

Granny diplomacy

When a mother-in-law moves in, it's an adjustment for everyone (even a president)

By Beth Teitell Boston Globe
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As if Barack Obama hasn't already pulled off enough firsts, he's on record hoping - hoping! - that his own mother-in-law will move into the White House.

"I don't tell my mother-in-law what to do. I'm not stupid - that's why I got elected president, man," he told Steve Kroft of "60 Minutes." "But we hope that she comes."

What to make of this? Is he taking this "team of rivals" business to a whole new level? Does he want an in-house check on executive power? Or maybe it's a gift from No Drama Obama to comedy writers and voters still in withdrawal from Tina Fey's Sarah Palin. It's delicious, isn't it, to imagine Michelle Obama's mother, Marian Robinson, swanning around the West Wing in a caftan - a la Endora from "Bewitched" - haranguing Obama about how poorly he's running the country.

But with the clock ticking down to Inauguration Day, the question looms: Will she or won't she?

Robinson, 71, a widow, did retire from her part-time bank job to care for her granddaughters Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, during the campaign, but whether she'll move from Chicago into the White House has become a favorite Washington parlor game. With excitement surrounding the Cabinet appointments waning since the big ones like State and Treasury were filled, cocktail party speculation has shifted to Robinson.

Predictify.com is running a poll (about 70 percent think she'll move in). A petition on the Huffington Post urges the First Granny to come along. "We the undersigned," it reads, "want to let Marion [sic] Robinson know that the American people support her presence in the Obama White House."

She wouldn't be the first mother-in-law to take up residence. Mamie Eisenhower's mother, the formidable Elvira Doud, wintered there when her son-in-law, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was in office, and reportedly liked to call her daughter from bed. Bess Truman's mother, Madge Gates Wallace, not only lived in, but took the opportunity to belittle her son-in-law, President Harry S. Truman.

"She never accepted the fact that her daughter married someone from a lower social class and wealth than their own family," Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies' Library, wrote in an e-mail to the Globe. "She frequently carped to her daughter about Truman's decisions - but when she asked why 'Harry' fired 'that nice man,' Mrs. Truman gave it back - 'My husband happens to be President and General MacArthur was insubordinate!'"

Grace Coolidge's mother, Lemira Barrett Goodhue, disliked Calvin Coolidge, Anthony added, and seemed a living embodiment of the old joke that behind every successful man is a mother-in-law who said he'd never make it.

"She always credited her daughter's natural warmth and extroverted personality as the reason for his rise in politics," Anthony wrote. If Robinson does move in, the Obamas will be entering into a living arrangement similar to that of a growing number of Americans - albeit with more bathrooms. In 2007, 3.6 million parents, or 1.2 percent of the population, were living in an adult child's home, according to US Census Bureau figures.

That's up from 2000, when 2.3 million parents, or .8 percent of the population, were living in an adult child's house.

The benefits of such arrangements are many. Grandparents can provide live-in child care, bunking together is less expensive, adult children can help frail parents. But proximity is not without stress, experts say, and disagreements over how to raise the children and spend resources, and a lack of privacy, are common issues, according to Andrew Cherlin, a professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University.

Indeed, Robinson freely admitted to the Globe in March that she didn't agree with the Obamas's TV and bedtime rules for their children. "That's ridiculous!" she said of the 8:30 p.m. suggested bedtime, adding that an hour of TV is "just not enough time." During the campaign, she also balked at serving the girls only healthy food. "That's not my thing," she said. "Well, see, I grew up when you had good food, right? I can't change that at this late day and time."

Disagreements over fried food aside, observers predict a smooth relationship between the Obamas and Robinson should they end up housemates. Indeed, the touching photo of Obama and his mother-in-law holding hands on a couch as they watched election-night returns was the shot seen in mother-in-law suites around the world.

Even if Robinson doesn't move in, her much-lauded child-care contributions during the campaign - and her plans to move to Washington, D.C., even if it's in her own place - have already turned her into a poster granny.

"It's about time that it's acknowledged that we as a society value this incredible contribution that grandparents can make," said Amy Goyer, AARP's online expert on grandparenting, and senior vice president for outreach at Grandparents.com.

Goyer said she hopes Robinson can help dispel some erroneous stereotypes. "Grandparents are either the comical figure in sitcoms, or an insignificant member of the family," she said, but in reality, they often provide financial assistance and child care. She pointed to Census figures from 2000 showing that 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for the basic needs of grandchildren who live with them in their homes.

Despite the monologues Robinson's potential move sparked - "Barack Obama's mother-in-law might be moving into the White House with him," Jay Leno said. "See, Joe Biden was right. 'Hostile forces will test him in the first few months' " - new research by British psychologist Terri Apter found that the relationship between female in-laws can be far more tense than the one between a man and his wife's mother.

That point was seemingly supported by Sarah Palin's mother-in-law, Faye Palin, who said during the campaign she didn't know if she'd vote for her daughter-in-law.

"I'm not sure what she brings to the ticket," Faye Palin said of her daughter-in-law, "other than she's a woman and a conservative."

Meanwhile, as moving day grows closer, regular sons- and mothers-in-law offered the first family advice.

"Listen to what your mother-in-law says," Russ Macomber, 42, of Brockton, suggested to the president-elect, as he ran a bowling tournament at Ron's Gourmet Ice Cream & 20th Century Lanes, in Hyde Park. "Don't ignore her."

That counsel sounded about right to Dolores Nabauns, 62, a Dorchester mother-in-law. "Give advice," she said as she shopped at the Prudential Center, "but don't say 'I'm the boss.' "