

The Washington Post

First lady aims for kids in top physical form with mind-sets to match

By Robin Givhan

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, February 24, 2010; 11:30 AM

First lady Michelle Obama sits in an upholstered armchair in her East Wing office, a generous bowl of fresh apples on a nearby table. She wears a body-conscious gray sleeveless sheath with an artful corsage of matching fabric decorating the right shoulder. A petite Georgetown Hoya -- one of the young ladies from the White House mentoring program Obama established last year -- quietly observes as the first lady discusses the role physical fitness played in her Chicago girlhood.

The tableau contains all the elements that have defined Obama's time in the White House: youth outreach, distinctive style, healthful food and fitness. Of all these, nutrition and physical activity are key to the legacy Obama would like to leave. They're essential to her national rallying cry to end the crisis of childhood obesity in a generation.

Obama launched [her sweeping initiative](#), Let's Move, in an early February publicity surge that had her discussing "food deserts" and the urgency of clearer labeling. She [lobbied the National Governors Association](#) before its members partied at the White House. She visited schools and at a Philadelphia grocery store pulled out a \$20 bill to buy a banana-strawberry smoothie. The statistics she has repeated are both jarring and daunting: One in three children is overweight or obese. The dollars she has proposed the federal government dedicate to the dilemma are significant: at least \$10 billion over 10 years.

Most of the attention has focused on the nutrition part of the equation -- thanks in large part to her [vegetable garden](#) that took on astonishing international significance. Let's Move aims to make wide-ranging improvements to the eating habits of a food-addled society. Fitness is a less discussed, yet crucial, piece of her initiative. She will unveil the details of a comprehensive fitness agenda in the coming weeks.

"If kids are naturally active, they shouldn't have to worry about what they eat. That's how it was when we were growing up. Nobody talked to you about nutrition. You ate your vegetables. You ate what was on your plate. And you went outside and played. There wasn't a need for structured activity," she says in an interview in her office. "The physical education piece is about exploring that. In our nation, what happened? What have been the cultural trends that have led us away from that regular exercise and activity that kids used to get?"

The days when children came home from school and went outside to play until the streetlights came on aren't coming back, Obama acknowledges. She wants to lead the way in finding contemporary, healthy traditions.

"How do we answer the questions or give solutions or approaches to parents in all different kinds of communities?" she asks rhetorically. "There are going to be kids who can't just go out and play. They're home alone or their neighborhoods aren't safe. . . . Or what about families that are living out in rural areas where they don't have a car and can't go to the local soccer field?"

"We have to decide as a nation that physical activity and nutrition and all that stuff is just as important as test scores and good grades, textbooks and everything else we make the trade off for," she says. Failure to make those things a priority "can kill our kids."

A different time

Growing up in Chicago, Obama was a self-described "tall, lanky, crazy-skinny kid." She has never had to battle the scale in significant ways. As a child, her daily routine included dashing outside after school, where she rode her bicycle, played tag and jumped double Dutch.

"In my mind, I still picture the neighborhood where we played," she says. "You'd maybe take a break and sit on the stoop or run inside to get water, but you were doing that just to get it done because you didn't want to miss out on anything."

"If I'm more reflective, because my father had multiple sclerosis and physical movement wasn't a given for him, as I talk to my brother now, neither one of us took our physical fitness for granted. We knew our father was a jock when he grew up -- he boxed -- and to see him go from that so quickly, without any warning, to someone who couldn't walk without crutches, you don't take that for granted. I don't think my father ever did."

The first lady offers a full-throated recollection of that period in her life, the words tumbling out at full speed. Physical activity wasn't a matter of dutiful exercise; it wasn't scheduled. It was family time with her father.

"He did his best to always get out there with us. When he'd come home from work, if he was on a shift that would allow him to, we'd be boxing or throwing the ball or playing dodge ball. There was always some game involved."

