

Michelle Obama receiving star treatment on campaign trail

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The fan's voice is urgent, her eyes wild. She is 40 years old but shrieking like a teenager.

"SIGN MY BIBLE! Can you sign my Bible?" Nzati Mbengi begs, waving the book over her head as she and the crowd surge forward, shoving and shouting.

Behind a metal railing, the star is unrattled, flashing her dazzling smile, clasping the fans' outstretched hands with her perfectly manicured fingers as stone-faced security guards look on. She snatches the book and scribbles her initials.

Mbengi lifts the Bible up, throws her head back and wails, then plants her lips on the cover. She has an autograph from ... MICHELLE OBAMA!

Yes, Michelle Obama. The 44-year-old soccer mom, whose appeal is centered squarely on her plain-talking, keepin'-it-real persona, has become a rock star.

It's a weird place to be, especially for a woman whose stump speech on behalf of her husband, Barack, is all about the plight of the Everyman, her modest upbringing on Chicago's South Side, her struggles as a working mother.

She knows it's weird. She says as much to crowd after crowd: "I am not supposed to be here."

Yet here she is, the woman of the man of the people, who just happened to make Vanity Fair's best-dressed list, who lives in a \$1.65 million mansion, who recently left a \$212,000-a-year job as a hospital executive to help her husband's presidential campaign. Who is drawing comparisons to Jackie Kennedy.

But forget about all that. Ask fans what they love about her and they rattle off words like funny, classy, warm, smart, tough. And, most of all, "real."

It would be easy to dismiss the Michelle mania as a spillover of adulation for her celebrity husband. But read the signs at rallies that bear only her name, watch people laugh and cry over her words, and it's clear plenty are here for her. She's pulling in crowds of up to 2,500 - on her own.

"She's not like a plastic talking head the way that some of them can be," Kimberly Sorrell, 41, says as she waits at the Community College of Rhode Island in Warwick for her to arrive during campaigning last month for the primary there. "She's an actual person, a real person."

At times, she has been a little too real for some. Comments tweaking her husband have drawn criticism. And his campaign had to do major damage control when many took offense after a comment - misinterpreted, she said - about whether she was proud of her country.

She has learned from both the cheers and the boos as she goes about a whirlwind schedule that has utterly changed her life.

The morning after the rally, her brother Craig Robinson, head basketball coach at Brown University in Providence, sits in a Starbucks pondering the previous night's pandemonium. Not long ago, Michelle was known as "Craig Robinson's sister." Now, he is "Michelle Obama's brother."

"Surreal is almost like an understatement," he says with a faint smile. "It's magical, is what it is. I mean, it's like going to sleep and waking up and you're Tinkerbell."

In the beginning, Michelle Obama worried about what a presidential run would do to her family. Would they be safe? And, as with everything in her life, if it was going to be done, it had to be done right. How would it play out? As a kid, she walked out on her brother's basketball games if the score was close.

Once persuaded, her introduction to the public was gradual. She opened for her husband at events; his huge crowds didn't intimidate her, but her remarks were brief.

Everything changed last April at a Women for Obama event in Chicago. She talked about her exhausting juggling act of campaign travel, work, parent-teacher conferences, hair appointments and workouts.

"And to top it off, I have the pleasure of doing it all in front of the watchful eyes of our friends in the back," she said, gesturing toward the press. "What's up, people?"

A beat.

"But other than that, things haven't changed much."

The crowd loved it. And as their laughter faded, she segued into what would become a theme in her speeches.

"With the exception of the campaign trail and life in the public eye, I have to say that my life now is really not that much different from many of yours. I wake up every morning, wondering how on the earth I'm going to pull off that next minor miracle to get through the day."

She kept them laughing with an anecdote involving an overflowing toilet. Rather than help, her husband left. Michelle stayed home to handle it and had to reschedule a meeting.

"He's a wonderful man, he's a gifted man," she said. "But in the end, he's just a man."

That zinger earned applause. It would also earn scrutiny by those who felt she was emasculating her husband.

She began appearing solo, speaking at libraries and community centers and church basements, pulling in crowds of 50-200. She connected to the audiences - particularly women and the working class - on the premise that she was like them and felt their pain. And her husband could make it better.

Her stump speech doesn't dwell on policy. Instead, she offers a somewhat depressing analysis of American life. She talks about her blue-collar beginnings and overcoming the odds, how some told her she didn't have the grades to go to Princeton, but go she did - and later to

Harvard Law. At the end, she tells the crowds they need her husband now.

Despite the sober themes, she's fun to watch, casually delivering 45-minute speeches without notes.

And she's a hugger. At a typical event recently, she repeatedly ignored the pleas of aides who told her it was time to go. Instead, she pulls the bevy of breathless strangers close, stares deep into their eyes, nods empathetically as they share their struggles.

Could this just be a carefully calibrated political package?

No, says friend Yvonne Davila, who insists Michelle Obama's "real" is real. "She is you, she is me, she is everybody," Davila says. "There's no pretense with her. It's all genuine and you can see it when she speaks. You can see it when she shakes your hand."

It was in Iowa that campaign aides began calling her "The Closer" for her remarkable ability to secure votes. At a speech in Muscatine, most of the crowd was undecided when they walked in. Half signed supporter cards when they walked out.

That allure is nothing new. In college, students flocked to her for advice, her Princeton roommate Angela Acree recalls.

Her words carry great weight with her husband, who calls her his "rock." When he brought up a run for the presidency, she said she'd agree only if he stopped smoking. Last month, he announced he'd kicked the habit.

