant an 1,100-square-foot garden of fresh vegetables and install beehives on the South Lawn of the White House. She also put efforts to fight childhood obesity near the top of her agenda.

Michelle Obama remained committed to her health-and-wellness causes. In 2012, she announced a new fitness program for kids as part of her Let's Move initiative. Along with the U.S. Olympic team and other sports organizations, she worked to get young people to try out a new sport or activity.

"This year, 1.7 million young people will be participating in Olympic and Paralympic sports in their communities — many of them for the very first time. And that is so important, because sometimes all it takes is that first lesson, or clinic, or class to get a child excited about a new sport," she said in a statement.

Putting her message in print, Michelle released a book as part of her mission to promote healthy eating. *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America* (2012) explores her own experience creating a vegetable garden as well as the work of community gardens elsewhere.

She told Reuters that she saw the book as an opportunity to help readers understand "where their food was coming from" and "to talk about the work that we're doing with childhood obesity and childhood health."

After the White House

After leaving the White House, Obama remained highly sought after for her words of wisdom. In November 2017, during a conversation with poet Elizabeth Alexander at the Obama Foundation's inaugural youth leadership summit in Chicago, she spoke about the problems with impulsively firing off thoughts on social media.

"When you have a voice, you can't just use it any kind of way, you know?" she said. "You don't just say what's on your mind. You don't tweet every thought. Most of your first initial thoughts are not worthy of the light of day." It was believed to be a rebuke of President Trump, a notorious Twitter devotee, though Obama clarified that she was "talking about all of us."

The former first lady also addressed the topic of protecting women from sexual harassment, a hot-button issue stemming from recent accusations made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and others in position of power.

"When we think about women in particular we ask them to speak up. We ask them to speak their mind. We ask them to just say no, to speak out against sexual harassment," Obama said. "But if we don't teach our young girls to speak at an early age, that doesn't just happen. It takes practice to have a voice. You have to use it again, and again, and again before you can say 'no.' Or 'stop.' 'Don't touch me.'"

On February 12, 2018, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery unveiled its official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama. Rendered by African-American artists, the colorful portraits were noticeably different from the more traditional efforts of past years: Kehinde Wiley's work featured Barack in a chair surrounded by greenery and symbolic flowers, while Amy Sherald depicted the former first lady in a flowing dress, gazing back at viewers from a sea of blue.

'Becoming'

Later that year, Obama published her memoir, *Becoming*. Describing the "deeply personal experience" of writing the book, she tweeted: "I talk about my roots and how a girl from the South Side found her voice. I hope my journey inspires readers to find the courage to become whoever they aspire to be."