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Charities Hope First Lady's Work on Obesity Is Just the Beginning

By Eden Stiffman



AMANDA LUCIDON, WHITE HOUSE

BEST FOOT FORWARD: Michelle Obama launched the Let's Move campaign in 2010 to promote healthy lifestyles among kids. Advocates say she directed much-needed attention to the issue of childhood obesity.

health might become one of her signature issues.

In February 2010, Ms. Obama launched the Let's Move campaign, encouraging a healthy lifestyle in children with the goal of eliminating childhood obesity within a generation.

The first lady planted a vegetable garden on the White House lawn, championed legislation to improve school lunches, and challenged TV-show hosts to on-air push-up contests, tweeting, Instagramming, and Facebooking along the way.

Obesity rates among children ages 2 to 5 fell from 14 percent in 2004 to 8 percent in 2012, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's impossible to know how much credit goes to Ms. Obama. Still, health experts and nonprofits leaders say there is no doubt that the media-savvy first lady helped move the needle.

"She has taken an issue that was a public-health concern and turned it into an understandable and urgent issue that every one of us can take action around," says Curt Ellis, chief executive of FoodCorps, a nonprofit AmeriCorps program that sends participants into schools to teach kids about healthy food, cooking, and gardening. "That's a huge accomplishment."

And it's just the beginning, according to those following Ms. Obama's work closely.

With her credibility as an Ivy League-educated lawyer and an African-American mother, an approval rating of 64 percent, and experience bringing together forces across sectors, the 52-year-old first lady is primed to do even more on this issue and others in the coming years.

"My hope is that she will take advantage of the opportunity to be outside the constraints of the day-to-day political realities of living in the White House to be as bold as possible in inspiring the growth of organizations, the change of policies, and the shifts in practice that would actually change the game for kids across the country," Mr. Ellis says.

Early Awareness

For years, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation President Risa Lavizzo-Mourey and other public-health experts watched, alarmed, as the country's accelerating childhood-obesity epidemic received scant attention from policy makers.

In 2005, Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey met Michelle Obama, then the vice president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she was responsible for forging community relationships to improve people's health. The foundation leader paid the hospital administrator a visit, and over a nearly two-hour conversation it became clear that Ms. Obama knew the issues well and was passionate about finding solutions.

Ms. Obama was pursuing the issue both as a working mother and as someone who understood that lack of access to healthy food and places to play could dramatically reduce children's opportunities, Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey recalls. The conversation left such an impression on the foundation chief that four years later, she and her Robert Wood Johnson colleagues reached out to the new first lady to ask whether children's

The seeds of the Let's Move campaign were planted in the Obamas' Chicago home when Barack Obama was still the junior senator from Illinois. As working parents, the Obamas found it challenging to feed their daughters the foods they needed to stay healthy. After the family's pediatrician warned that Sasha and Malia needed to watch their weight, the Obamas started eating out less often and paying closer attention to portion sizes and snack choices. They hired Chicago chef and family friend Sam Kass to help ensure they were getting nourishing food on their plates.

Once in the White House, Ms. Obama convened some of the foremost experts on childhood health and nutrition to help craft her approach to the campaign against child obesity. The resulting drive's five pillars involve creating a healthy start for children, empowering parents and caregivers to help kids make lifestyle changes, providing healthy food in schools, improving access to affordable healthy foods, and increasing physical activity.

"We were extremely gratified when we saw that she was going to make it one of her major projects," says Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey, whose foundation — the nation's largest focused solely on health — has now pledged \$1 billion to ensuring that more children have the chance to grow up at a healthy weight.

Mr. Kass was there, too: He had followed the family to Washington as an assistant White House chef and became an influential voice on nutrition. He soon became the first executive director of the Let's Move campaign and the president's senior adviser on nutrition policy.

The White House vegetable garden, something he helped create, was a way to take the temperature of Americans' interest in these issues, Mr. Kass says. "After we saw the overwhelmingly positive response to the garden, we knew it was the right issue at the right time."

OBAMA WHITE HOUSE PROVES A WELL-WORN PATH TO THE NONPROFIT WORLD

Many veterans of President Obama's two terms in office have assumed leadership positions at foundations and charities. Here's a look at where they've landed:

ARNE DUNCAN

Former secretary of education

Now: managing partner, Emerson Collective

KATHLEEN SEBELIUS

Former secretary of Health and Human Services

Now: a trustee, the Estée Lauder Foundation and the Kaiser Family Foundation; also, a senior adviser to Out Leadership and the Aspen Institute

MELODY BARNES

Former assistant to the president and director of the White House Domestic Policy Council

Now: chair, Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions

JANE LUBCHENCO

Former administrator National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Now: a trustee, Packard Foundation and the Nature Conservancy

SONAL SHAH

Former deputy assistant to the president

Now: executive director, Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, Georgetown University

DANIEL ASHE

Former director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Now: president, Association of Zoos and Aquariums

