

Student's Initiative Brings First Lady to Commencement

Education

ADMINISTRATOR

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While perusing the White House's new Web site Jasmine Williams found a form for schools to submit to request First Lady Michelle Obama as keynote speaker at their commencement ceremonies.

Williams, a 19-year-old graduate of the Washington Mathematics Science Technology Public Charter High School (WMST) in Northeast, said she thought it would be a great idea to try and get Obama as the keynote speaker at her school's commencement exercises.

"I asked my principal [to request that the First Lady be the keynote speaker at our commencement] and I wrote a letter [to the First Lady]. He approved the letter and I asked him to write a letter to go along with mine. We sent it out President's Day weekend," said Williams, who lives in Northwest.

Mark Holbrook, principal at WMST, said he supported Williams' effort, but had previously invited Hampton University president William Harvey to be the keynote speaker. Harvey had accepted the invitation.

However, Holbrook penned a letter to Obama in support of his student's request.

"I'm thinking we have just about as much a chance of winning the lottery, but just as with the lottery, if you don't play, you don't win," Holbrook said.

Surprisingly, Holbrook said, he received a call from the Office of the First Lady in February to confirm receipt of the letter. However, the Office could not give him a definitive answer about Obama's availability since her schedule is not confirmed that far in advance.

"Most of the time you send correspondence or a letter to a lot of officials and they send you a letter back," Holbrook said.

"That's what kept me thinking that it might be possible -- because they called. But, still it's the First Lady -- she's a busy woman. We put positive thoughts out there, but did I think that we could guarantee that we would have the First Lady at our commencement? No," he said.

Williams explained to the First Lady, in her letter, how her American history classes at WMST closely followed the historic election of the first African American president and how she and President Barack Obama have inspired them.

"On June 3, 2009, we will stop being the kids who grew up in the city of Washington, D.C.," Williams wrote. "We will become adults who will face some of the hardest challenges since 1932. We will have to rely on common sense given to us by our families, the toughness we learned growing up in the conditions we did and 'that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes We Can.'"

"The world already has a pre-determined thought that our generation is full of criminals and concubines. Although this may be true of some of the people of our generation, there are still a lot of us that live above the influence and strive to be our best," Williams wrote in her letter to Obama.

The Office of the First Lady told Holbrook that they would get back with him to either accept or decline the invitation four weeks prior to the commencement, but Holbrook received the call that the First Lady would speak at their commencement on Fri., March 20.

Family, friends, and the graduating Class of 2009 waited anxiously inside Howard University's Cramton Auditorium in Northwest as the First Lady took her place at the podium to address graduates and guests.

"To all of you graduates, you are more than ready to assume the mantle of leadership and become the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs, leaders and legends," Obama said.



First Lady Michelle Obama accepts a token of appreciation from Jasmine Williams, a graduating senior from Washington Math Science Technical High School in Northeast. Williams wrote a letter to Obama requesting that she speak at their 2009 graduation ceremony on Wed., June 3. **Photo by Zelena Williams**