She's beautiful - though not, as her husband wrote in his book "The Audacity of Hope," in a way that men find intimidating or women find off-putting.

Her hair flip, pearls and sleeveless shifts have drawn comparisons to Jackie Kennedy. So has her promise of something different and exciting. They're both women of their time, though they're women of very different times.

But where Jackie was demure, Michelle is bold. You can't really picture Mrs. Obama standing quietly by her man if her man turned out to be a womanizer. And Michelle didn't come from money. She's fond of saying she and her husband are out of debt only because he wrote two best-sellers.

Her brother notes the "soft" side of his tough sister, and indeed she was seen near tears during her husband's recent speech responding to criticism of their church pastor's racial remarks.

"Deep down inside, I'm still that little girl who grew up on the South Side of Chicago," she told a New Hampshire crowd in January. "I am a product of that experience through and through. Everything that I think about and do is shaped around the life that I lived in that little apartment in that bungalow that my father worked so hard to provide for us."

She is the product of her father's ideals, the lessons he taught her when she was Michelle LaVaughn Robinson, those who know her say.

Fraser Robinson was a Democratic precinct captain who worked swing shifts at the city water plant. Mother Marian stayed home to raise the kids in the one-bedroom apartment on the top

floor of her aunt's house. Michelle and Craig slept in the living room, which their grandfather converted into two tiny bedrooms and a small study area.

They were close-knit. Barack Obama wrote that visiting the house was like dropping in on the set of "Leave It to Beaver."

Fraser was revered. Despite a limp from multiple sclerosis, he never missed work, never failed to play with the kids. Their mother doled out corporal punishment, but Fraser punished with The Look. Seeing disappointment in his eyes made them weep.

Fraser had plenty of lessons: The empty drum beats the loudest. Don't let others dictate what you think about yourself. Whatever you do, do it well.

And don't boast. Princeton roommate Acree didn't realize Michelle had graduated with honors until she heard about it in the media.

By the time Fraser died in 1990, his daughter was working at a Chicago corporate law firm, where she'd begun dating an intern named Barack Obama.

Over the years, she had many suitors but they didn't meet her high expectations, her brother says. She "fired 'em fast."

Obama was something else. She has said he was charming but not arrogant, serious without taking himself too seriously. She loved the easy way he connected with people.

They have been married 15 years, during which time he worked as a community organizer, served in the Illinois Legislature and won a U.S. Senate seat in 2004. She left corporate law for community service positions and gave birth to their two daughters, Malia, 9, and Sasha, 6.

Like everything else, motherhood had to be done right. Soon after her second daughter was born, Michelle Obama snagged an interview with Michael Riordan, then president and chief executive of the University of Chicago Medical Center. One problem: She didn't have a babysitter. So she walked into the office with Sasha.

"It probably demonstrated early on what her priorities were gonna be," Riordan says today. "And sometimes, family was gonna go first."

She schedules her campaign appearances around her children's activities. Although on the road two to four days a week, campaign officials say she tries to fly home each night in time to tuck the girls into bed.

"I think people relate to her as a glamorous version of one of the girls," says Elayne Rapping, a University of Buffalo professor of American studies who analyzes pop culture.

But as open as she is about her personal life, Michelle brushes off questions about what her platform as first lady would be. Her staff rebuffed multiple requests to interview her for this article, citing scheduling demands.

Her drive can seem excessive. She has a temper, though those who know her say she gets it under control quickly. "I have never been on the receiving end of her temper, and I'm really grateful for that," friend Verna Williams says with a laugh.

Nor is her marriage perfect. Her husband writes that when he launched his ill-fated run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, Michelle - struggling to balance work and children - made it clear she was not pleased. "You only think about yourself," she told him. "I never thought I'd have to raise a family alone."

Her sarcastic humor is funny in person, but falls flat in print. And not everybody loves her anecdotes about her husband's imperfections: he's "snore-y and stinky" in the morning, he forgets to put away the butter. She says she's just trying to keep people from deifying him.

"You really can't censor her," friend Valerie Jarrett says. "And I can't imagine anyone would try."

Her bluntness has earned her adoring fans - and trouble. Some labeled her unpatriotic after she told a Milwaukee audience, "For the first time in my adult life, I am proud of my country."

She later said she meant that she was proud of how Americans were engaging in the political process, and that she had always been proud of her country.

But the comment created a stir and energized opponents. Cindy McCain, wife of Republican presidential contender John McCain, called attention to the remark by saying, "I have, and always will be, proud of my country."

Speculation ran rampant about her senior thesis when Princeton restricted access to it until after the November election. The campaign eventually released the 1985 document, which details her feelings of alienation from white students.

"My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my 'Blackness' than ever before," she wrote. "I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don't belong."

The lights of the opulent ballroom of Providence's Biltmore hotel are shining down on her. Standing well over 6 feet in her heels, she towers over nearly everyone in the room.

She's closing her speech with a heart-warmer of an anecdote she cites often. It's the story of a little girl she met in South Carolina who told her Obama's run for the presidency meant she could imagine anything for herself. The girl, she says, began to cry.

There's a collective "awww" from the audience.

"You know why I know what that little girl is feeling?" Michelle Obama says. "Because she was me. See, because I am NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE."

She finishes and the crowd leaps to its feet applauding. Some are crying.

"I could barely keep it together," says Linda Newton, a 55-year-old working mother of two, as she blinks back tears. "Because it's a fundamentally different message. It's a message that resonates deep at your core, that you can identify with as a woman, as a mother, as someone who cares about people, someone who cares and believes in community."

"I'm gonna go write a check."

The Closer indeed.