

# The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

## Michelle Obama's Washington

By [Krissah Thompson](#) and Illustration by Laura Stanton, Published: September 26

ADVERTISEMENT

AD

Washingtonians, how well do you know your city? Have you visited more than 34 restaurants and set foot in two dozen schools? Been to the Kennedy Center more than a handful of times — unless, of course, you're a season ticket holder? Ever volunteered at Miriam's Kitchen or talked to the teens at Mary's Center? Had yogurt at Pinkberry in Dupont Circle and ice cream at Thomas Sweet in Georgetown? ¶ [Michelle Obama has](#). ¶ Since moving to Washington 4<sup>1</sup> / 2 years ago, the first lady has set about making this place home.

([See a map of Michelle Obama's Washington.](#))

In both her formal schedule and private time she makes forays into every quadrant of the District and has made a few trips into its Virginia and Maryland suburbs. ¶ She has thrown on a baseball cap and walked the family dog, Bo, across the Mall to view the cherry blossoms. She hosted a milkshakes-and-burgers birthday party for her younger daughter, Sasha, at [Red Robin in Dulles](#). She visits her friends in their homes. Secret Service SUVs parked on D.C.'s residential streets attract little interest. ¶ She is one of the first in many generations of first ladies to see Washington beyond the transactional corridors of power. Other first ladies, by comparison, have had projects in Washington. Obama has worked her way into the fabric of the city. ¶ Martha Washington described herself in the President's House in Philadelphia as akin to a "state prisoner," trapped by the constraints of the role. The bounds of the president's political office have been restrictive for every first lady who has followed her. The ways the women have made space for their own lives and interests amid those restrictions are revealing. ¶ Every first lady has had her own way of getting out of the White House. Laura Bush went antiquing in Georgetown. Hillary Rodham Clinton went for walks in a cap and sunglasses. Michelle Obama, it seems, goes just about everywhere.

### OUT ON THE TOWN

Michelle Obama toggles between wife, mother, fashion icon, American symbol, promoter of causes and girlfriend. As in, "*Girlfriend*, let's get together." As in, "I need some *girlfriend* time."

"She's developed her own group of friends here, and she had a strong network of friends in Chicago," says Melissa Winter, the first lady's longtime deputy chief of staff. "She finds her community where she goes, and she found her community of women here."

They are the women with whom Obama heads to Eatonville in the U Street corridor to celebrate a friend's birthday or to Rasika in Penn Quarter for a leisurely Saturday night dinner. Obstetrician Sharon Malone, wife of Attorney General [Eric H. Holder Jr.](#), has been spotted among them, as has Kelly Dibble, a friend of Michelle Obama's from Chicago who now works in Washington, and Angela Acree, a roommate at Princeton.

Before dinner is over, other patrons often realize that the first lady is among them, but for a few hours, in

relative anonymity, she is just 'Miche.'

"Women energize me. My husband is terrific. He is my true partner. Spending time with him and downloading things with him is key," Obama said in a 2011 interview. "But it's also important for us as women to find each other. And there's that natural reenergizing that happens when women get together and we kind of hold each other up. But that takes time to invest in your friendships and to invest in yourself."

She relies on them "implicitly to be able to talk frankly and complain without being judged, and to let off steam knowing that you really don't mean it," she [explained to a women's Web site last year](#).

Obama is also close to her mother, Marian Robinson, who, too, is a confidant and who lives with the family in the White House. Robinson accompanied Obama to an Aretha Franklin concert at Constitution Hall last year. In March, she joined her daughter and a group of friends at a Sweet Honey in the Rock concert at the Howard Theatre. It was the second time the first lady had visited the recently renovated theater with her crew of friends. They also caught a performance by R&B crooner [Musiq Soulchild](#) there.

The first lady's trips into the city with her girlfriends also feed her inner foodie. On date nights with her husband, she also tries new places. Her staff, friends and associates pass along tidbits on the hot restaurants or scenes.

"I find places [and] I always let Tina or somebody know — 'Hey, first lady might want to know about this,'" longtime D.C. resident and Democratic strategist Donna Brazile says, referring to Obama's chief of staff, [Tina Tchen](#). "Sometimes I try to tell her there's a new [place] and, of course, I have to keep it healthy, but I tell her, 'There's a new organic place'. . . . Like, 'have you been to Ripple on Connecticut Avenue? They have a lot of organic food.' She likes to know. . . . She wants to know from Anacostia to Brookland to Chevy Chase — all the way down to the Waterfront. I mean she wants to *know*."

Obama has her standbys. She's a fan of chef José Andrés and visits his restaurants frequently, says Eddie Gehman Kohan, founder of the Web site [ObamaFoodorama](#), which tracks White House food initiatives and all of the family's forays into the local food scene.

The first lady has also made repeat visits to chef Spike Mendelsohn's [We, the Pizza](#) and [Good Stuff Eatery](#), sometimes with staffers and sometimes with her daughters.

"It never gets old," Mendelsohn says. "She's been in over 10 times."

Both Mendelsohn and Andrés volunteer for Obama's [Chefs Move to Schools](#) program, a part of the first lady's effort to reduce childhood obesity that partners chefs with local schools to create healthy lunches.

