This Is How They Do It

Keeping a family healthy while balancing two demanding careers can be tough—especially if one of those jobs is campaigning for the most powerful post in the world. But Michelle and Barack Obama show that with some real planning and tough decision making, it can be done.

November 29, 2007 By Tomika Anderson

Just because presidential candidate and U.S. Senator Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, appear to be living the American dream—with their Harvard degrees, two beautiful children and a shot at the White House—doesn't mean it's easy.

Like many American families, the high-power couple struggles to find a balance between the demands of work and home life. But given their unique position as black America's "first family," their challenges are supersized, particularly in the face of the senator's increasingly demanding schedule. They more than rise to the occasion, however, by planning strategically and making tough decisions, sometimes sacrificing comfort and professional ambitions to ensure that their family stays healthy and well-adjusted.

That they were diligent in their planning became evident soon after Barack declared his candidacy. Michelle—a graduate of Harvard Law School and an accomplished lawyer—significantly scaled back her duties as vice president for community and external affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she's responsible for expanding the relationship between the hospital and the city, specifically the South Side Chicago neighborhood in which the hospital is located. For now, she's a full-time mom and "running mate" for her husband. With Barack constantly on the road, the Obamas agreed that having at least one parent with a more flexible schedule would offer the most stability to their little girls, Malia, 9, and Sasha, 6, as they embark upon their historic White House run.

The Obamas also decided to stay in Chicago instead of moving to Washington, DC, after the Illinois senator was elected to Congress in 2004. That required him to make an exhausting commute between the cities almost every weekend, so that their daughters wouldn't have to leave their schools and friends. "He's the grown-up. He's the senator. He can handle it," Michelle had told the *Chicago Tribune*.

But this kind of sacrifice is not a foreign concept to either Barack or Michelle. They know they've actually been blessed with a wealth of options—something their parents weren't as fortunate to have.

America's Health Care Crisis

Growing up, Michelle watched her father, who toiled his entire life as a blue-collar worker on the south side of Chicago, suffer from multiple sclerosis. Because he didn't have access to good health care, the chronic inflammatory illness caused his body to deteriorate, forcing him to rely on a cane—and on even greater support—later in life.

Barack's mother died from ovarian cancer when she was "in the prime of her life," says Michelle. Instead of being able to just focus on beating her illness, Michelle explains, she spent her final days worrying about whether or not her health insurance would cover her treatment.

"Barack's experience with his mother affects not only our own home but Barack's work as a U.S. senator and now on the campaign trail," Michelle says. "He knows what it's like to see a loved one suffer because of a broken health care system. He knows that it's wrong. And he knows that's not who we are. We deserve better," she says, particularly noting the 47 million Americans living without health insurance.

The charismatic senator—who rose to prominence in 2004 when he delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention—has been pushing for a groundbreaking new universal health care program, more equity in the treatment provided to minorities and the poor, and greater funding in the war against AIDS. He wants to make sure that no other families have to suffer like his and Michelle's did. Not only do Americans deserve better, Barack says, he promises they will get it. If he is elected president, the 46-year-old Democrat pledges a quality health care system for all Americans by the end of his first term in office.

"I believe that every American has the right to affordable health care," he recently told an audience in Iowa City. "I believe that the millions of Americans who can't take their children to a doctor when they get sick have that right. We now face an opportunity and an obligation to turn the page on the failed politics of yesterday's health care debates."

Bringing It Home

But Barack's leadership on the issue of health care isn't just politics as usual. He literally is practicing what he preaches.

Just before he announced his run for the presidency last February, Barack made a commitment to quit smoking. And while no one has seen him smoking during the past campaign year, he acknowledges that it hasn't been easy. "The flesh is weak," he once told the *Chicago Tribune* about his nicotine habit.

The Obamas also work hard to keep themselves and their children healthy, particularly in the face of the strenuous campaign.

"From my experience in health care, I know that a lot of what contributes to the health care crisis is people not taking adequate care of themselves on the front end for treatable illnesses like diabetes or asthma that then escalate out of control," explains Michelle. "As a family we try to eat

fresh and healthy foods at home and teach our kids about eating right. But I must admit, I do enjoy some good hot fries to cap off the end of a long campaign day," she jokes.

The Obamas know that exercise is an essential part of staying strong in all aspects of life. It's another life lesson the couple, who have been married for 15 years, say they are committed to teaching their daughters and are modeling for America.

"Barack and I certainly try to schedule exercise into our campaign schedule regularly because it keeps us both physically and mentally on point," says Michelle, who is an avid runner.

