

Style

THURSDAY, JUNE 4, 2009

C

S

Citing Self-Belief Over Obstacles, First Lady Rouses NE High Class *Speaking Not of Pomp, but Circumstance*

By ROBIN GIVHAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

First lady Michelle Obama brought a little churchgoing fervor along with her personal story when she delivered the commencement address for Washington Mathematics Science Technology Public Charter High School yesterday. She began her speech with a single “Yea!” after being introduced by senior Jasmine Williams, who sent Obama a letter in February imploring her — or the president — to speak at her graduation.

In her letter, Williams — who someday

would like to be secretary of state or the White House press secretary — referred to Obama as “first lady Michelle” — a phrase that was a mixture of respect and informality. Williams and other students said they found a kinship in the stories Obama has repeated about being an African American girl from a working-class family in Chicago who wasn’t expected to achieve a fraction of what she has.

“She’s outgoing and outspoken,” senior Miranda Holland said before the ceremony, held at Howard University. “She reminds me of my grandmother,” who’s in her 50s.

For Williams, the most memorable moment since Obama became first lady was not during the sweeping pomp of the inauguration — although Williams was there. It wasn’t in the dazzling choreography and costuming of the European trip in April, although Williams watched the parade of fashion. It was when Obama spoke to another group of D.C. students at Anacostia High School in March. “She told them how a lot of people told her she spoke like a white girl. I don’t know what that means, but I’ve been

See OBAMA, Page C12



BY MARVIN JOSEPH — THE WASHINGTON POST

Jasmine Williams wrote the letter that swayed “first lady Michelle” to speak.

Obama to Grads: Ignore Doubters

OBAMA, *From Page C1*

told that, too," Williams says.

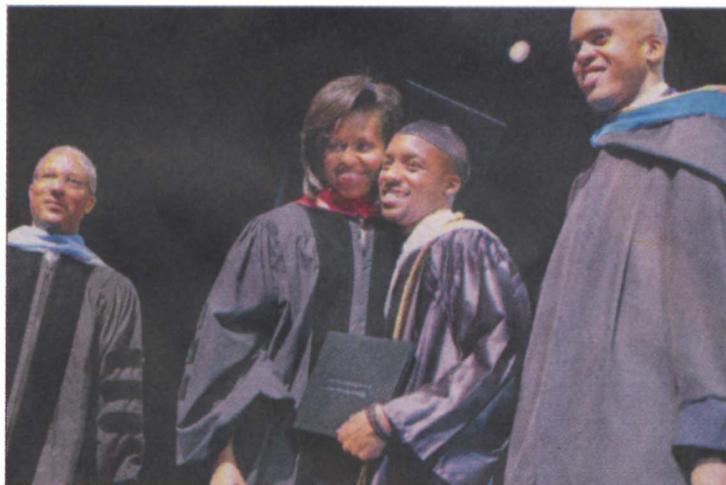
All of the school's 98 graduating seniors plan to attend college. Obama told them and their families that she gave only two speeches during this year's commencement season. The other was last month at the University of California at Merced. It was important, she said, to pick schools that she believed in, but she also wanted to pick a "D.C. public high school because I wanted to celebrate the achievements of young people in my new home town."

In her speech, Obama used her background — as well as her personal insecurities — to connect with the mostly black and Latino students in the Class of 2009. Hers was a rousing speech meant to convince already high-achieving minority students that they can accomplish even more, while also empathizing with their worries.

Don't let doubt turn into fear, she warned them. Don't close yourself off. "There were voices of people sowing seeds of doubt in my head," the first lady said in describing her adjustment to Princeton University, where she was an undergraduate in the '80s. "There was a part of me that started to believe the doubters."

As some in the audience began to murmur in agreement, Obama said, "I can get an 'Amen' to that."

And it's not just the students who



BY MARVIN JOSEPH — THE WASHINGTON POST

The first lady poses with valedictorian Jaren Davis. At left is James Mitchell, chairman of the school's trustees; Principal Mark Holbrook is at right.

have anxiety, Obama said, recalling that her parents never went to college and didn't have that experience to draw on to alleviate their worries. Parents have fears about "sending your kids off to school and not being able to touch them real quick and shake 'em up." They have fears about finances, she said. And the audience gave her an "Amen" for that, too.

She went on to tell the stories of other minorities who proved the naysayers wrong, from Lasalle Lefalle, the pioneering physician at Howard University's College of

Medicine, to Grammy-winning artist Herbie Hancock, who successfully combined his love of math and music. She also pointed to Sonia Sotomayor — the up-from-the-Bronx Supreme Court nominee — noting that when she heard the story of Sotomayor's awkwardness and insecurity as a Princeton freshman, and someone who even now looks over her shoulder worried that she doesn't quite measure up, "I understood how she feels."

Washington Mathematics Science Technology high school, on Bladensburg Road NE, recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. It was founded to give District students interested in math and science a place where they would be pushed to succeed. The school's philosophy is to admit students based not on proven skill or test scores, but on desire and potential. That dovetails neatly with a message that Obama has frequently delivered as first lady: the idea of transformation, of overcoming.

Unlike many commencement addresses that plead for students to have humility, this one encouraged them to swagger a bit. This was an ego-boosting, celebratory speech to kids for whom so much has seemed virtually impossible.

Obama will accompany the president to Normandy for ceremonies marking the 65th anniversary of the World War II D-Day landings. She has no separate public appearances scheduled as of yesterday, according to her spokeswoman Katie McCormick-Lelyveld. After the commemoration, the first couple is planning several personal days in Paris.