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When Michelle Met Barack

How romance in the sedate corridors of a corporate law firm changed everything for the woman who might become the country's first African American first lady

By Liza Mundy
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In the summer of 1989, Michelle Robinson told her mother she was going to concentrate on her law career and not worry about dating. She was 25 and had just finished her first year as an associate at Sidley & Austin, a corporate law firm in her home town of Chicago. Not long after, the firm assigned her to mentor a summer associate named Barack Obama.

Even then, there was a lot of buzz about this 27-year-old prodigy from Harvard Law School. Sidley didn't usually hire first-year law students as summer associates, so Barack's arrival was noteworthy. Martha Minow, a law professor at Harvard, told her father, Newton Minow, a high-ranking partner at Sidley, that Barack was possibly the most gifted student that she had ever taught. Michelle, who'd graduated from Harvard Law herself in 1988, felt annoyed by all the chattering. Why were people surprised that a black man might be articulate and capable?

Her own skepticism took a different form. His name struck her as odd, as did the fact that he had grown up in Hawaii. She assumed he would be "strange and overly intellectual" and that she would almost certainly dislike him.

"He sounded too good to be true," she told David Mendell, author of "Obama: From Promise to Power." "I had dated a lot of brothers who had this kind of reputation coming in, so I figured he was one of these smooth brothers who could talk straight and impress people. So we had lunch, and he had this bad sport jacket and a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and I thought: 'Oh, here you go. Here's this good-looking, smooth-talking guy. I've been down this road before.' "

The fact that she was Obama's mentor made her feel self-conscious. She often recounts how she resisted when Barack asked her out, saying in an interview that she felt it would be "tacky" if they started to date because they were "the only two black people" at the firm.

That, anyhow, is how the story goes: Barack and Michelle, whose last name, of course, is now Obama, both enjoy telling it. But like many personal stories that get repeated during political campaigns, it's been polished and simplified for public consumption.

As Newton Minow and others are quick to point out, Michelle and Barack were not the only black lawyers at the firm, now called Sidley Austin. Sidley made an effort to be socially progressive. The firm had a black partner, and more African American attorneys were being hired as associates every year. Even so, Minow recalls, there probably weren't more than a half-dozen, and it must have felt to Michelle as though she and Barack were under a microscope. Which, in a way, they were. Before Barack and Michelle became an official item, Minow and his wife, Jo, ran into them at the popcorn stand at a movie theater. Minow is not sure, but thinks it may have been their fabled first date to see the Spike Lee movie "Do the Right Thing." "I think they were a little embarrassed," Minow says with a laugh.

And the truth is, if Michelle resisted, it wasn't for long. Andrew Goldstein, a Sidley attorney who worked with Michelle, says he had the impression that Michelle was pursuing Barack as much as he was pursuing her, and

with plenty of resources. She was tall, poised, very put-together, with an air of strength and a dazzling smile. "She is just as charismatic as he is," he says.

Another colleague, Mary Carragher, who at the time was a more senior associate assigned to work with Michelle, remembers how smitten Barack and Michelle seemed with each other. Sometimes, in the slow hours around 5:30 p.m., Carragher would go to Michelle's office to talk about a case or drop off some work, and, through the half-open door, she would see Barack, sitting on one corner of the desk. Michelle would be seated, the two of them rapt, oblivious, chatting.

"I could tell by the body language, he's just courting her," says Carragher, who would quietly depart without bothering them, thinking, 'You know what, I'm going back to my office.' "

But between Barack's visits, Michelle would confide in Carragher, sharing the tidbits she was gleaning about him. It was clear that she was now intrigued -- rather than put off -- by his unlikely origins and upbringing, which she would relay piece by piece as she learned about them. "I can't believe he's got a white grandmother from Kansas!" Carragher recalls Michelle telling her.

"She had all these little facts about him," says Carragher. "She was just learning about him and getting to know him, and she seemed to be quite taken with him." His biracial heritage -- he was the son of a foreign student from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas -- was part of the appeal. "She was just sort of amazed by him."

Far from resistant, Carragher says, "she was falling hard." But Michelle, who declined to be interviewed for this article or the book it is adapted from, was careful to maintain her professional demeanor. When Carragher saw them interact, "she was not falling all over him. She was very cool."