But the Obamas also know that healthy living extends beyond diet and exercise. "We stay as vigilant as we can to get to the doctor regularly, get the girls to bed at a reasonable hour, and have quality time together, because health is not just physical," says Michelle.

And although her husband is the primary Obama in the limelight, the 43-year-old admits it's not always easy being the mate of a national political icon. While Michelle works on her work-home balance, she cautions other women juggling family, career and lives of their own. "Women in particular need to keep an eye on their physical and mental health, because if we're scurrying to and from appointments and errands, we don't have a lot of time to take care of ourselves," she says. "We need to do a better job of putting ourselves higher on our own 'to do' list."

Fortunately, Michelle says, she has some help. Despite her husband's constant travels, the Obamas often make time as a family to go to church. Barack told *Ebony* magazine that he doesn't work on Sundays so that he can spend time with his wife and kids. The presidential contender also makes sure to help clean up the house, doing small things like stacking dishes into the dishwasher.

Anything he can do to make the world a better place.

OBAMA IN THE HOUSE

How the presidential contender would confront five key health issues affecting the black community

Forget about what they're talking about on FOX News—black folks need to know what Barack Obama has in store for them once he reaches the White House. There's so much at stake—rising HIV rates, a lack of health care for many low-income blacks and a burgeoning black prison population. Here, the Obama campaign sounds off on five issues you'll never see covered in the mainstream media.

As president, what steps will Mr. Obama take to fight HIV/AIDS in the United States, where in some African-American communities the rates of infection approach those of some African nations?

"Senator Obama will continue to be a leader in the fight against AIDS, and he will take several

specific steps to fight HIV/AIDS in the United States. In the first year of his presidency, he will develop and begin to implement a comprehensive national HIV/AIDS strategy that includes all federal agencies. It will include measurable goals, timelines and accountability mechanisms.

"He is committed to signing universal health legislation by the end of his first term in office, ensuring that all Americans have high-quality, affordable health care coverage.

"He will promote AIDS prevention by increasing federal appropriations for the JUSTICE Act, which would prevent transmission of HIV within the incarcerated population. He also supports legislation that would lift the ban on federal funding for needle exchange as a strategy to reduce HIV transmission among injection-drug users, their partners and children."

What does Senator Obama feel the role of government should be as it relates to the nearly 9 million uninsured children?
"He has a health plan that will provide quality, affordable health coverage to all 47 million uninsured Americans, including all 9 million children. Obama will expand eligibility for Medicaid and SCHIP programs, and ensure that these programs continue to serve their critical safety-net function. He will also expand the number of options for young adults to get coverage by allowing young people up to age 25 to continue coverage through their parents' plans."

Tackling racial health disparities is part of the Obama health plan, yet study after study shows that they persist in every major health area. What steps would Senator Obama take to change that?
"Minorities are less likely to receive early and timely health care for many treatable conditions such as cancer. And minority patients are less likely to receive recommended care that meets accepted standards of medical practice, which has a negative impact on health outcomes.

"Obama will address differences in Americans' access to health care and the ways prevention and public health messages are delivered. He also will challenge the medical system to eliminate inequities in health care through quality measurement and reporting, implementation of effective interventions such as patient navigation programs, and diversification of the health workforce."

Gun violence is destroying many of our communities. What policies would Senator Obama implement that would lead to reductions in shootings and gun-related injuries and fatalities?
"In every year of his administration, President Bush has proposed to eliminate or dramatically slash funding of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. This is despite the fact that COPS is the most successful federal law enforcement support program of the 1990s. As president, Obama's first act on this issue will be to restore full funding for COPS.

"He also supports measures requiring mandatory background checks on purchasers at gun shows, making the expired federal Assault Weapons Ban permanent, and repealing the Tiahrt Amendment, which prevents the ATF from reporting trace data that can be used to track the flow of guns used in crimes across the nation. The amendment impairs the ability of local law

enforcement to access this data or to use it in evidence."

Many black men who are incarcerated actually have mental health and substance abuse problems. What policies would you implement to reduce the incarceration rate among this group?

"As president, Obama will work to reduce the blind and counterproductive warehousing of nonviolent offenders. He will give first-time, nonviolent offenders the opportunity to serve their sentence, where appropriate, in the type of drug rehabilitation programs that have proven to work better than a prison term in changing bad behavior. He will [also] continue to support Department of Justice programs that provide grants to state drug courts that supervise treatment programs, and will replicate those drug courts on the federal level."

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