



## **CENTER FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHILD CARING**

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### **The Encouragement of Michelle Obama**

In June 2010, when Michelle Obama cast her eyes across the class of graduating high school seniors from one of Washington's most troubled black neighborhoods, she saw not only their lives, but her own. The setting was Constitution Hall, where the Daughters of the American Revolution had prevented Marian Anderson from performing in 1939 because she was black. So much had changed in seven decades and yet much had not. Michelle spoke to the graduates about the troubles facing African American children in Anacostia, and she spoke about racism. She pointed out that the neighborhood in sight of the U.S. Capitol once was segregated and that black people had been prohibited from owning property in parts of the community. "And even after those barriers were torn down," she said, "others emerged. Poverty. Violence. Inequality."

Michelle drew a straight line from her struggles with hardship and self-doubt in working-class Chicago to the fractured world the Anacostia students inhabited thirty years later. She told them about being written off, about feeling rejected, about the resilience it takes for a black kid in public school to become one of the first in her family to go to college. "Kids teasing me when I studied hard. Teachers telling me not to reach too high because my test scores weren't good enough. Folks making it clear with what they said or didn't say that success wasn't meant for a little girl like me from the South Side of Chicago." As she spoke of her parents—their sacrifices and the way they pushed her "to reach for a life they never knew"—her voice broke and tears came to her eyes. As the students applauded in support, Michelle went on. "And if Barack were here, he'd say the same thing was true for him. He'd tell you it was hard at times growing up without a father. He'd tell you that his family didn't have a lot of money. He'd tell you he made plenty of mistakes and wasn't always the best student."

She knew that many of the Anacostia students faced disruptions and distractions that sometimes made it hard to show up, much less succeed. It might be family turmoil or money problems or needy relatives or children of their own. Or maybe the lack of a mentor, a quiet place to study, a lucky break. "Maybe you feel like no one has your back, like you have been let down by people so many times that you've stop believing in yourself. Maybe you feel like your destiny was written the day you were born and you might 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."

Addressing those 158 Anacostia seniors dressed in cobalt blue gowns, Michelle shared more about her history and her self-doubt. She offered advice and encouragement but skipped the saccharine. "You just can't sit around," she instructed. "Don't expect anybody to come and hand you anything. It doesn't work that way." She asked them to think about the obstacles faced by Frederick Douglass, their neighborhood's most illustrious former student, born into slavery and self-educated in an era when it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write. His mother died when he was a boy and he never knew his father. But he made it, "preserving through thick or thin," and spent decades fighting for equality.

She also asked them to consider the current occupants of the White House. "We see ourselves in each and every one of you. We are living proof for you, that with the right support, it doesn't matter what circumstances you were born into or how much money you have or what color your skin is. If you are committed to doing what it takes, anything is possible. It's up to you."

Taken from the Introduction of Peter Slevin's book, *Michelle Obama: A Life*, 2015, Vantage Books