The romance with Barack was just one way that Michelle's three years at Sidley Austin were, for her, pivotal.

Like Barack, Michelle also had spent a summer at Sidley before graduating from Harvard. One of the most prestigious firms in Chicago, Sidley was located in what is now called Chase Tower, a skyscraper famous for its distinctive, swooping profile, in the heart of the Loop, or downtown district.

The firm's offices were just 10 miles from the neighborhood where Michelle had grown up. But the social and economic distance was much farther. Michelle came from the city's South Side, raised in a working-class neighborhood called South Shore that had gone from being all-white to all-black during the turbulent 1960s and '70s. Her father, Fraser Robinson, was employed by the city to tend boilers at a water treatment plant. He made just enough money for her mother, Marian, to be able to stay home with Michelle and her older brother, Craig.

A driven, focused student, Michelle had propelled herself into the Ivy League and, as a summer associate at Sidley, was starting to reap the benefits. Along with 60 or so other law students, she spent the summer of 1987 being courted by the firm's highly paid partners -- going to baseball games, lunches and happy hours. Her stint there led to a full-time job offer and a stark choice: Work as an associate at a big-name law firm earning about \$65,000 a year, or look for something more public service-oriented but likely to be less lucrative.

Michelle would have been well qualified for a career in public service law. At Harvard, she had devoted hundreds of hours of her time to the law school's legal aid bureau, which was essentially a student-run law firm. She and other students who worked there spent at least 20 hours a week helping poor people with civil cases, a major time commitment on top of their studies. They did their work in Gannett House, a white-poricoed Greek Revival structure that is the oldest surviving Harvard Law School building.

A few years later, Barack Obama would also spend untold hours in Gannett House, whose upper floor contained the offices of the Harvard Law Review. During his second year, he served as an editor of the law review, a much sought-after position, and then survived an even more grueling competition and was elected the law review's first African American president, a signal achievement that would attract national media attention. The

law review was a steppingstone to any number of prominent careers, including Supreme Court clerkships.

In contrast to her future husband, Michelle toiled in the lower part of the building, which housed the well regarded but less effete legal aid bureau. "There was a little bit of an upstairs-downstairs element to it," recalls Dave Jones, who was in Michelle's class and would go on to become a member of the California State Assembly. "There wasn't a whole lot of interaction when I was there between law review and legal aid bureau members, other than we would see them pass through the front door and go upstairs, while we were meeting with poor clients down in the basement."

The bureau was multiracial, and its students were public-minded. They were helping people who needed a lawyer and could not afford one. "We handled landlord-tenant disputes; we handled public benefit disputes; we ran a pro se divorce clinic that empowered women to handle their own small, uncontested divorce matters," says Ronald Torbert, who worked alongside Michelle and was president of the bureau during his third year.

The students could appear in court on behalf of their clients, doing trial work under the supervision of a licensed attorney. When not in the courtroom, they were on their own, unbossed, exercising their own discretion. Torbert calls the work "the most fun and the most memorable thing I did in my three years at Harvard."

It must have been equally satisfying for Michelle, who had arrived at Harvard in 1985 after four uncomfortable years at Princeton University. In her senior thesis, she described the frosty reception she'd received on the New Jersey campus, where affirmative action admissions policies were under attack and where many African American students felt marginalized.

"My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my 'Blackness' than ever before," Michelle wrote in her thesis, "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community." "I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don't belong."

Even so, she acknowledged that her years at Princeton had changed her. She entered the university, she wrote, determined to use her education to benefit the black community. But by the time she was preparing to graduate, she was not nearly so sure where her obligations lay. "As I enter my final year at Princeton, I find myself striving for many of the same goals as my White classmates -- acceptance to a prestigious graduate or professional school or a high paying position in a successful corporation. Thus, my goals after Princeton are not as clear as before."

At Harvard's legal aid bureau, Michelle found herself doing the kind of work she'd envisioned when she entered college: using her education to help those in need. "She handled some of the more complex landlord and tenant issues," says Torbert, who saw a lot of Michelle back then and describes her as "very mature, very, very bright. I just remember her being very serious about the work she did, and she really cared a lot about the people she worked with."

