

BIOGRAPHY™



Photo: Joyce N. Boghosian/The White House/Getty Images

NAME
Michelle Obama

BIRTH DATE
January 17, 1964
(age 57)

EDUCATION
Harvard Law School, Princeton University, Whitney M. Young Magnet High School

PLACE OF BIRTH
Chicago, Illinois

ORIGINALLY
Michelle LaVaughn Robinson

Michelle Obama (1964-)

UPDATED: JAN 21, 2021 · ORIGINAL: FEB 26, 2018

Michelle Obama is a lawyer, writer and the wife of former U.S. President Barack Obama. Prior to her role as first lady, she was a lawyer, Chicago city administrator and community-outreach worker.

Who Is Michelle Obama?

Michelle Obama is a lawyer and writer who was the first lady of the United States from 2009 to 2017. She is the wife of the 44th U.S. president, [Barack Obama](#). As first lady, Michelle focused her attention on social issues such as poverty, healthy living and education. Her 2018 memoir, *Becoming*, discusses the experiences that shaped her, from her childhood in Chicago to her years living in the White House.

Early Life

Michelle was born Michelle LaVaughn Robinson on January 17, 1964, in Chicago, Illinois. Michelle's 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. At just 21 months apart in age, Craig and Michelle were often mistaken for twin.

The Robinson family lived in a small bungalow on Chicago's South Side. Michelle and Craig shared quarters, sleeping in the living room with a sheet serving as a makeshift room divider. They were a close-knit family, typically sharing meals, reading and playing games together.

Education

Raised with an emphasis on education, both Michelle and her brother learned to read at home by age four. Both skipped the second grade. By the sixth grade, Michelle was taking classes in her school's gifted program, where she learned French and completed accelerated courses in biology.

Michelle 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, she graduated from the school as class salutatorian.

College and Law School

Following in her older brother's footsteps, Michelle 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.

Marriage to Barack

Michelle and Barack married at Trinity United Church of Christ on October 3, 1992. They met in 1989, at Michelle's first job as a lawyer at the Chicago firm Sidley Austin. Her future husband, Barack, was a summer intern to whom Michelle was assigned as an adviser.

Initially, Michelle 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.

Career in Lawyer and Public Service

After graduating law school in 1988, Michelle worked as an associate in the Chicago branch of the firm Sidley Austin in the area of marketing and intellectual property.

In 1991, she left corporate law to 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, Michelle 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.

Campaigning for President Obama

Michelle first caught the eye of a national audience while at her husband's side when he delivered a high-profile speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Barack was elected as U.S. Senator from Illinois that November.

In 2007, Michelle scaled back her own professional work to attend to family and campaign obligations during Barack's run for the Democratic presidential nomination. When they were

out on the trail, they would leave their daughters with their grandmother Marian, Michelle's mother.

Barack eventually won the nomination and was elected the 44th President of the United States. He was inaugurated on January 20, 2009.

When her husband sought reelection in 2012, facing a challenging race against Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, Michelle diligently campaigned on his behalf. She traveled the country, giving talks and making public appearances.

On November 6, 2012, Barack was re-elected for a second term as U.S. president. After Mitt Romney conceded defeat, Michelle accompanied her husband with their two daughters, Malia and Sasha, onto the stage at McCormick Place in Chicago, where President Obama delivered his victory speech.

Notable Speeches

Throughout her career, Michelle has given a number of powerful speeches. A few of the most notable include:

2012 Democratic National Convention, September 4, 2012

In September 2012, Michelle delivered a noteworthy speech at the Democratic National Convention. "Every day, the people I meet inspire me, every day they make me proud, every day they remind me how blessed we are to live in the greatest nation on earth," she said. "Serving as your first lady is an honor and a privilege."

She went on to praise the Latino community for supporting President Obama and stated that her husband—"the same man [she] fell in love with all those years ago"—understands the American Dream, as well as the everyday struggles of American families, and cares deeply about making a difference in people's lives. Michelle won both public and critical praise for her narrative, called a "shining moment" by The Washington Post.

2016 Democratic National Convention, July 25, 2016

In July 2016, Michelle campaigned in support of former first lady, senator and secretary of state [Hillary Clinton](#), who became the official Democratic nominee for the American presidency and the first woman in the U.S. to win a major political party's presidential nomination. On the first night of the Democratic National Convention, Michelle spoke in support of Clinton, who had previously run against Barack during the 2008 primaries, and her vision of a progressive America.

"...I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves, and I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent, Black young women, playing with their dogs on the White House lawn," she said. "And because of Hillary Clinton, my daughters, and all our sons and daughters, now take for granted that a woman can be president of the United States."