"When she comes into your restaurant, it just humanizes the whole entire thing," Mendelsohn says. She's "not just going out and telling chefs what they should do, she is . . . meeting these chefs . . . and showing her face, and taking time to show some love. We show her so much love and follow her, and we do as much as we can. Her coming in just validates it a little bit more."

Her visits also bring the restaurants media attention and increased traffic. In tribute, Mendelsohn named his Good Stuff turkey burger the "Michelle Melt."

## SCHOOLS

"Madame first lady, don't forget Anacostia," Brazile implored Michelle Obama at a White House bill signing in February 2009. "Many people often forget about the kind of places where we grew up."

With Obama, Anacostia has not been forgotten. The first lady has held events east of the Anacostia River at least 20 times.

In 2010, she gave a speech at Anacostia High School's graduation, tracing the community's struggles from 19th-century laws that denied blacks landownership rights to modern-day poverty.

"Despite these challenges, Anacostia continues to push forward," Obama told the graduates at the school, now known as Academies at Anacostia. "And that's what I admire about this community and what I admire about all of you all. See, in the face of incredible struggles, you refuse to be defined by the hardships or the adversities."

Her presence there communicated her approach to the city. Michelle Obama would go to what her staff calls "unexpected places" and put her energy into Washington's other city: the part that is not gentrified, not moneyed, not overtly political.

When it comes to school visits, Obama often recalls her younger self, a kid from the South Side of Chicago, going to public schools.

It is a nod to the responsibility Obama has acknowledged that she carries as the first African American first lady and the only modern first lady who grew up in the heart of a big city. She is someone whom D.C. residents, half of whom are African American, can look to as a reflection of their own lives.

She recently danced to James Brown hits with preschoolers at Savoy Elementary in Anacostia, belting out "We're gonna have a funky good time!"

In 2011, she held a group session with young women at Ballou High, where the population is 99 percent black and only half of students graduate in four years.

From the start Obama made clear "we are going to schools that have challenges, and schools that don't have challenges," says Jocelyn Frye, the first lady's former policy director and a native Washingtonian. "She wanted to engage with all of those kids."

High school students from predominantly black areas of east Washington have also been included in the first lady's East Wing mentoring program, which Obama staffers like to call "her baby." The program for young women, which pairs local high school students with White House mentors, was started because Obama "recognized the limits of a one-time school visit," Frye says.

In her relationship with challenged local schools, the tension between a cute photo and lasting impact is ever present. Obama grappled with it early on when she started her White House garden and knew she wanted to partner with a local school to promote healthful eating.

Excitement was tinged with skepticism when Obama chose Bancroft Elementary in Mount Pleasant. The thinking went: Great, but let's face it — this is going to be a Washington photo-op, says Devon Bartlett, whose son attends the school.

Bancroft had a garden for a decade before Obama came to town with talk of growing vegetables on the South Lawn. Three months into her tenure, the first lady's staff invited the school's fifth-grade class over to help till the ground and plant the first crop of vegetables. Two weeks later, the fifth-graders were back at the White House to tend the garden. The next month, Obama went to Bancroft and saw their garden, a gangly plot of land surrounded by dirt and weeds.

Bartlett watched the kids approach Michelle Obama with ease. "They were comfortable with her," she recalls. "And she knew the kids enough to know their individuality. I was surprised by the true connection."

The White House still invites a few of Bancroft's fifth-graders to the harvest and planting, but not the entire class. Kids from schools all over the city, and country, are included, cutting down on the slots available to the Bancroft students. She no longer knows their individuality.

That's disappointing for some at the school, but the impact of the first lady's attention on Bancroft may be lasting. Bartlett, who had volunteered for the garden effort, has since become the school's part-time gardening instructor, giving the program more structure. Bancroft also gained a reputation as Michelle Obama's gardening partner, drawing in parents who may have overlooked the neighborhood school, where three-quarters of the students are Hispanic and about half live in the neighborhood. Obama also wrote

about Bancroft in her gardening book, "American Grown," which features the children's photos prominently.

"It changed school culture," Bartlett says.

## **INCOGNITO**

Being an ordinary woman, of the sort who shops at Target and goes to her kids' soccer matches, is a crucial part of Michelle Obama's game — in the way that pillbox hats, horseback riding and speaking French were part of Jacqueline Kennedy's.

Obama's popularity is rooted not in Americans seeing her as above them but in her ability to relate to them. When [photos of the first lady pushing a Target shopping cart](#) with one hand and holding two plastic bags with the other shot around the globe in 2011, it played to that part of her image.

A cashier at the Alexandria store and a surreptitiously placed Associated Press photographer were said to be the only people to recognize her behind sunglasses and a gray baseball cap. Behind her there is a tall man with pursed lips in a white t-shirt and khaki ball cap. He has the look of Secret Service. The photo also includes a young woman, wearing a black top, following closely behind carrying a shopping bag. In a second shot, the same aide is holding two BlackBerry phones.

