

Obamas updating first family's image

By Mimi Hall and Maria Puente, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — He carries a smartphone on his hip, goes out for burgers and plays pickup hoops. She goes to their daughters' soccer games, works in the garden and loves listening to her iPod. Together, they host poets, artists and musicians at their house and invite neighborhood kids to drop by.

Their kids, meanwhile, go to birthday parties, romp around with their new dog and get spoiled by Grandma.

Sounds like a lot of families — but this is the nation's first family.

"The Obamas have changed the culture of the White House," says Dee Dee Myers, President Clinton's first press secretary.

President Obama may not have delivered on all the policy changes he promised since his election a year ago, but he and his family have brought dramatic social change to the nation's capital and to the country's collective image of its first family — and not just because they're the first African Americans in charge at the White House.

The contrast with recent presidents is clear: George W. Bush had older kids, went to bed early, headed for his Texas ranch as often as he could and presided over a White House tightly buttoned down after the 9/11 attacks. Bill Clinton had his own reasons to stay low-key after the Monica Lewinsky scandal began in his second term.

"The Obamas' White House is the most open for cultural and intellectual activities since the Kennedy administration," says Douglas Brinkley, author and presidential historian at Rice University in Houston. "It's not simply a matter of doing events of statecraft and cultural gravitas. They have a great flair for American pop culture."

That the Obamas are a couple in step with the world around them is evident almost daily, whether the first lady — a term that seems particularly archaic for a 45-year-old mom and Ivy League-educated lawyer — is touting the benefits of organic food or the 48-year-old president is admitting on TV that he hasn't done a good enough job handling his share of the child-care duties.

Political observers of both parties say it generally works to the president's benefit. The polls bear this out. Although majorities now oppose the way Obama is handling issues from health care to Afghanistan, his overall approval rating has stayed at 50% or higher in Gallup's daily survey.

"He has a genuinely appealing personality and his staff understands that and he understands that," conservative commentator Tucker Carlson says. "Talking about his life is effective."

Myers says the Obamas probably know the image they project — hip and multicultural but also casual and down-to-earth — helps forge positive connections with the American people.

Whether it's Michelle Obama's easy J.Crew style or her husband's obsession with sports, most people can relate. "It works for them because it's authentic," Myers says.

The connections can be felt when it comes to:

Gadgets and technology

Following on the most tech-savvy campaign in history, the White House has a blog, a Twitter feed, a Facebook page and Flickr photostream, and it livestreams the president's appearances.

The Obamas also are personally connected. On NBC's *Jay Leno Show*, Michelle Obama told the host last month, "I love my iPod."

She said she has a "pretty eclectic" lineup on it, from soul and hip hop singer Mary J. Blige to jazz master Herbie Hancock.

The president has his own iPod and, despite early objections from lawyers and the Secret Service, he is the first commander in chief to use a smartphone.

"I've won the fight!" the delighted BlackBerry-addicted Obama told reporters on his second day in office.

Physical fitness

Obama is hardly the first president to try to stay fit. Ronald Reagan rode horses, George W. Bush went mountain biking and Bill Clinton, in a perennial battle with his weight, jogged.

But the Obamas may be the first first couple to work out together and make fitness a focus of their message and politicking.

Together, they play tennis (Michelle complained to Leno that it's annoying when her husband wins) and work out in the White House gym at 5:30 a.m., before breakfast with Malia, 11, and Sasha, 8. On his own, Obama plays golf and hosts basketball games with friends, staff and members of Congress from both political parties.

Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library in Ohio, says presidents often use sports to send a message, get to know fellow politicians and size up friends and foes.

For the first lady, captured on video hula-hooping on the South Lawn recently, exercising is part of her main message to youths: Eat right and stay in shape.

Family matters

"The big change is that kids are back in the White House," says Doug Wead, a staffer in George H.W. Bush's White House and author of *All the President's Children*.

Not since a roller-skating Amy Carter left marks on the East Room floor in the 1970s has the public been treated to stories of young children in the East and West wings.

The Bush twins had gone off to college when George W. and Laura Bush moved into 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., and Chelsea Clinton was almost a teenager when her father's first term began.

