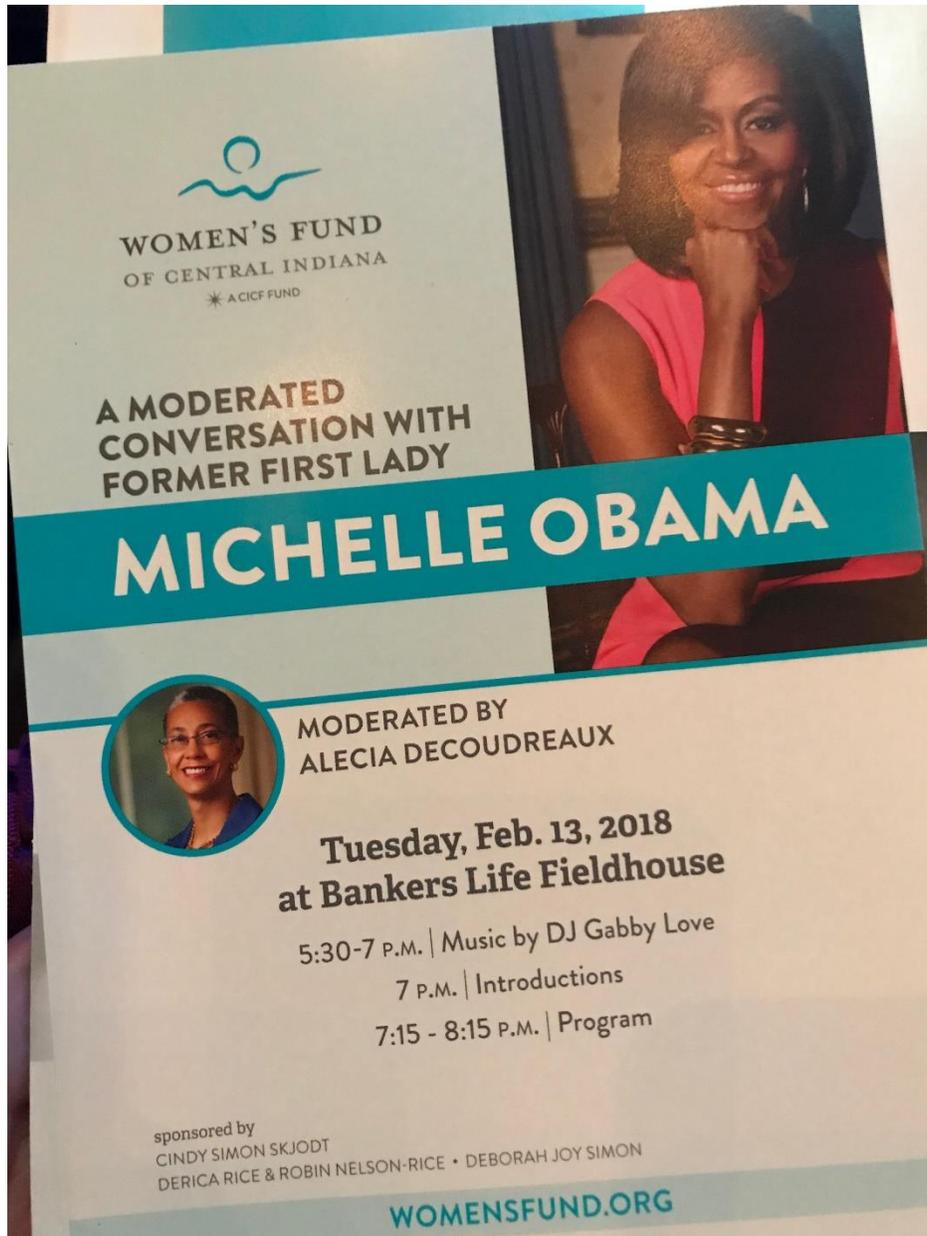


Five Lessons I Learned from Michelle Obama

By Shawnta S. Barnes – March 1, 2018



Sometimes life grants you opportunities where the reward clearly outweighs the investment. Hearing, then Senator, Barack Obama, speak in person, was

one such opportunity for both my husband and me. It was Monday, May 5, 2008, the day before the Indiana primary election and Senator Obama was scheduled to speak at a campaign rally at the American Legion Mall. As a child, it never crossed my mind a person of color could become the President of the United States. Just the possibility of this becoming a reality convinced my husband and me to stand for hours after work and wait in a long line. With tired feet and hungry bellies, we were blessed with tickets close to the front of the crowd – thanks to the kindness of a stranger.



Barack Obama, May 5, 2008 in Indianapolis

Fast forward ten years later and life presented me with yet another opportunity to hear an Obama speak. This time it was with Former First Lady Michelle Obama. She was part of an event put on by the Women's Fund of Central Indiana called, "A Moderated Conversation with Former First Lady

Michelle Obama.” I knew I had to be there to hear one of my heroes speak. She is hope realized for many women of color. I wanted to soak up any wisdom she had to offer and apply it to my own journey in life. The ticket wasn’t cheap, but it was well-worth the investment for the lessons I received. I’ve detailed those lessons below:

When you get a seat at the table don’t waste it.