As a kid in the late '60s and early '70s, Obama was on the cusp of the generation of women who reaped the full benefits from Title IX, a law giving girls equal access to sports. Title IX was enacted in 1972, when Obama was 8. "Even though I was a bit of a tomboy then, there weren't organized leagues for girls that I can recall," she says.

She never played any sports with dedication, although she ran a bit of track in high school, "but by then I was more focused on academics," she says. "And because I didn't play a lot of sports in high school, the thought of taking it up in college . . ." Her voice trails off at the very idea of it.

In contrast, her older brother, Craig Robinson, went on to basketball stardom at Princeton University and now coaches the Beavers at Oregon State. "Once he got to the age of being on team sports, we'd spend all our time in the gym watching his games," she says. "I could throw and I could catch, but that's what the boys did."

On the move

Practically everywhere one looks, there's evidence of the cultural changes -- both positive and negative -- Obama describes. In a Maryland suburb, some 45 minutes from the White House, five fifth- and sixth-grade girls and boys sprawled on gym mats inside multipurpose room 136 are watching -- not quite intently and not exactly quietly -- as fitness instructor Sandra Sirjue demonstrates the proper form for push-ups. First she stretches out into a plank position and slowly performs the standard down-and-up motion while balanced on her toes. Then she gives the students the option of doing a easier version on their knees. She pointedly does not describe the less strenuous exercise as a "girl's push-up," but somehow the kids, settled into this after-school program housed at Lake Arbor Elementary School in Mitchellville, know better. The challenge is on: four girls ready to take on one boy.

Lauryn Lowe, 11, stretches out her small frame and pounds out some 23 push-ups with impressive form in 30 seconds. Earlier she completed 84 jumping jacks in one minute while her friends sang out the numbers with the steady rhythm of a metronome.

Lauryn, a competitive cheerleader with two springy ponytails and dark oval glasses, is one of about two dozen kids participating in Fun, Fly & Fit, a project launched in 2010 by the United Way of the National Capital Area that brings mobile gym classes into schools, churches and community centers.

The six-week series, offered to organizations that request it, brings in workout instructors, a trainer-to-the-stars and an assortment of gear and games, with the simple goal of getting kids who might be spending much of their after-school time sitting in front of computer screens, up and active.

Fun, Fly & Fit speaks to the spirit of the first lady's childhood obesity initiative. It's grass-roots and free; it provides children and their parents with nutrition information; and it focuses on the importance of play. But it is also, quietly and slyly, strives for measurable results. And so, on the first day of this nascent program, the three workout instructors dispatched from Nu-You Fitness, huddle around a picnic table in the corner of the gym finalizing their game plan for making something as yuck-inducing as a "physical assessment" seem like fun.

Of about two dozen students, a handful are visibly overweight. And after all the jumping and measuring, Cory Morgan, one of the instructors pronounces himself impressed with the fitness level of some of the girls, amazed by a couple of the boys, but concerned that, in general, the body mass indexes "weren't bad but they were on the higher end," which means too much fat and not enough muscle. In short, most of the kids are average.

Keisha Jordan, 10, with her hair in thick cornrows, completes 70 jumping jacks and not so many sit-ups and protests that, "My tummy hurts," although she's smiling when she says it. While there are golfers and swimmers among the students, Keisha, long and lanky, says, "the only sport I play is video games." She identifies herself as a fan of Nintendo's "Animal Crossing: Wild World," which based on her description of mortgages and wildebeests sounds a bit like "The Suze Orman Show" meets "National Geographic."

These kids don't represent an extreme. In many ways, they are like the first lady's own children: a generation of youngsters with schedules to rival those of their very busy parents.

"We try to limit the amount of planned activities and meetings to five things over the course of the week so she has some down time," says Leslie Johnson, whose 10-year-old daughter, Maya, bespectacled with her hair in a curly bob, was running a Fun, Fly & Fit relay race that had just begun. "This builds social skills because they have the camaraderie and the cooperation."