Michelle continued to campaign for Clinton, speaking out forcefully against the campaign of Republican candidate [Donald Trump](#), who went on to win the presidential election.

Final Speech as First Lady, January 13, 2017

On January 13, 2017, Michelle made her final speech as first lady at the White House, saying "being your first lady has been the greatest honor of my life and I hope I've made you proud."

In an emotional moment, she addressed young Americans: "I want our young people to know that they matter, that they belong. So don't be afraid. You hear me, young people? Don't be afraid. Be focused. Be determined. Be hopeful. Be empowered. Empower yourself with a good education. Then get out there and use that education to build a country worthy of your boundless promise. Lead by example with hope; never fear."

Obama Foundation Summit, November 18-19, 2018

During a conversation with poet Elizabeth Alexander at the Obama Foundation's inaugural youth leadership summit in Chicago, in November 2018, the former first lady spoke about the problems with impulsively sharing 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 Michelle clarified that she was "talking about all of us."

Michelle 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," Michelle 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.'"

Causes and Accomplishments as First Lady

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

Volunteering

During the first year of the Obama presidency, Michelle and Barack 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.

Organic Food

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.

Healthy Living Initiatives

Michelle remained committed throughout her time as first lady 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."

Daughters

Barack and Michelle have two daughters: Malia, born in 1998, and Sasha, born in 2001.

Both Michelle and Barack have stated that their personal priority is their children. After Barack was elected president in 2008, the parents realized that the move from Chicago to Washington, D.C. would be a major adjustment for any family. Residing in the White House, having Secret Service protection and always being in the wake of their parents' public obligations dramatically transformed their lives.

The Obamas tried to make their daughters' world as "normal" as possible, with set times for studying, going to bed and getting up.

"My first priority will always be to make sure that our girls are healthy and grounded," Michelle has said. "Then I want to help other families get the support they need, not just to survive, but to thrive."

Fashion Icon

After her husband's political role pushed her family into the spotlight, Michelle was publicly recognized for her no-nonsense campaign style as well as her sense of fashion.

In May 2006, she was featured in *Essence* magazine as one of "25 of the World's Most Inspiring Women." In September 2007, Michelle was included in *O2138* magazine as number 58 in "The Harvard 100," a yearly list of the school's most influential alumni.

She also twice appeared on the cover of *Vogue* and made the *Vanity Fair* best-dressed list two years in a row as well as *People* magazine's 2008 best-dressed list.

During the inauguration ceremony for her husband's second term, on January 21, 2013, Michelle and her daughters received attention for their fashion choices, which included clothes from Thom Browne, J. Crew and Kate Spade. Michelle also drew praise for the red Jason Wu dress she wore during the subsequent events.

Book: 'Becoming'

In late 2018, Michelle 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." Fourteen months later, the audio version of *Becoming* won a Grammy for best spoken word album.

The Obama Portraits

On February 12, 2018, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery unveiled its official portraits of Barack and Michelle. 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 Serrano depicted the former first lady in a flowing dress, gazing back at viewers from a sea of blue.

Deal With Netflix

In May 2018, Michelle and Barack announced that they signed a multi-year deal to produce series and films for Netflix through their company, Higher Ground Productions. "Barack and I have always believed in the power of storytelling to inspire us, to make us think differently about the world around us," the former first lady said in a statement.

Their first joint effort resulted in Netflix's August 2019 release of *American Factory*, a documentary about the 2015 launch of a Chinese-owned automotive glass factory in Dayton, Ohio, and the clash of differing cultures and business interests. A hit with critics, *American Factory* earned an Academy Award for best documentary feature in February 2020.

That May, Michelle became the centerpiece of another Netflix documentary, *Becoming*, which follows her on tour as she promotes her memoir of the same name.

Coronavirus, Storytime Series and Podcast

As the world grappled with the coronavirus in 2020, Michelle appeared alongside [Laura Bush](#) on [Lady Gaga's One World: Together at Home](#) benefit concert in April to thank health care workers and offer a message of hope. Shortly afterward, she teamed with PBS and Penguin Random House to launch her live-streamed Mondays with Michelle Obama series, which features the former first lady reading some of her favorite children's books.

In 2020, Michelle released her podcast, *The Michelle Obama Podcast*, on Spotify.

Citation Information

Article Title: Michelle Obama Biography

Author: Biography.com Editors

Website Name: The Biography.com website

URL: <https://www.biography.com/us-first-lady/michelle-obama>

Access Date: January 26, 2021

Publisher: A&E Television Networks

Last Updated: January 22, 2021

Original Published Date: April 2, 2014

<https://www.biography.com/us-first-lady/michelle-obama>

