

Obama girls share spotlight on big day

By Jocelyn Noveck
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Photo by Jae C. Hong

AP

Barack Obama's half-sister Maya Soetoro-Ng, right, stands with Sasha, front right, and Malia along with Michelle Obama's mother, Marian Robinson, left.

WASHINGTON - Malia Obama peered out through the viewfinder of her camera from her perch on the inaugural podium. And what a view she had: More than 1 million people packed onto the National Mall, listening raptly to her father give his inaugural address.

One imagines it was a heady moment for Malia, 10, and sister Sasha, 7, the self-possessed and appealing youngsters who have already fascinated the country more than any presidential progeny since the Kennedys. Now they're likely to fascinate us even more, as the youngest occupants of the new White House.

The girls were poised and collected on the podium, where they stood alongside their parents as Obama took the oath of office.

Malia was more visible in the television coverage. She smiled confidently when she arrived with her grandmother, and seemed to offer her dad a few words of approval after his speech.

As befits bona fide tween celebrities who, just the night before, danced onstage with the Jonas Brothers, designers had been angling to dress the Obama girls for the inauguration.

Their mom chose J. Crew, the mall favorite that the new first lady occasionally patronizes for herself.

Malia looked chic in a periwinkle-blue coat with a fluffy black wool scarf, while Sasha looked more little-girl cute in a light pink coat with an orange scarf and coral-colored dress.

And it was perhaps a sign of their uncommon fame that two inaugural speakers mentioned them directly: the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who called the girls “angelic” in his benediction, and evangelical pastor Rick Warren, who prayed for them in his invocation.

What were the girls thinking on the podium, viewers wondered?

One former presidential daughter speculates that even at their young age, they understand the import of the moment and their role in it. “I think they recognize that they’re part of history,” said Lynda Johnson Robb, daughter of Lyndon B. Johnson.

“I imagine they’ll keep a level head, though the opposite can happen,” Robb said in an interview before the inauguration. “They certainly show a great affection for their father. And in that job, you need every bit of comfort you can get.”

Ahead for the Obama girls on Tuesday was the chance to settle into their White House rooms for the first time. It was unclear whether they’d participate in any of the inaugural balls, which were to last into the early morning.

“They’ll be with their parents, friends and family from all over the world today,” said Michelle Obama’s spokeswoman, Katie McCormick Lelyveld.

When the girls stood next to their father during the oath, they were participating in only a recent tradition. Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton began it in 1997 with daughter Chelsea, said Carl Sferazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library. George W. Bush followed suit with twin daughters Jenna and Barbara.