MELANCA CLARK

Former chief of staff, U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services

Now: president, Hudson-Webber Foundation

BRUCE REED

Former chief of staff to Vice President Joe Biden

Served as president of the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation

RUTH LEVINE

Former deputy assistant administrator, US. Agency for International Development

Now: program director, Hewlett Foundation

GARY LOCKE

Former secretary of commerce

Now: a trustee, PATH

JOHN GOMPERS

Former director, AmeriCorps

Now: president, America's Promise Alliance

Now: president, America's Promise Alliance

MICHELE JOLIN

Former White House senior adviser for social innovation

Now: chief executive, Results for America

KRISTEN JARVIS

Former special assistant to first lady Michelle Obama

Now: chief of staff to Ford Foundation President Darren Walker

XAVIER DE SOUZA BRIGGS

Former associate director, U.S. Office of Management and Budget

Now: director of economic opportunity, Ford Foundation

NICKY GOREN

Former acting chief executive, Corporation for National and Community Service

Now: president, Meyer Foundation

RUSSLYNN ALI

Former assistant secretary for civil rights, U.S. Department of Education

Now: chief executive officer of the XQ Institute

PETER ORSZAG

Former director, Office of Management and Budget

Now: a trustee, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

But Mr. Kass and Ms. Obama were aware of the challenges — political and otherwise — the issue presented.

Not unlike the president's efforts to improve educational and economic outcomes for young black men and boys, Ms. Obama's focus on childhood obesity showed the administration's willingness to tackle complex issues, said Robert Ross, a physician and president of the California Endowment.

"Those are two big, thorny, complex issues," he says. "Both of them defy any silver-bulleted, elegant policy fix. They both require a comprehensive public-private strategy."

But the first lady has proved her effectiveness in harnessing the power of the bully pulpit to support such partnerships, Dr. Ross says. This administration has been willing to look these "thorny, hairy issues in the eye and say 'OK, how can we pragmatically take this one?'"

A Nonprofit Future

Michelle Obama's work from the East Wing lent energy to an effort already taking shape among a network of foundations working to address childhood-obesity issues: the creation of the Partnership for a Healthier America, a nonprofit focused on creating change through the private sector.

A group of grant makers, including the California Endowment, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and several health-care systems came together in 2010 to create the organization, which operates independently of the Let's Move campaign but shares many of the same long-term goals. The partnership works to emphasize to American families and businesses the importance of providing more healthy, affordable nutrition options. It uses celebrity-driven marketing campaigns and publicly tracks food companies' commitments, holding them accountable through regular progress evaluations.

From the start, the charity's leaders understood that solving the childhood-obesity crisis would take much longer than any presidential term. Two years ago, they began working with Bridgespan to plan for a future without an Obama White House, says executive director Larry Soler. Even without the first lady, who serves as the organization's honorary chairwoman, he believes the efforts she championed are now sustainable in the long term.

Ms. Obama "really brought the energy to make this movement happen at the beginning," he says. Now, as consumers are taking the lead, the organization is "positioned to continue the work until the problem is solved."

Lifelong Commitment

At Partnership for a Healthier America's summit in May, Ms. Obama made her future intentions known: "I'm in this for life. I'm in this until we fix this."

"The truth is that it actually doesn't matter where I'm sitting eight months from now," she added. "While next year I will no longer be first lady, I just want you to know that I will always be here as a partner in this effort. ... I was passionate about this issue long before I became first lady, and I plan to work on it long after I leave the White House."

Nonprofit leaders are pleased.

Mr. Soler declined to comment on the specifics of Ms. Obama's future role but does say, "It's going to be a huge asset to the work that we're doing to have her continue to be involved."

For her part, Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey, whose foundation upped its original \$500 million commitment to tackle obesity to \$1 billion through 2025, says she's thrilled the first lady will continue to advocate for this cause.

"The messages that Let's Move has championed over the last almost eight years have really changed the way people — especially women — talk and think about this," she says.

Ms. Obama's impact has been pervasive in changing the way Americans think about food, though in many cases, the public might not be aware of where she's left her mark, says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies Library. He sees a strong similarity with only one other recent presidential spouse: Lady Bird Johnson, who traveled the country planting wildflowers and spurred an unprecedented national dialogue about the importance of environmental conservation through beautification projects.

Mr. Anthony sees Ms. Obama as both a substantive and a symbolic voice on the subject. Her time in the East Wing has been concurrent with an overall greater awareness of issues surrounding our food supply — a trend mirrored by foundation and donor spending on the issue.

Mr. Kass, the Let's Move campaign's first executive director, believes it's possible to make great strides against obesity. "If we get a real long-term, deep investment in resources — and the nonprofit and philanthropic world plays a major part — we could really solve this problem, and a lot of other issues would start to work themselves out," he says.

"We have something that we can really leverage and take to the next level once they leave office," Mr. Kass says. "And I think she will continue to be one of the most outspoken, high-profile leaders these issues have."

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