Dave Jones also was struck by Michelle's compassion, recalling her as someone who "came from a place in Chicago where she had very direct experiences with people living in dire and difficult circumstances, and I think she brought that to her work at the legal aid bureau."

The other thing Torbert noticed was that Michelle expected a lot from other people. "If there's one thing that stood out about her, she is not easily impressed," says Torbert, now vice president and general counsel for Barton Malow, a construction management company based in Michigan. "You think you're working hard, and I think her attitude is: 'Well, that's what you're supposed to do.' "

During their third year, Harvard students had to decide what to do with the rest of their lives. Students in the legal aid bureau were perhaps the ones most likely to go into public service, or legal aid, or, if they went with a private firm, to find one with pro bono opportunities. "It was something that a lot of us talked about and thought

about," says Torbert. But while many found the idea of public service compelling, "the [recruiting] process channels you toward a corporate legal practice," says Neil Quinter, another of Michelle's classmates. Private firms interviewed incessantly, "offering all this money."

In Michelle's case, Sidley Austin was offering a prestigious name and a lucrative starting salary. Michelle had grown up with parents who lived paycheck to paycheck. She had student loans to pay off. In the end, she went with the private firm, a conventional choice and one she would eventually urge others not to make.

At Sidley, Michelle didn't follow the traditional route for newly minted associates by doing general litigation or antitrust work. Instead, she was recruited by the looser, more fun-loving lawyers in the marketing law group, also known as intellectual property or entertainment law. These attorneys represented companies that sold goods to the public: advertising agencies, automakers, beer manufacturers. One of the clients was the flamboyant boxing promoter Don King, whose appearances always created a stir in Sidley's otherwise sedate corridors.

The marketing group "had the reputation in the firm of being a little more glitzy," says Brian Sullivan, an associate at the time who now practices in Vermont. Glitz, of course, is relative. They were still lawyers; they still wore suits; and they still worked long hours. Nevertheless, "it was the most fun area of practice in the firm, bar none," recalls Mary Carragher, who left Sidley in 1992 and now has her own practice. "We were the coolest people, and we had the best work. It was all popular culture stuff. You could do a lot of dull things in law, and this was, and still is, in my opinion, the best stuff."

The pop culture aspect of the job must have been appealing to Michelle, who was such a huge fan of "The Brady Bunch" growing up, according to her brother, that she knew every episode by heart. And she'd be working within a relatively small group of lawyers, where a new associate could get a fair amount of responsibility. The group also had a sizable contingent of women. One of the partners was Mary Hutchings Reed, a good-humored and gregarious attorney who had worked hard to win advancement for women in the top echelon of the legal profession. Reed, who also writes fiction, would later insert Michelle as a bit character in a novel, "Courting Kathleen Hannigan," that explores the perils of being a woman trying to make partner in the 1980s and 1990s. The fictional character Michelle inspired was "Michelle Richardson" -- a young associate who is part of the defense team in a sex-discrimination case, and who soon after being introduced is usually sent off to research an aspect of the law. The character, Reed says, exemplifies that young associates, even highly competent ones like Michelle, mostly were seen and worked hard, but were not heard.

"I loved her," says Reed, who left Sidley in 1989 and is now of counsel at Winston & Strawn in Chicago. She remembers Michelle as a stylish dresser with a ready sense of humor, not cowed by the senior partners, a young woman with self-confidence who nevertheless was willing to admit what she did not know.

Although she was a new associate, recalls colleague Andrew Goldstein, she would "push back" if she disagreed with an approach or had a different idea. "Michelle -- you didn't want to underestimate her," he says.

The group went out of its way to give Michelle work suited to her interests. When an opportunity came in to handle the budding public television career of Barney, the purple dinosaur poised to become a phenomenon among American children, Goldstein says he and others felt it had Michelle's name written all over it.

"Michelle had some smattering of public interest" experience, says Goldstein, who is now at the firm of Freeborn & Peters in Chicago, "and so we said, 'That's it: Public television, you're in on it.' "

The firm's task was to manage the trademark protection and distribution of Barney plush toys and other merchandise, Goldstein says, and to negotiate with public television stations that wanted to broadcast the show. "She had very little experience in that area," recalls Goldstein, "but she latched onto it and did a very good job with it."

