

The White House's working mom

With two daughters to raise and causes to champion, it's a sure bet her life in Washington will be hectic—and confidants say she's up to the task

By Dahleen Glanton | Tribune correspondent
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Despite a grueling campaign schedule that took her from one end of the country to the other, [Michelle Obama](#) managed to maintain an equally hectic schedule in Chicago that included soccer, ballet and birthday parties for her two young daughters.

For Obama, a self-described "multitasker," life has been a balancing act between family and duty, and those who know her best said that will not change when she becomes first lady.

"She has incredible integrity. Whatever she strongly believes in, she puts everything into it. And she is very passionate about family," said Yvonne Davila, a former City Hall co-worker and friend for 18 years.

Like First Lady [Laura Bush](#), Obama has surrounded herself with a small circle of girlfriends—doctors, lawyers and businesswomen who not only provide a support system but also keep her grounded. And like Bush, who still takes yearly vacations to a national park with her girlfriends, Obama will likely maintain those close bonds when she moves into the [White House](#).

During the presidential campaign, Obama and Davila kept their Saturday morning routine. Davila would take Obama's 7-year-old daughter, Sasha, and her own 9-year-old daughter to dance class while Obama drove Malia, 10, and Davila's 10-year-old daughter to soccer. Afterward, they would meet for lunch and sometimes a movie.

"Like all of us, she juggles her job as a wife and mother, and she will take that with her to Washington," Davila said.

Throughout the campaign, Obama has stressed her commitment to her children and has used her experience as a wife and mother to connect with families across the country. She has said that as first lady she would provide a voice for working women and military families, in particular, ensuring that they receive adequate health care, mental health services and economic support.

"What I'm hearing around the country is that there are women who are struggling to keep their heads above water. And these issues transcend party and even socioeconomic status," Obama said recently on CNN's "Larry King Live." "We need to give those issues a voice because I think women need a different model, a template, ensuring that we're creating policies that actually make sense."

The Obamas will be the fourth family with young children to occupy the White House since the start of the 20th Century. And like [Rosalynn Carter](#), [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) and Edith Roosevelt, Michelle Obama will have to balance her duties as first lady with raising small children.

That means creating a comfortable home within the White House.

"That will probably be the first order of business for her and maybe the most important thing, creating a sense of emotional security for her family," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a biographer and historian for the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio.

"These kids will be moving from Chicago, leaving behind their school, their friends and their established life. That can be overwhelming."

A Harvard-educated lawyer who has worked in City Hall and for the [University of Chicago Hospitals](#), Obama will bring a high level of professional expertise to her new role. She has often been compared to [Hillary Clinton](#), who was criticized for taking on health-care reform and failing.

Though she has made mistakes along the way, Obama has grown increasingly comfortable speaking to large audiences about policy. She will have to make a choice as to how far she wants to go.

"The traditional role of wives in the White House is to play hostess. They are gracious and keep the home fires burning while the president is out doing business. Barbara Bush fit into that role wonderfully," said Barry Burden, a political scientist at the [University of Wisconsin](#). "Hillary Clinton said early on that she was not going to stay at home and bake cookies and stand by her man like [Tammy Wynette](#). That struck a lot of people as inappropriate out of the box, and she never won them back. We still don't know how Laura Bush feels about most issues."

[Nancy Reagan](#), on the other hand, was known to consult astrologers and have discussions with the chief of staff before giving her husband advice.

[Barack Obama](#) has made it clear that he listens to his wife, saying during the final debate that she reminds him there are things he does not know. The verdict is still out among the public on how much influence a first lady should have with the president.

But whatever role she decides on, friends said Obama will pour her heart into it.

"One of Michelle's strengths is being prepared," Valerie Jarrett, a senior campaign adviser and longtime family friend, said in an interview several months ago. "It's not good enough to be prepared, she has to be overprepared. She is the most disciplined and organized person I have ever known."

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