The Obamas have insisted that the news media leave Malia and Sasha pretty much alone. That doesn't mean they're sheltering the girls from view.

Last month, the White House released a new family photo taken by photographer Annie Leibovitz. The girls also have been photographed touring Paris and Moscow, bicycling on Martha's Vineyard and frolicking with their puppy, Bo.

The president and first lady also make it a point to do things that other parents do, when they can. Both go to the girls' school for parent-teacher conferences; both have been seen on the sidelines at Saturday soccer games.

Washington resident Marjorie Kask remembers arriving at her son's Little League game one Saturday last spring to find the field's small parking lot crammed with big black SUVs.

Kask says it never dawned on her that the vehicles could be carrying one of the Obamas. She was "a little annoyed" — until she got up to the field and saw Michelle Obama, holding Bo on a leash, watching Malia play soccer.

"It was really cool," says Kask, 28, whose 8-year-old son, Christopher, was playing baseball on a nearby field. "Every weekend, I hoped we'd see them again."

Such outings help humanize the first family, says Ann Stock, social secretary in the Clinton White House. "It's fun for people to see what the kids are doing and fun to see the president and first lady going to the soccer games," she says.

For the first time in a generation — since Harry Truman lived with his mother-in-law, Madge Wallace — the first family is also an extended one. Michelle Obama's mom, Marian Robinson, moved in on Inauguration Day. Robinson told *Essence* magazine in May that she's enjoying life in the White House because "my children are good parents. It makes it very easy to be a grandmother when your children are good parents."

A return to socializing

Almost as soon as they moved into the White House, the Obamas began entertaining.

They've invited local schoolchildren in for performances, hosted a poetry slam and put on a varied set of musical performances. The Mexican-American rock band Los Lobos played on the South Lawn; Motown legend Stevie Wonder played the East Room. Others who've performed at the White House in the past nine months: the rock band The Foo Fighters, jazz pianist Diana Krall and pop star Fergie.

"The Reagan White House had a great flair for black-tie events," Brinkley says. "They brought old-style elegance back to the White House, but the entertainment was usually of a dated variety."

Myers says the music represents a big change even from the more recent Bush years.

"I don't think the Bushes ever felt old to anybody, but there is a sense of a generational shift," she says. George and Laura Bush, now 63 and 62 respectively, weren't much older than the Obamas when they were in the White House, but "this is a president who seems more interested in and connected to pop culture. Not that Stevie Wonder is exactly up-to-the-minute music, but it's not Guy Lombardo either."

Unlike the Bushes, who typically turned in at 9 p.m., the Obamas also like to go out — a lot. Their destinations don't include Georgetown parties with Washington's elite.

The president and the first lady readily admit they love a good burger. His motorcade has taken him to at least three local joints in the past year, including the Washington landmark Ben's Chili Bowl, famous for its \$5.20 half-smokes. Michelle Obama has been to Five Guys, known for its freshly made burger patties and peanut shells on the floor.

The first couple also go out to fancy date-night dinners at high-end restaurants. In a move that some critics called extravagant during a recession, the president made good on a campaign promise to his wife and took her to New York City to see a Broadway play in May. The couple went to dinner and saw August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, a play set in the early 20th century about the lives of freed slaves.

The Republican National Committee issued a press release calling it inappropriate for the Obamas to jet off to New York City at a time when "families across America continue to struggle to pay their bills."

But "I don't think the public perceives that kind of thing negatively," says David Jackson, a Bowling Green State University professor who specializes in the intersection of politics and pop culture. "They're young, they're married, they go out."

When they do go out, Michelle Obama usually makes headlines on the fashion pages. Her signature look — slim sheath, bare arms, cinched waist, flat shoes, brooches — has now spread to retailers across the land.

Wead says the fact that the Obamas are black is, of course, the biggest social and cultural shift of all.

"Our most prominent social creatures are president and Mrs. Obama and the fact they happen to be African American has huge ramifications," he says. "No matter how quickly we've adjusted, it's still, from a historical standpoint, a huge, gigantic event that will take many, many years" to process.

"After all, some of our founders were slave owners. To have an African American in the White House. ... You have to go (back) to something like the moonwalk to find something that equals the significance."