But Michelle could also frustrate her supervisors. Quincy White, the partner who helped recruit Michelle and who headed the marketing group, remembers finding her a challenge to manage. White, who is now retired from the firm, says he gave her the most interesting work he could find, in part because he wanted to see her advance, but also because she seemed perennially dissatisfied.

She was, White recalls, "quite possibly the most ambitious associate that I've ever seen." She wanted significant responsibility right away and was not afraid to object if she wasn't getting what she felt she deserved, he says.

At big firms, much of the work that falls to young associates involves detail and tedium. There were all sorts of arcane but important rules about what could and could not be said or done in product advertisements, and in the marketing group, all the associates, not just the new ones, reviewed scripts for TV commercials to make sure they conformed. As far as associate work goes, it could have been worse -- "Advertising is a little sexier than spending a full year reading depositions in an antitrust law suit or reviewing documents for a big merger," says White -- but it was monotonous and relatively low-level.

Too monotonous for Michelle, who, White says, complained that the work he gave her was unsatisfactory. He says he gave her the Coors beer ads, which he considered one of the more glamorous assignments they had. Even then, he says, "she at one point went over my head and complained [to human resources] that I wasn't giving her enough interesting stuff, and the person came down to my office and said, 'Basically she's complaining that she's being treated like she's a second-year associate,' and we agreed that she was a second-year associate. I had eight or nine other associates, and I couldn't start treating one of them a lot better."

White says he talked to Michelle about her expectations, but the problem could not be resolved because the work was what it was. He is not sure any work he had would have satisfied her. "I couldn't give her something that would meet her sense of ambition to change the world."

"Not many people went over my head," says White. It was an unusual move for a young associate to make, and he believes it was consistent with her personality. She "wanted something that pushed her harder {lcub}hellip {rcub} Waiting five to seven years to make partner was a good career move for me but not for [her]. There are too many other opportunities out there {lcub}hellip{rcub} that mature faster than that."

Abner Mikva, a former congressman and federal judge who is close to the Obamas and was an early mentor to Barack, finds that account of Michelle's 20-something impatience amusing. "It doesn't surprise me at all," he says. Michelle is "clearly somebody who likes to make decisions and likes to be involved in exciting and important stuff. I can imagine writing memos for other lawyers -- I don't think that would have been her favorite dish of tea."

In that sense, she had much in common with Barack Obama, whose political ambition was already very apparent to those who knew him at Harvard. They were both driven, both eager to have an impact. And they wanted to do it right away.

In interviews and speeches, Michelle frequently talks about her early impressions of Barack. When she first met him, she told her local newspaper, the Hyde Park Herald, "he had no money; he was really broke. He wasn't ever going to try to impress me with things. His wardrobe was kind of cruddy . . . His first car had so much rust that there was a rusted hole in the passenger door. You could see the ground when you were driving. He loved that car. It would shake ferociously when it would start up. I thought, 'This brother is not interested in ever making a dime.' "

On one early date, he took her to a Chicago church, where he was meeting with a group of people he had worked with as a community organizer before he started law school. "The people gathered there together that day were ordinary folks doing the best they could to build a good life," Michelle recalled this summer in her speech to the Democratic National Convention. "They were parents trying to get by paycheck to paycheck; grandparents trying to get it together on a fixed income; men frustrated that they couldn't support their families

When Michelle Met Barack: How romance in the sedate corridors of a corporate law firm change... Page 6 of 10
after jobs had disappeared.

"And Barack stood up that day, and he spoke words that have stayed with me ever since. He talked about the world as it is, and the world as it should be. And he said that, all too often, we accept the distance between the two, and we settle for the world as it is, even when it doesn't reflect our values and aspirations."

Barack's idealism and his desire to help poor African Americans swept Michelle off her feet. She took him to meet her family. Her older brother, Craig Robinson, has talked many times about Michelle's impossibly high standards when it came to men and the obstacles those standards created for would-be suitors: "She would meet guys and go out on a couple of dates, and that would be it."