The half-hour Target shopping trip, one of Obama's many incognito excursions in the D.C. area, provided an inside view of how her fleet of Secret Service agents and staffers have gamely accommodated her desire to quietly get out of the White House. She is followed by the media only at her official events, so, unlike her husband, she can dodge the cameras when she wants.

Obama has taken her dog to Petco, stopped at the Potomac Yards Baskin-Robbins with her daughters, gone clothes shopping at Tysons Corner with her girlfriends and sat on the sidelines of her daughters' soccer games, handing out oranges to the team.

How is it that one of the world's most famous women moves around Washington undetected? What's her secret?

Michelle Obama expects to have a private life — and demands one.

"They have their friends. They get out. . . . They unwind, kick back and take off their shoes," says Brazile, who is friendly with the Obamas. "They are not shy about that. . . . Especially Mrs. Obama is just very comfortable being here in Washington, D.C."

Winona Scott, a native Washingtonian, lives in the same Northeast D.C. neighborhood as one of the first lady's college roommates and has seen Michelle Obama's motorcade on her block. Scott has watched the first lady slip in to visit her old friend while her security detail remains parked outside.

"Catholic University graduate students live next door. They are clueless. I don't even think they know Secret Service is there," Scott says.

Washingtonians tend to give first families breathing space. Parents at Sidwell Friends, where her daughters attend school, assiduously avoid discussing the Obama daughters. Similarly, Michelle Obama's favorite local restaurateurs play it cool and allow her to relax.

Melissa Winter, Obama's deputy chief of staff, was not surprised to receive a birthday e-mail from the first lady asking: "Where do you want to have dinner? Do you want to come over or do you want to go out?"

"She's open to either," Winter says.

Winter picked out a place in her Glover Park neighborhood. After dinner, she and the first lady walked up the street to get ice cream.

## **VOLUNTEERING**

Talk to [Mary's Center President Maria Gomez](#) long enough about Michelle Obama and tears come down her cheeks.

One of Obama's first solo outings as first lady was to the community health center's Adams Morgan location. What causes Gomez to well up is what she calls "the power of having been connected to her."

The first lady's tour through the center led to a list of invitations for Gomez: to the White House Easter Egg Roll; to participate in discussions about health-care reform's impact on women and children; to talk about the first lady's childhood anti-obesity agenda; to have teens from Mary's Center sit in the first lady's box at the State of the Union address; to the White House state dinner for Mexican President Felipe Calderón, where Gomez was seated next to the first lady's mother.

"Why would I know anything about state dinners?" Gomez says. "Then I look it up and . . . I'm, 'Okay, this is a fancy-pants dinner!' "

The first lady's visit and her decision to bring Gomez and Mary's Center into the fold also boosted the nonprofit group's fundraising and attracted corporate officials to serve on the center's board.

"I don't come from money. I don't have a fancy home to entertain board members. So having her endorsement matters," Gomez says.

In 2009, the center raised \$953,092. Last year, it raised \$1,470,411.

Miriam's Kitchen, where Michelle Obama dished out risotto to homeless men and women in 2009, experienced a similar bump in donations. The nonprofit organization is eight blocks from the White House.

"There was one \$500 donation that came from a donor in Texas who referenced Mrs. Obama's visit as the reason for the donation," Miriam's Kitchen President Scott Schenkelberg recalls. Altogether, he estimates that donations to the kitchen rose \$50,000 because of her visit. The nonprofit also became the recipient of excess produce from the White House kitchen garden, and its staff was invited to help glean the vegetables. White House interns volunteer at the kitchen, and the nonprofit's staffers also get invited to White House holiday parties and other events. Like Gomez, Schenkelberg attended the state dinner for Mexico.

"I don't ever recall another administration having as much local presence . . . particularly Mrs. Obama," says Schenkelberg, who has lived in the city for 18 years. "It's not just ceremonial."

Good works have long been a mainstay of first ladies, ceremonial and otherwise. Abigail Adams grappled with the city's squalor upon moving here. Hillary Clinton established a home for orphans with Mother Teresa on Western Avenue. Laura Bush established the National Book Festival, which endures.

Obama is a planner, looking to infuse her service with a deeper significance, aides say. Obama has upended the staid White House luncheon that first ladies typically host for congressional spouses by adding a volunteer project. Last year, the spouses stuffed bags with canned goods at the [Capital Area Food Bank](#) in Northeast. Similarly, she added a service project to the congressional family picnic held at the White House. Last summer, she had those political families trek six miles from the White House to work on the playground at the Imagine Southeast Public Charter School — in Anacostia.

"That was all her," Winter says.



#### **New Rule in New Jersey**

(Oct 2013): New Rule in New Jersey Has Drivers Furious...  
[www.SmartLifeWeekly.co](http://www.SmartLifeWeekly.co)

#### **Map Your Flood Risk**

Find Floodplan Maps, Facts, FAQs, Your Flood Risk Profile and More!



[www.floodsmart.gov](http://www.floodsmart.gov)



**Do THIS before eating carbs (every time)**

1 EASY tip to increase fat-burning, lower blood sugar & decrease fat storage

<http://info.fixyourbloodsugar.com>

**Buy a link here**

© The Washington Post Company