Motivator to the stars

In the space of 45 minutes, it was not difficult to get these kids moving. They were eager for a game, eager to be first in line to do pretty much anything. But the program also has a secret weapon: celebrity trainer Mark Jenkins.

Jenkins has both the physique and the carriage that one would expect of a former Navy recruit and the cheerleading personality of someone who guided music mogul Sean Combs to a four-hour finish in the New York City Marathon after only two months of preparation. Jenkins's height hovers at six feet; his legs are like tree trunks and his biceps are so sharply defined that they appear to be perpetually flexed. Jenkins looks like the celebrity trainer that he is, someone who once charged \$30,000 for a one-month job that entailed transforming a chubby neo-soul singer named D'Angelo into pin-up boy perfection for the music video "Untitled (How Does It Feel?)," which was essentially a 4 1/2 -minute homage to the male torso.

That was a decade ago and since then, Jenkins's price and his notoriety have only risen. As the spokesman for Fun, Fly & Fit, he brings celebrity razzle-dazzle to the nation's overly sedentary children. For free. He doesn't offer magical formulas for curing what Surgeon General Regina Benjamin described in a recent report as an epidemic of overweight and obese children who are on track to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. He just brings motivation.

"The biggest problem with the fitness community is just because something is the right thing to do doesn't mean you don't have to market it," Jenkins says.

And so the trainer stands in front of kids, *young* kids, and talks about money and vanity. His message echoes what the first lady describes in her regular plea: She tells young people "whether you feel it or not, your best days are ahead, really, if you make some good short-term decisions and don't do stupid things. The bulk of your life is left ahead. And if you've got some money, you've got a job, you don't want to be in the hospital because you have high blood pressure. You don't want to take insulin shots."

Jenkins takes that message and puts it in vivid, music video color. He tells kids how the stars train. Mary J. Blige jogs while singing one of her CDs in its entirety to make sure she has enough stamina to get through a concert while doing all that lamenting that her fans love so much. Jenkins also cuts to the bottom-line, specifically the kids' own personal bottom line: Obese people make less money.

The children take notice. After all, any adult who has ever visited a school on career day knows to expect a singular question: How much do you make?

No part of Jenkins's spiel is new. It is merely more visceral -- designed to appeal to the id rather than the superego. It taps into what Benjamin described as "the new normal."

"We have to stop bombarding *Americans* with what they can't have or what they can't eat and what terrible thing will happen if you don't get on some dreaded exercise equipment" said Benjamin during an appearance with the first lady in January. "We need to start talking about what they can do."

Sharing life's lessons

The first lady has used her own "id" moments to sell her initiative. She reassures her audiences, with their fat-lusting taste buds, that healthy eating doesn't have to mean a lifetime of steamed broccoli and grilled chicken by describing her love for french fries and burgers. She takes the same approach with fitness. She has told many audiences of the pleasures in slacking off.

Obama might have been a pre-teen jock, but she came to fitness -- in its modern form as a scheduled activity -- late. "I've been much more physically active since I've had kids: going to aerobics class, going to a trainer, going to the gym, eventually taking up tennis and playing that a little bit more."

When Obama was a child, Frasier Robinson taught his daughter to play, by his undaunted example. Eventually, the games were replaced by academics, work, marriage and kids. It would be Marian Robinson who would teach her adult daughter how to play again -- not by example, but in the form of her own regrets.

"I didn't see a mother who had a career. I didn't see a mother who invested in herself and worked out, went to the hairdresser. My parents sacrificed everything for us. And that, in so many ways, made us who we are. But she will even tell me today that she wouldn't want me to do that for my girls," the first lady says. "Fortunately, I had a mother who taught me through her own failings and could admit, 'This is what I would have done differently.' And I think because of that honesty, her openness, I'm more, I feel more confident about showing my girls now that you invest in yourself.

"Because of my mother I feel more comfortable saying, 'You're going to stay with Dad and I'm going to the gym.'" One woman's regret becomes a first lady's call for action.