



Exclusive: Michelle Obama's Emotional Meeting With Military Families

First Lady Tells ABC News That President Obama Is 'What We Need Right Now'

By KAREN TRAVERS

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First lady Michelle Obama says she is distressed by the plight of many military families who are struggling to keep their heads above the poverty line while the soldier in the family is in harm's way in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Michelle Obama opened up to Robin Roberts on "Good Morning America" in her first television interview since she became first lady.

Watch more of Robin Roberts' interview with first lady Michelle Obama on "World News With Charles Gibson" at 6:30 p.m. ET and "Nightline" at 11:35 p.m. ET

During the interview, the first lady talked about everything from her husband's handling of the presidency to what's been broken in the White House since the Obama's moved in.

But she was at her most emotional in talking about the families of soldiers and their financial battles while a parent is deployed to battle al Qaeda or the Taliban.

"It hurts. It hurts," the first lady said of hearing about military families on food stamps. "These are people who are willing to send their loved ones off to, perhaps, give their lives -- the ultimate sacrifice. But yet, they're living back at home on food stamps. It's not right, and it's not where we should be as a nation."

To highlight that concern, Mrs. Obama made her first trip outside Washington as first lady Thursday to Fort Bragg, N.C., where she visited with military families. It was an emotional meeting that clearly moved her.

"Our soldiers and their families have done their duty. They do it without complaint. And we as a grateful nation must do ours and do everything in our power to honor them by supporting them," she said at the Fort Bragg Community Center.

First Trip to Fort Bragg

During her visit to Fort Bragg, the first lady read "The Cat in the Hat" to a dozen preschoolers at the Prager Child Development Center, and the folks at Fort Bragg were touched by her performance.

"It was like she was reading to her children," said Mattie White, a lead education technician at Fort

Bragg.

While reading "The Cat in the Hat," the first lady told the children she had two young daughters, and one tyke chimed in "I know Sasha."

Her concern for military families is an agenda issue that began during the presidential campaign, and one that she vowed she would continue to work on from the East Wing of the White House.

The Fort Bragg visit is a setting that the first lady seems comfortable in -- it combines her top policy issue and the qualities of the "mom-in-chief" she aims to be.

And any mention of the Obama daughters, Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, is an emotional touchstone for Mrs. Obama and, she suggests, for many in the country.

"You know, I just think, 'How sweet.' That's the power of kids connecting with other kids," the first lady said after the Fort Bragg child shouted out Sasha's name. "I think that that's, you know, been wonderful for the nation to have two little kids in the White House that they connect to."

Besides the financial woes of military families, the first lady said she is aware of how many American families are struggling during the economic recession. But she remains confident in her husband and the nation. "I wouldn't want anybody but Barack Obama to be working at this time, because he is a focused, clear-thinking, rational man -- and that's what we need right now," she said. "I'm coming off of a boost of understanding all that our country is made of, the values, the men, the women, people who are looking for the silver lining, even in tough times."

The first lady told Roberts about how she has taken time in the first few weeks in the White House to get to know the new city she now calls home and to make the rounds visiting various federal agencies. She has met with thousands of men and women who now work for her husband.

She makes these visits to thank the people she calls "the backbone of our government," and rally them for more work ahead.

It's also a chance for her to hear the concerns of federal government employees and relay them back to the president.

At each stop, she makes a point to meet privately with a smaller group of staffers before she delivers remarks. She has asked to meet with the longest-serving staff members at these agencies, and when she visited the Department of Interior last month, some of the employees she spoke with had worked there for nearly 40 years.

"Part of what I want to do is to tell them, 'Thank you. Thank you for your service.' They make up the foundation of this democracy as well," she said.

She plans to get to every federal agency over the next few months.

Michelle Obama is adjusting to her many new roles, including hostess-in-chief, she said. The first family has hosted regular Wednesday night social gatherings at the White House and two formal dinners in less than two months.

For Super Bowl Sunday, the Obamas opened the White House to friends and members of Congress and

their families.

Living in a home with antiques, historic artifacts and two small children might be an accident waiting to happen, but the first lady said, so far, the children have not broken anything.

"We've had some guests who've broken some things but not the kids," she said with a laugh. "And they know who they are."

Both the first lady and the president have talked about the simple joy of being able to eat dinner together every night at the White House after two long years on the campaign trail.

"There's time to breathe a little bit, at least as a family. We're breathing in a way that we haven't breathed in a long time. And it feels good," she told Roberts.

Her daughters, she said, are doing "great" after two months in Washington.

"I think they're doing great because I've been able to strike a balance," she said. "I have a pretty full plate, but I still have time to be home for homework and to make sure I'm there before they leave, and to go to their parent-teacher conferences and all the things that it's important to do as a parent. So they're doing great. They keep us going."

First Lady Michelle Obama on Family's White House Transition

The first lady credited her mother, Marian Robinson, with helping to ease the transition for her and her daughters and called Robinson's presence in the White House "immeasurable."

"First of all, she's one of the funniest people I know. And she's so nonimpressed by any of this. She keeps all of our feet on the ground," Michelle Obama said.

Robinson is there to lend a hand with the girls when the first lady's own schedule prevents her from being there, she said.

"Like today, when I'm out and about, I'm gone all day, she's picking them up, she's getting them through homework. She's, you know, making sure that they practice piano, all the things that moms would do," she said. "But she does it with that little extra kick of love, and a little extra piece of dessert, tonight, I'm sure is going on."

The first lady laughed when Roberts suggested her morning workout routine was paying off.

"Well, I covered my arms up" for the interview, she said, noting her departure from her well-documented fondness for sleeveless dress. Life in the White House for the new first lady starts with an early morning workout and ends with a late night "veg out" in front of the TV, the first lady confided to Roberts.

"I must confess," she said. "Sometimes I just click on some non-important TV and just veg out."

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