So when Barack came over for dinner, the whole family felt sorry for him, assuming he wouldn't be around for long. "He was very, very low-key," Craig, the head basketball coach at Oregon State University and a former star player at Princeton, told the Chicago Sun-Times. "I loved the way he talked about his family because it was the way we talked about our family. I was thinking: 'Nice guy. Too bad he won't last.' "

Not long afterward, Michelle asked Craig to take Barack out on the basketball court to test his character. He obliged her, and emerged from that game with a positive report: Barack was self-confident but not a ball hog or a hotshot.

At Sidley Austin, it was clear to Michelle's colleagues that the couple were sharing their aspirations. Michelle confided to Mary Carragher that Barack was planning to write a book, a project that he would not embark on for several years. Even then, it was the opinion of some at the firm that Barack was presidential timber. Andrew Goldstein remembers conversations around the water cooler in which people would tick off Barack's accomplishments, predicting that a résumé like his could only be leading toward one place: 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. " 'This guy's going to be the first African American president,' " he recalls one colleague declaring.

Michelle has always insisted that she was unaware, early on, of Barack's political ambitions. "We didn't talk about politics specifically," she told me when I interviewed her in the summer of 2007 for a story about her husband. But Obama wasn't keeping his ambitions secret. Michelle's brother, also speaking to me in 2007, recounted one of the first times Michelle brought Barack to a party that included the extended family, during which Craig pulled Barack aside to quiz him on his prospects and clue him in to family members' personalities and eccentricities.

When Craig asked about his career plans, Barack replied, "I think I'd like to teach at some point in time, and maybe even run for public office." Craig assumed Barack wanted to run for a post like city alderman, but Barack let him know that his sights were set higher. "He said no, at some point he'd like to run for the U.S. Senate," Craig recalled. "And then he said, 'Possibly even run for president at some point.' And I was like, 'Okay, that's great. But don't say that to my Aunt Gracie.' I was protecting him from saying something that might embarrass him." The Robinsons tended to be cynical about politics and politicians.

When I related this anecdote to Michelle, she laughed as though she had not heard it before. "He probably should have said: Don't tell Michelle!" she cracked, meaning that she shared her family's antipathy toward politics and implying that she didn't realize Barack had serious political aspirations.

Craig has his doubts about that. "She knew what she was getting into," he told Vanity Fair. The surprise, if there was one, he said, was how good a politician Barack would turn out to be.

After Barack went back to Harvard, the couple had a long-distance romance. In interviews, Michelle is fond of recounting how, during this period, she began to pressure Barack to get married, and how Barack put her off, arguing that marriage was a meaningless institution and that the only thing that mattered was how they felt about each other. Michelle, whose parents had been married for some 30 years, wasn't buying it.

Then, one night in 1991, he took her to Gordon, an expensive Chicago restaurant, and she started to press him again. He went into his usual tirade against marriage, a dissertation that went on until they ordered dessert. When it came, the plate had a box on it, and in the box was an engagement ring.

"That kind of shuts you up, doesn't it?" Michelle remembers Barack telling her. She acknowledged to a reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times that she doesn't remember what the dessert was, or whether she ate it. "I was so shocked and a little embarrassed because he did sort of shut me up."

They married in 1992 at Trinity United Church of Christ, in a ceremony officiated by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whom Barack had gotten to know during his work as a community organizer and whose fiery sermons would become so controversial during Obama's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination that the couple would have to cut ties with him. Michelle wore an off-the-shoulder gown. They had the reception at the South Shore Cultural Center, a former country club that had once excluded blacks and Jews. They honeymooned on the West Coast and moved into a condo in Hyde Park, one of Chicago's most integrated and politically progressive communities.

The year before they married, Michelle left Sidley Austin, and with it the practice of corporate law. Newton Minow remembers how Sidley offered Barack a job upon his graduation from Harvard and how Obama broke the news that he wanted to go into politics and would not be taking a job with the firm. Minow, who had served as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under President John F. Kennedy, replied that public service was an admirable path and that the firm would do all it could to help advance his political career.

"Well, I don't think you're going to want to help me," Barack replied, telling him to sit down because he had even more bad news. "I thought, 'What the hell is this?'" says Minow, who sat down. Whereupon Barack said, "I'm taking Michelle with me." Minow began to sputter at Obama, "You no-good worthless rotten . . ." until Barack said, "Hold it, we're getting married."

