

*Michelle Obama*  
*First Lady*



*Tanya Savory*



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Maybe you feel like no one has your back, like you've been let down by people so many times that you've stopped believing in yourself. Maybe you feel like your destiny was written the day you were born, and you ought to just rein in your hopes and scale back your dreams. But if any of you are thinking that way, I'm here to tell you: Stop it!

—Michelle Obama in a speech to high-school seniors, 2010.

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## Chapter 1

*I* can learn on my own!”

Four-year-old Michelle Robinson pulled the storybook out of her mother’s hands and propped it in front of her face. She stared at the pictures and words with a serious expression. Marian Robinson smiled at her daughter. From across the small kitchen, Michelle’s brother, Craig, grinned. He could already read, and he enjoyed reminding Michelle of that fact.

In fact, Craig, who was not quite two years older than Michelle, had learned to read before starting school. Now he was far ahead of his first-grade classmates. Michelle had watched their mother teach Craig the alphabet and then how to sound out words. Now, Michelle decided she was going to outdo her big brother; she would learn without anyone’s help! But after staring at the strange lines and squiggles on the page for as long as she could stand it, Michelle finally gave in. She handed the book back to her mother, but not before shooting an evil eye at Craig.



Still, for all of her rivalry with her big brother, Michelle was extremely close to him.

“He was my protector and my lifelong friend,” Michelle would say years later.

“We were so close, we were more like twins,” Craig would agree.

In the small upstairs apartment on South Euclid Street in Chicago’s South Side, the Robinson children had no choice but to be close—literally. The apartment had only one bedroom, a kitchen, one very small bathroom, and a narrow living room. It was really a space big enough for no more than two people, but Michelle and Craig’s father, Fraser, came up with an idea. With the help of a friend, Fraser put up cheap paneling in the living room, creating two tiny bedrooms for Michelle and her brother.

“It was the smallest room I’d ever seen,” one of Michelle’s childhood friends remembered. “It was really more like a closet.”

But Michelle never saw it that way. Her “bedroom” was barely big enough for a small bed and a desk, but by the time she was in the first grade, she managed to squeeze in a fancy dollhouse and an Easy-Bake oven. She often invited friends over to play with her Barbie dolls for hours, crammed together in a circle, giggling and laughing so loudly that Craig would be forced to retreat to the tiny kitchen for some peace and quiet. The lack of noiseproofing between their

rooms annoyed both brother and sister at times, but sometimes they were glad for it. Long after Michelle and Craig were supposed to be asleep, they would press their mouths and ears up to the thin partition and talk, tell jokes, and muffle their laughter late into the night.

The Robinsons rented their apartment from an aunt who owned the building and lived downstairs. Both Craig and Michelle took piano lessons from this aunt. Craig was bored to death with the lessons and had to be nagged by his mother to practice on their secondhand piano. But Michelle loved playing. She'd replay songs again and again until she got everything perfect.

“We knew there was something special about Michelle when she practiced without ever being pushed,” Marian later said.

Michelle memorized the theme song from the television special *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and performed it when anyone would ask (and sometimes, even if no one did). Years later, when Craig was the star player on his high-school basketball team, he would ask his sister to play the song to calm his nerves before a big game.

Like most kids growing up in the 1970s, Michelle and Craig spent a lot of time outside. They rode their bikes all around their neighborhood and hung out in a nearby park on the windy shores of Lake Michigan. They played epic games of Monopoly and Scrabble on Saturday nights.

Michelle was so competitive that Craig often let her win so that she wouldn't quit; he knew that if he beat her too many times, he'd no longer have a game partner. Craig and Michelle were allowed to watch no more than one hour of television a day. Michelle's favorite show was *The Brady Bunch*, a popular 70s sitcom that Michelle can still recall in detail more than forty years later.

"Somehow, she has managed to commit every single episode to memory," Craig said with a laugh in a 2008 interview.

Every summer, the family took a brief vacation at a small cabin by a lake up in Michigan or, when Michelle was a bit older, at their grandparents' home in South Carolina. A few times a year, there was a special dinner out for pizza on Friday night or even a drive-in movie. These treats, along with the fact that Michelle and Craig's mother was a stay-at-home mom while most of their friends' mothers worked, led Michelle and her brother to think they must be pretty well-off.

