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Michelle Obama embarks on a new campaign: help for military families

By Nia-Malika Henderson
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NEW YORK - It started in North Carolina in the spring of 2007, when Michelle Obama was simply the spouse of a presidential candidate running second in a crowded field of Democrats.

She had been connecting with voters around tables in Iowa and New Hampshire, but it was in the Rainbow Room near the Fort Bragg Army base where the future first lady began to hear powerful stories of struggle and strength. In a banquet hall where families sent soldiers off to war, Obama heard about long deployments, frequent moves and the challenge of piecing together a family life post-combat.

Making it to the White House remained a long shot, but it was there that part of Obama's platform as a first lady began to take root.

At a speech here Thursday, Michelle Obama began a more public push on issues of concern to military families, presenting them to what was, in many ways, an unlikely civilian audience. Introduced by her husband, she spoke at the annual Clinton Global Initiative, a gathering that brings together philanthropists, corporate chiefs, government officials and nonprofit leaders to find charitable solutions to worldwide problems.

The first lady asked the assembled leaders to consider "the challenges faced by America's veterans and military families . . . particularly as they transition to civilian life." She urged them to hire veterans, touting their unique skills by ticking off stories of veterans who are rebuilding in Haiti, retrofitting buildings to make them green or volunteering for the Toys for Tots program.

"Whatever you're looking for, whether it's technical expertise or management abilityâ¦whether you're trying to lift a struggling community, or boost your bottom line . . . I'm asking you to reach out and engage our veterans and military spouses," she said. "I'm asking you to take advantage of their talent, their dedication, and their experience."

The recent end of the combat phase of the Iraq war means thousands of troops have returned home at a time of unusually high unemployment. Those numbers are expected to increase next year, when planned military withdrawals from Afghanistan begin.

With that in mind, while much of her public schedule has recently been dominated by her healthy living initiatives, privately Obama has been focusing on the concerns of military families and helping to frame those issues in the West Wing, White House aides said. She has hosted several small discussions with military families in the Old Family Dining Room in the White House, visited wounded soldiers and their families at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and called on the joint chief spouses.

"She is very committed and genuine in her care for military families," said Patricia Shinseki, whose husband, Eric, leads the Department of Veterans Affairs and has attended meetings with the first lady. "What I notice most is her desire to get the facts. It's a very strategic process, it's not just the superficial details."

White House aides said that the first lady's work with military families was very much in the president's mind when he decided on the budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs - he chose the highest of three options.

Introducing her Thursday, President Obama said, "At the end of each day, it is Michelle, her moral voice, her moral center that cuts through all the noise in Washington and reminds me of why I'm there in the first place."

Michelle Obama also took time to highlight her husband's commitment to veterans.

"He's worked to fund a 21st-century GI Bill which is helping nearly 300,000 veterans and their families get the education they need to fulfill their dreams," she said. "He's made veterans hiring a top priority in the federal government, hiring nearly 33,000 veterans in the first half of this fiscal year alone - an increase of 8 percent over last year."

In the administration, Michelle Obama has also found a partner in Jill Biden - whose stepson, Beau Biden, is in the Army National Guard. On military family issues, it has often been the second lady guiding the first, according to their aides.

During the presidential transition, the two women discussed the issues they would take on in the White House; both said they wanted to continue working on the concerns of military families. In recent months, they have made joint appearances before advocacy groups. More such visits are planned, as are public events.

"It was just a natural fit and a shared interest that has continued to grow and expand," Biden said by e-mail Thursday. "We are true partners in this effort and often talk about new ways to inspire communities, businesses and individuals to help."

After Biden and her husband got back from a trip to Iraq this summer, she and the first lady talked about the trip. Michelle Obama asked her to speak at a lunch with Senate spouses, Biden said. "We are constantly looking for ways to bring this issue to the forefront," she said.

But the first and second ladies face a country in many ways tired of war, with plenty of citizens long ago stripping the "Support Our Troops" magnets from their cars.

Given her focus on food and healthy eating, many expected that the first lady would bring that issue to the gathered corporate and global leaders. Indeed, she acknowledged that the veterans issue might seem "too uniquely American in scope for such a global audience here at CGI."

"But right now, the human potential of America's veterans and military families is both vast, and woefully under-utilized . . . and that's not just an issue for those individuals, or for this country," she told the gathering of corporate and nonprofit leaders, as former president Bill Clinton and Microsoft chairman Bill Gates looked on. "It also significantly impacts what you and so many others are trying to achieve . . . not just here in America, but around the world."

Aides to the first lady said that in the coming months she will focus more publicly on military issues, and look to launch an effort that is modeled on her anti-childhood obesity efforts.

Obama said she would use her platform and visibility to "spark not just a national conversation, but national action to give our vets and military spouses the opportunities they deserve."