In fact, there was no need for Michelle to leave Sidley Austin just because she was marrying Barack. He was coming back to Chicago after Harvard, and she easily could have stayed with the firm. "As far as the firm was concerned . . . we considered it a real loss," says Minow. "We thought she was going to eventually become a partner and have a big role there."

But Michelle was ready to revisit the choice she'd made when she graduated from Harvard. At the time, she was still reeling from the death of her father in 1991. Fraser Robinson had died while getting ready to go to work, felled by what Barack, in his book "The Audacity of Hope," describes as complications from a kidney operation. This was an event of enormous emotional and psychological magnitude for Michelle and the rest of her family. At the Democratic National Convention, she described her father as "our rock. Although he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early 30s, he was our provider. He was our champion, our hero. But as he got sicker, it got harder for him to walk. It took him longer to get dressed in the morning.

"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 he worked a little harder."

His death made Michelle aware of how short life can be and prompted her to reflect, she has said in interviews. "If what you're doing doesn't bring you joy every single day, what's the point?"

Her father's death wasn't the only one she was grieving. In 1990, one of Michelle's closest friends from Princeton, Suzanne Alele, had died from cancer when she was only in her 20s. Alele, a computer specialist at the Federal Reserve, had always followed her heart, doing what felt right rather than what was expected of her. She was described in her alumni obituary as a "free spirit" who was much loved by her classmates.

Michelle resolved to live her own life in that vein. "I wanted to have a career motivated by passion and not just

money," she would tell the New York Times years later.

That's what Barack was doing. He, too, had struggled with spending time in corporate law, even just a summer, and ultimately rejected private practice and other conventional paths. To Michelle's amazement, Barack wasn't interested in parlaying his presidency of the Harvard Law Review into a clerkship for a U.S. Supreme Court justice. "Never did it cross his mind," Michelle told me in 2007. "Here I am, knowing the power of his position: 'You're not going to clerk for them? You're kidding me!'"

Instead, Barack took a less exalted job at a Chicago civil rights law firm, but first spent six months working on a voter registration drive, Project Vote, that targeted low-income African Americans. "We had many debates about how to best effect change," Michelle later told the Daily Princetonian. "We both wanted to affect the community on a larger scale than either of us could individually, and we wanted to do it outside of big corporations."

In a 2004 interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Michelle also expressed a lingering sense of guilt about enjoying so much material success as a big-firm lawyer while others who shared her origins and upbringing were not doing as well. She remembers asking herself, "Can I go to the family reunion in my Benz and be comfortable, while my cousins are struggling to keep a roof over their heads?"

Moreover, she wasn't enthralled with the work at Sidley Austin and apparently didn't think many of her colleagues were, either. "I didn't see a whole lot of people who were just thrilled to be there," she told Newsweek earlier this year. "I met people who thought this was a good life. But were people waking up just bounding out of bed to get to work? No."

Her brother would have the same epiphany while working on Wall Street. He had earned an MBA from the University of Chicago and gone to work first for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and then as a partner in a boutique investment firm. For a while, he enjoyed his wealth, then realized that the job wasn't making him happy.

"I'm so embarrassed to admit it," Craig told a New York Times sports reporter in 2007. "I had a Porsche 944 Turbo. I had a BMW station wagon. Who gets a BMW station wagon? It's the dumbest car in the world. Why would you buy a \$75,000 station wagon?" Concluding that "I've got all this stuff, and it hasn't made my life any better," Craig, in his late 30s, left investment banking for a job he loves: coaching basketball.

During her last year at Sidley Austin, Michelle began meeting with general counsels for universities, trying to find an area of the law that might be more satisfying. In 1991, she wrote to Valerie Jarrett, deputy chief of staff for Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Jarrett, now one of Barack Obama's most important campaign aides, was instantly impressed with Michelle. "She was so confident and committed and extremely open," Jarrett would later tell Newsweek. She offered her a job in the mayor's office. But before Michelle would accept, she asked that Jarrett have dinner with her and Barack.