"Are we rich, Dad?" they asked one evening.

Fraser smiled, but didn't answer. The next day, instead of depositing his paycheck at the bank, he cashed it and brought home a big wad of twenty-dollar bills. He spread all the money on Craig's bed. Craig looked at it and exclaimed, "Wow! We *are* rich! I knew it!"

"Not really," Fraser said. He then pulled out a stack of mail that was typically kept on a small desk

in his and Marian's bedroom. The stack contained the bills for electricity, gas, car payment, rent, and telephone. Fraser then put as many twenties as necessary for payment into each bill's return envelope. Then he put aside twenties for groceries and other typical expenses. When he was finished, there was a single twenty left.

"So, you get to save all that every month?" Craig asked. Twenty dollars still seemed like a lot to him.

"No," Dad said. "Remember when we get pizza or go to the movies? And our summer trips aren't free. In the end, there is no money left over at all."

To eight-year-old Michelle and ten-year-old Craig, the lesson may have still been a little confusing. In and around their South Side neighborhood, there were other children who clearly had far less. Some of these children didn't seem to get enough to eat. Their clothes were worn out. And both parents of these children usually worked, leaving the children alone or with neighbors after school and in the summer. Still, Craig and Michelle looked at the lone twenty-dollar bill that was left and had to agree, in low voices later that night through the partition, that perhaps they were not rich after all.

And yet the Robinson kids were very rich in other ways.

Marian constantly brought home books from the library for Michelle and Craig to read. They

quickly discovered that good books were almost always more exciting than television (even *The Brady Bunch!*), and they spent much of their free time stretched out on the small front porch in the summer, cooling off and reading. Marian also saved spare change to buy extra workbooks that could help the children get ahead in school. Her plan worked! Both Craig and Michelle were given permission to skip the second grade when their teachers realized they were far ahead of their classmates.

Marian and Fraser encouraged their children to do their best every day, to strive well beyond “just good enough” in their schoolwork. They not only encouraged their children; they made them believe in themselves by showing them love and telling them how proud they were of both of them.

“I was always raised to believe I could do it all,” Michelle explained. “That was very empowering.”

“The academic part came first and early,” Craig added. “Our parents emphasized hard work and doing your best. Once you get trained like that, you get used to it, and you don’t want to get anything but A’s and B’s.”

And while Michelle and her brother were raised to respect their teachers and other adults, they were also told to question anything, *anything*, they didn’t think was right or fair or clear. They were taught to really think about what was going

on rather than follow rules blindly. Fraser and Marian impressed upon their young children that always being a follower would get them nowhere. Also, being a leader sometimes meant speaking up and taking chances.

“I was not allowed to speak my mind or question authority,” Marian recalled of her own childhood. “I couldn’t say what I felt, and I always wondered, ‘What is wrong with me saying what I feel?’”

Soon enough, at Bryn Mawr, Michelle’s elementary school, teachers learned that they could not pull anything over on Michelle Robinson. Michelle also became indignant if she thought her classmates were being treated unfairly—by teachers or by other kids. At night, Michelle would talk to Craig about other students who were getting bullied or seemed to be having a hard time at home.

“I didn’t realize it then, but I realize it now,” Craig said recently. “Those were the people she was going to dedicate her life to, the people who were struggling with life’s challenges.”

Most of Michelle’s teachers accepted and even respected Michelle’s questioning, but one teacher was not impressed. After the teacher refused to answer six-year-old Michelle’s questions, Michelle became angry. That evening, the teacher called Marian to complain. Instead of getting mad at Michelle or the teacher, Mrs. Robinson just

laughed and said, “Yeah, she’s got a temper, but we decided to keep her anyway.”

The Robinsons knew, however, that simply encouraging hard work and freethinking in their children wasn’t enough. They would have to set examples of their own. Fraser, in particular, set an example that made an impression on both his children, to their very core.

