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Michelle Obama's Savvy Sacrifice

By Jay Newton-Small

When she takes the stage at the Democratic National Convention Monday evening, Michelle Obama will surely discuss her husband's many achievements and the promise for America that his groundbreaking candidacy represents. What she is less likely to talk about is just how instrumental she has been to launching her husband's political trajectory or that this tough, razor-smart Chicago native had to sacrifice many of her own career ambitions along the way.

From almost the earliest days of their personal and professional partnership, Barack Obama's political aspirations have guided Michelle's path. At the end of the summer of 1989, Obama was an intern at Sidley Austin, a prestigious Chicago law firm that also happened to employ a young intellectual-property lawyer and Harvard Law grad named Michelle Robinson. Obama was offered a permanent job at Sidley, though senior partner Newton Minow wasn't surprised when he turned the firm down; the two had often discussed the intern's political plans, and Minow had pledged to help Obama in his pursuit of a place in public life. But Obama didn't just turn the firm down. Minow, a former Federal Communication Commission chairman, recalls that Obama told him to take a seat: "You may not want to help me after you hear the rest of what I've got to say. I'm taking Michelle with me." ([See pictures of Barack Obama's family tree.](#))

"You no good, worthless —" Minnow said, jumping up angrily. "Hold it," Obama said, raising a hand. "We're going to get married."

Most women might not appreciate their boyfriend's effectively giving notice on their behalf. Michelle, though, didn't seem to mind. Not only were they engaged a year later, but sure enough, Michelle surprised her family and friends and left the law to go into public service. It was a move that would prove fateful for both her and her husband: the contacts she made were invaluable, some say essential, to his state senate and U.S. Senate races.

The child of Marian and Fraser Robinson, a stay-at-home mother and a city pump operator, Michelle was

raised in a close-knit family that ate every meal together, played Monopoly and read together. "Nobody emphasized public service. What was emphasized was doing what you love to do and you'll be good at whatever you do," says Craig Robinson, Michelle's brother, who left his banking job after a decade to coach college basketball. That didn't stop Robinson from being surprised when Michelle left Sidley Austin to become an assistant to Chicago mayor Richard Daley. "Her father asked her, 'Don't you want to pay your student loans?' " her mother, Marian, recalls. One of her college roommates, Angela Acree, remembers being stunned. "I'm sure at Sidley she made more money than her parents ever made," says Acree. "It just seemed incredible at the time that she'd leave."

The move was not without its benefits. Michelle Obama's stint at the mayor's office gave her, and her husband, access to Chicago's political class. Combined with her own Southside roots — she went to high school with Santita Jackson, the Rev. Jesse Jackson's daughter — Michelle's job gave her husband entrée into the best political machine in Illinois, augmenting her ties to Jackson's powerful civil rights group, Rainbow Push.

"Michelle is a tremendous asset," says Habitat Inc. CEO Valerie Jarrett, a close friend of both Obamas and a key campaign adviser. As Daley's deputy chief of staff at the time, Jarrett hired Michelle to help troubleshoot for companies having problems navigating the city's bureaucracy. "Her being from Chicago, from the Southside of Chicago, was an asset to Barack in terms of enhancing his ties to the community."

But if Michelle helped give Obama an invaluable new base in Chicago politics, he helped her get back in touch with her home base. It was at the end of her first year as an associate at the law firm that she had been assigned to mentor Obama. In a now famous story, she at first refused to date him, feeling their work relationship would make a romance improper. But Obama's courtship helped her discover anew her childhood home on Chicago's Southside. Dates often took them to church basements and protests. "He could've gone to Wall Street; those offers were available to him. But instead Barack bussed these young mothers down to City Hall to help them find their voice and advocate for change," Michelle told an audience in Orangeburg, S.C., earlier this year.

As Obama gradually moved further away from grass-roots organizing and into business and politics, Michelle seemed to fill the vacuum. After 18 months, she left the mayor's office to head up the Chicago office of a new charity that was forming: Public Allies, which helps place young people at nonprofits.

"Everyone had said at the time that the best young organizer in Chicago was Barack," says Paul Schmitz, CEO of Public Allies. The group invited Obama to join their board. But when they started to look for someone to head up the Chicago office, Obama recommended his fiancée and resigned when the nonprofit began to court her in earnest. "At a time when the average age of our staff was 23, she was like drafting Brett Favre for the Packers," Schmitz says. "Michelle was 29 when we hired her. She had a law degree from Harvard, had worked for the mayor, for a corporate law firm. Comparatively, I'd worked a telemarketing group. Frankly, we were surprised that she wanted to do it."

During her nearly four years with the group, Michelle set fund-raising marks that remain records for the organization. In the process, she developed an unparalleled network of young activists. "She was a connector. They were a power couple. They helped each other along the way," says Craig Huffman, a graduate student from the Southside whom Michelle took under her wing and recommended for the charity's board. Huffman was drawn into Obama's orbit and, like dozens of Michelle's other protégés, volunteered for Barack Obama's campaigns. "Each ally was placed with a not-for-profit, about 20 to 30 a year. When you think of the number of people who got to know who Michelle was, and by extension Barack, that's a whole generation from all over Chicago," Huffman says.

Michelle went on to work as an associate dean of students at the University of Chicago, launching a community-service program for undergrads before moving to the university's medical school to become vice president of external relations, a fancy title for the person who helps the well-endowed school relate to its struggling Hyde Park neighborhood. She sponsored yet more volunteer programs, helped expand the hiring of local labor and launched a program that found ER patients clinics for long-term care.

Eventually, the money she had initially walked away from in corporate law did come. Her salary last year between the university and six boards approached \$500,000. In addition to serving on the boards of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Michelle also worked for Wal-Mart supplier Tree House Foods — a board from which she resigned when her husband criticized the retailing giant's labor practices. Asked in an interview about being the breadwinner of the family, Michelle is shocked by the notion. "Me? No! Barack had, like, four jobs, always," she laughs. "No, really. Barack's a hustler. I shouldn't say hustler, but he's a humper in terms of work."

The division of responsibilities in the Obama household, however, hasn't always been a laughing matter. In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama talks about Michelle's rage at his ever increasing absence: "My wife's anger toward me seemed barely contained. 'You only think about yourself,' she would tell me. 'I never thought I'd have to raise a family alone.' "

Michelle may have envisioned giving her children the idyllic childhood that she'd had, but she had to know that Obama was far from a city pump operator with regular hours, nor did she show any real inclination to be a stay-at-home mom. But it is her connection to traditional middle-class values that drives her still to make an effort to put her children first and seemingly removes any desire to run for public office herself, though many have suggested it over the years. Her hint of nuclear-family nostalgia is also what helps make this very strong woman a much less threatening figure to the audiences who have throughout the campaign warmed to her homespun, sensitive speaking style. That down-to-earth appeal should be on full display Monday night, when she appears in her biggest venue yet. But that is only part of the real Michelle Obama. The country wouldn't get a two-for-one Bill and Hillary presidency if she were to become First Lady, but it would definitely get a lot more than many people realize.

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