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**Sent:** Fri, 18 Jul 2014 09:49:11 -0400  
**From:** "Jarrett, Valerie" <valerie\_jarrett@who.eop.gov>  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Christi Parsons

Christi asked that I send you her piece.

Obama meets with single mom, 'the person we are working for'  
Los Angeles Times  
By Christi Parsons  
July 17, 2014

The paper was stamped "Back from the Oval," and though the scribbled note at the bottom wasn't signed, the loopy handwriting was clearly President Obama's.

"This is the person we are working for," Obama wrote, directing his aides' attention to Taneil Benjamin, a single mother in Delaware who is trying to put herself through school.

After reading an email that Benjamin wrote him last summer, Obama instructed his personal assistant to distribute a printout to all his senior advisors.

Obama sometimes asks his staff to look into specific problems that he learns about in letters from Americans, but he rarely shares the sheaf of personal notes he goes through every night.

Until recently, it was even rarer for him to meet those writers. But on Thursday, Obama bought burgers for himself and Benjamin at the Charcoal Pit, a popular eatery, during a trip to Wilmington, Del.

Obama has had meetings with letter writers recently. This summer he's had lunch with a working mom in Minnesota and coffee with a university student in Texas.

In her email, Benjamin told Obama of the difficulties of raising a 5-year-old daughter while working as a full-time personal banker and attending DeVry University.

She works six days a week at \$15 an hour, she wrote. After paying rent and child care, she barely makes ends meet. But she doesn't want to quit school.

Obama's critics dismiss the face-to-face meetings as political stunts. The president's aides say Obama wants to highlight how even working Americans are getting squeezed these days.

"His frustration is that people lose sight of how things are going for Taneil," said a senior advisor.

On July 7 last year, Benjamin, then 22, wasn't thinking about politics.

She was writing a journal entry, addressing it, as she often does, to a person she pictures before her as she writes.

Settling down with her laptop, sitting on her bed, she typed, "Mr. President ..."

"I am a single mother of one beautiful 5-year-old girl," she wrote. "I was married and divorced by the age of 16 ..."

She explained how she was working full time while also attending the university. She wanted a business and human resources degree.

"I do everything in my power to raise my daughter to be better than the person I used to be," she wrote.

But her rent was more than \$800 and her child-care expenses were sometimes more than that — on top of taxes and healthcare coverage withheld from her pay.

After applying for food stamps, she found that she earned too much to qualify.

"I can't imagine being out in the streets with my daughter," she wrote, "and I'm afraid that's what may happen."

As she closed her laptop, she remembered that she had the White House email address. After voting for Obama in 2012, her first election ever, she had signed up to get emails from the reelected president.

She pressed "send," and it made her feel a little better.

"I assumed he had a big staff of people who read his letters," she said. "I thought maybe someone might read it, and that made a difference to me."

On the other end, someone in the correspondence office picked it up through the "Contact Us" link at the White House website <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

It went into a file for the president's eyes only. About a month later, a printout was delivered to him with other letters in a crisp purple folder.

The next day, it came back down in the same folder, now lumpy from the president's sorting through the cards, pictures and envelopes.

White House staffer Anita Decker Breckenridge went through it and found the directive, "Copy to Senior Advisors." The letter went straight to Chief of Staff Denis McDonough. For days, people referred in meetings to Tane (pronounced tuh-NAY).

Fast-forward to this summer and the president's plan to meet some of his pen pals.

All three so far have been career-oriented women. That happens to be a key demographic for Democrats in the fall election.

When a visit to Wilmington showed up on the president's schedule, everyone knew who they'd pursue for lunch.

He told his staff he wanted a full hour with Benjamin, even though they were running behind schedule.

Benjamin picked at her burger because she was nervous at first.

But then they started talking about her letter, and about just what it was that touched the president when he read it.

He admired her commitment to finishing school, he told her.

He said it reminded him of his late mother, Ann Dunham, an ambitious student who for a time took government assistance to take care of her children while building her career.

"My letter made him think of his mom," Benjamin said afterward, "and about how she cared for him

as a child.”

As the president told the story, she said, she found herself getting choked up.

They parted with a hug, and Obama went to give a speech on infrastructure investment at the Port of Wilmington.

She said she watched him walk away, wondering if maybe her daughter, Arona, now 6, might have great things in her future too.

“She did it,” Benjamin said of Obama’s mother. “Maybe I can too.”

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