Fraser Robinson worked at the Chicago city water plant. He had worked his way up from being a night janitor to being one of the plant managers. Although he had never gone to college, Fraser had done well in high school, where he was a star swimmer and boxer. Standing well over six feet tall, he was a strong, broad-shouldered man who always seemed to have a joke or a story to make people laugh and feel at ease. But when Michelle and her brother were still very young, Fraser became sick with multiple sclerosis, a disease that affects the spine and muscles and has no cure. Victims of MS, as it is called, often develop difficulty walking as the disease grows worse.

Michelle watched her father struggle painfully some mornings to simply get to the breakfast table on time. Then she would worry as he took the steep stairs down from their apartment, one at a time, and shuffled to his car. Barely in his thirties, Fraser was forced to start using a cane.

“As he got sicker, it got much harder for him to walk,” Michelle said in a speech in 2008. “But

if he was in pain, he never let on. He never stopped smiling and laughing, even while struggling to button his shirt, even while using two canes to get himself across the room to give my mom a kiss. He just woke up a little earlier and worked a little harder.”

Fraser Robinson never called in sick to work—not once. He never made excuses, complained, or even mentioned his illness. In fact, Fraser volunteered as a precinct captain for Chicago’s South Side neighborhoods. As a precinct captain, Fraser went from door to door making sure that residents were registered to vote. Walking the neighborhoods was often slow torture for Fraser, but he did his best. The right to vote was immensely important to Fraser. It was worth the pain.

“Some of my earliest memories are of tagging along with him as we’d walk door to door,” Michelle remembered. “We’d sit in neighbors’ kitchens for hours and listen to their opinions, concerns, and the dreams they had for their children. . . . My father would make sure that everyone could get to the voting booth on Election Day—because he knew that a single vote could help make their dreams a reality.”

As they grew older, Michelle and Craig developed a huge respect and love for their father. Disappointing him in any way was, to both brother and sister, perhaps the worst thing that could possibly happen.



“We always felt that we couldn’t let Dad down, because he worked so hard for us,” Craig recalled. “If Dad was disappointed in you, it was the worst thing that could happen in your life. If Michelle or I ever got in trouble with Dad, we’d *both* be crying! We’d both say, ‘Oh my God, Dad’s upset! How could we do this to him?’”

Many evenings, Michelle and Craig would stand at the top of the steep stairs, waiting for their father, throwing their arms around him in fierce hugs when he finally reached them. The two of them worried about their father even though he tried to keep the mood light. Sometimes, Craig would lie awake at night trying to figure out how to get his father out of the house quickly if the apartment caught on fire. But Michelle and Craig’s admiration for their father overpowered their worry. And Fraser Robinson’s steady and strong dedication to work and family made a tremendous impact on the quality of his children’s character.

“Dad was our rock,” Michelle said years later. “There were no miracles in my life. There’s nothing magical about my background. The thing I saw was hard work and sacrifice. . . . Dad and my mom poured everything they had into Craig and me. It was the greatest gift a child could receive.”

In turn, Michelle worked hard at school, studying at the little desk in her half of the living room for hours in order to get good grades. Craig

also got good grades but didn't seem to need to study as much.

“Craig could do well on tests by simply carrying a book home under his arm,” Marian joked. “Tests were hard for Michelle. I think she probably put too much pressure on herself.”

In spite of her nervousness about tests, Michelle brought home mostly A's. She took advanced classes, even studying French and taking a biology class at a nearby college when she was in the eighth grade. The work paid off. At the end of eighth grade, Michelle graduated second in her class of more than one hundred students.

In many ways, the world that young Michelle Robinson lived in seemed fair and full of opportunities. She was aware, of course, that being black meant being a member of a minority, but her parents rarely, if ever, made bitter comments about discrimination. They didn't speak much about the widespread racial conflicts that existed in Chicago and beyond. Michelle had never really known why her grandfather, Fraser Jr. (her own father was Fraser III) had moved to Chicago from South Carolina many years earlier.

There were a number of difficult realities that Michelle had never had to deal with as a young child. But as the 1970s wore on, her eyes were opened to the hard truths of what it meant to be black in America—both for her great-great-grandfather and, more than 100 years later, for her.