Barack was worried, according to his biographer, David Mendell, that Michelle might be too straightforward and outspoken to survive in a political setting. He fretted, too, that if she was going to enter the realm of Chicago politics, she needed a mentor, someone to look out for her.

"My fiance wants to know who is going to be looking out for me and making sure that I thrive," Jarrett recalled Michelle saying. After the meal, Jarrett told the Chicago Tribune, she asked, "Well, did I pass the test?" Barack smiled and said she did.

When Michelle was hired by the Daley administration, she was an assistant to the mayor, making about \$60,000 a year. But Jarrett was promoted to head the Department of Planning and Development, and took Michelle with her. Michelle's new job was "economic development coordinator," which city records describe as "developing strategies and negotiating business agreements to promote and stimulate economic growth within the City of

Chicago."

After three years of toiling on behalf of Barney and Coors beer, Michelle was working to bring new jobs and vitality to Chicago's neighborhoods. It was a turning point in her career and in the way she would later frame her life story. Michelle didn't just leave the world of corporate law; she would go on to publicly reject it.

"We don't need a world full of corporate attorneys and hedge-fund managers," she said earlier this year as she campaigned in South Carolina.

She and Barack both make a point of talking about how they left corporate America (After graduating from Columbia University, Barack spent one year as a researcher for a Manhattan financial firm before becoming a community organizer) and devoted themselves to public service. "We left corporate America, which is a lot of what we're asking young people to do," Michelle said at a campaign event in Ohio this past winter. "Don't go into corporate America. You know, become teachers. Work for the community. Be social workers. Be a nurse. Those are the careers that we need, and we're encouraging our young people to do that. But if you make that choice, as we did . . . then your salaries respond." Which is true, though she fails to mention that her own salary never fell that low and that, by 2006, she would be a highly paid administrator at the University of Chicago Hospitals, with a husband writing best-selling books.

For the most part, the lawyers Michelle once worked with at Sidley Austin don't take offense at Michelle's dismissive words about corporate law or her description of their work as lucrative but uninspiring.

"I do understand," says Mary Hutchings Reed, who relished getting up every morning and winning a place for women in the corridors of legal power. Even so, Reed allows, "we're sitting here doing advertising." You can tell yourself that you're working for the protection of the American consumer, she says, but "working at a large law firm like this, sometimes looking for meaning, you can't look for meaning in your work."

"At the beginning, it's so fun and interesting and new, and then after a few years you realize that it's pretty much all the same stuff," adds Mary Carragher. She points out that many young lawyers try big-firm work and decide that it's not for them. "It's not surprising that she would go the big-firm route for a while. When you're at a top school and you're a top candidate like that, you're getting recruited by every top law firm in the city. It takes a little while to say, 'Does this really fit for me?' "

After Michelle left the firm, Carragher and Reed mostly lost touch with her. Carragher ran into her on Michigan Avenue a couple of years later, when Michelle was executive director of the nonprofit Public Allies, which prepares young people for jobs in public service. Michelle gave Carragher her card and seemed very happy.

Carragher ran into her again two years ago in Chicago at a charity fashion show for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. By then, Michelle was earning close to \$300,000 as vice president of community and external affairs at University of Chicago Hospitals. And she was the wife of the U.S. senator who had dazzled the country with his eloquence at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and was being talked about as a presidential candidate.

Carragher had her mother and her 11-year-old daughter with her.

"I feel like I was 11 years old when I met you!" joked Michelle, marveling at how young and inexperienced she'd been at Sidley Austin.

When Carragher introduced Michelle to her mother, Michelle told her, "Mary was my mentor and taught me so many things." Whereupon Carragher's mother -- who doesn't hear well and apparently thought Michelle simply said the two of them had worked together -- replied, "Oh yes, that's what Mary told me!" Carragher says she was mortified, but Michelle laughed.

When Michelle Met Barack: How romance in the sedate corridors of a corporate law firm chan... Page 10 of 10

"What a life you're having," Carragher said to her. And Michelle, the woman who could become the country's first African American first lady, replied, "I know."

This article has been adapted from "Michelle: A Biography," which is being published this week by Simon & Schuster. The book's author, Liza Mundy, is a staff writer for the Magazine. She can be reached at mundyl@washpost.com.

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