“If you are already telling yourself they don’t want to hear me or maybe I’m not smart enough and you’re in a position where someone has put you at the table exactly because they want to hear from you and you’re quiet – you’re going to eventually just become a non-factor because they’re getting nothing from you.” MO

Michelle Obama’s words hit home because I have been a non-factor before. When I first started getting opportunities to participate in conversations or to join committees, I would take notes, observe, and would rarely voice an opinion. One day, after a committee meeting, an older black woman pulled me to the side and, “What’s the point of you being here if you ain’t gonna say nothing?” After I got past my hurt feelings over her bluntness, I realized she was right. Even though you know you’re at the table for a reason, it still is hard to voice your opinion because you worry about how what you say might be interpreted or what it might cost you. When I started writing on a consistent basis last January, I wrote “safe pieces.” They were boring pieces and I wasn’t saying anything. I was worried about how my opinion would affect my job. Now, I don’t worry about that. I write and speak about issues important to me including recently testifying in front of the Indiana Senate about the problems students, especially black students, are facing because of poor discipline practices in some Indiana schools. If someone doesn’t want to associate with me because of what I said, maybe I don’t need to be around this person or if someone gets angry because of what I said, maybe I’ve hit the nail on the head and the issue needs to be addressed. Issues can’t get solved if the people at the table who have new ideas to offer are mum.

Be prepared to know that the work is hard, but do it anyways.

“What you have to do is just get up and do it. There is no magic.” MO

We lie to our youth, when we don't tell them it takes hard work to achieve your goals. Everyone is looking for a shortcut and the reality is you have to make a plan and take the time to do the work. Earlier this year, a student asked me, “How do you do all that you do?” My students are aware I write a lot, teach at their school, and teach at a local university. I tell them I have a plan and in that plan, I have a schedule that allows me the time to get the work done to accomplish the goals I have. Yes, that means I get up early and yes, that might mean I have to stay up late and miss some social events. If I want to achieve my goals, I have to work hard. The payoff is so worth the hard work and the hard work opens the door to opportunities.

Save the platitudes and fix the problem.

“You can't ask people to just live on platitudes and well-wishes. You can't pull yourselves up by the bootstraps if you don't have boots.” MO

In society, we are really good at trying to patch up a situation with nice words. For example, “I'll keep you in my thoughts and prayers.” There is nothing wrong with reflecting and praying but that alone won't help a child that's three grade levels behind catch up on reading, it won't help the woman that is being punched by her partner, and it won't help the family that has to choose between paying the light bill and getting groceries. We have to take action in addition to saying kind words. Someone asked me, “Why did you go back to the school that cut your literacy coach position to facilitate the Black History Month Literacy Night?” For me, the answer was simple. Praying that the families would find books with characters representative of who their children are in hopes they would read and improve their literacy is not as helpful as showing up and giving those parents tools to accomplish that goal.

Set boundaries.

“You have to know how to advocate for yourself...There are things that I need to make this work for me. So, I was very clear about the boundaries that I needed. This is also something that I think women do not do well for ourselves is creating boundaries within which we want to work.” MO

When August rolled around last year, I was burned out. I had just finished coursework to obtain my school administration license. I had finished a policy fellowship. I had finished interviewing at several schools for a new job after my position was cut. I had wrapped up my contributions to the Indiana ESSA plan just to name a few. I realized moving into the 2017-18 school year something had to change. I could not keep saying yes to everything. Some days, I was attending multiple meetings. To be honest, some I wasn't even that interested in. My friend jokingly calls me superwoman, but I felt like a super failure. Although I'm not perfect this school year, I'm getting better at saying no and telling people how much time I can give. I liked when Michelle Obama shared how she would only give three days of her week to support Barack Obama during his campaign for President. By making those demands she said, "People learned to respect those boundaries." People will pull you in so many directions if you don't advocate for yourself and you should only participate in activities in which you are passionate.

Push through self-doubt.

"I want them to know that anybody who has been successful, particularly if you're a woman, and especially if you're a woman of color, you grow up with a lot of doubts in your head." MO

"You have to practice achieving through people's low expectations of you." MO

Although this portion of the night, Michelle Obama was focusing on the young ladies in the crowd, every woman, every person, needed to hear these words. Achieving through people's low expectations doesn't stop once you finally obtain your first professional job after college. Being a black professional is hard. There are times my husband and I lament about situations we have endured while navigating our respective fields, his technology and mine's education; these difficulties were simply because of our color. People think you only got the job because of affirmative action or people think you are less competent. Once people get to know you, they realize you do know your stuff and that you might even know more than them. There are times I get upset internally, but I know I have to keep my head held up high and push on because my two sons and the rest of their generation is behind me looking at my example.

So on this first day of Women's History Month, I salute Former First Lady Michelle Obama. Your words, wisdom, and work have inspired me to continue doing my best and to know that the road may be long, but the journey is mine to call my own. It is up to me to make the best of it. I salute you!