

Letters to Michelle Obama collected into a book
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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) - One letter is signed ``with a grateful heart."

``When I look at you, I see me," reads another.

The letters, solicited by two University at Buffalo scholars soon after the election, have been compiled into a book, ``Go, Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady," just in time for Tuesday's inauguration.

Many in the collection of 100 letters share a universal theme. Paine College President Shirley A.R. Lewis expressed it this way: ``Thank you for being such a vital part of this dream that I never thought I'd see in my lifetime."

Women of all ages and backgrounds responded to an Internet call for messages and poems, said the editors, themselves black women. No surprise, given their own feelings of exuberance through the campaign and election.

``I felt such a sisterhood with Michelle Obama and a kinship," said Barbara Seals Nevergold. ``At the end of the election, I started to think, how can we as African-American women share with her our feelings about the new role she's going to take?"

Nevergold and Peggy Books-Bertram, co-founders of the Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education on Women at the University at Buffalo, said more than 200 women responded within the narrow three-week window for submissions. Letters not included in the book will be posted online.

Some read like letters to an old friend. One compliments the incoming first lady for the red and black dress she wore on Election Night.

Others more reserved:

``It is noticeable that you are a charming, loving and intelligent woman of great integrity who knows how to set her priorities."

Most start simply, ``Dear Michelle."

In Michelle Obama, Nevergold said, many see the new face of black women in America.

``Here you have a black woman who is highly educated, who is very comfortable in who she is, who exudes self confidence, just represents African-American women at our best," Nevergold said. ``So the idea that she is going to portray an image of black women that will stand to offset the negative stereotypes is something that women really expressed."

Wrote Lori Jones, of Bowie, Md.: ``For all the history you and Barack have and will continue to make, one of the simplest and most treasured is your showing the world the face of black America; the beautiful, faithful, accomplished, nurturing, caring, loving, smart, strong and moral face of black America.

``What a wonderful picture you have drawn for the world," Jones wrote.

The book's title invokes the Negro spiritual ``Go, Tell It on the Mountain." The book's powerful opening poem, ``We in Anticipation of You," by Rochester writer Arlette Miller Smith, pays tribute to the slaves and activists who eased the path for black women today.

Many writers ``felt that we needed to have Michelle remember where we all had come from," Brooks-Bertram said, ``so the journey, the African-American women's journey in this country, from Africa to this country, was spelled out in many, many ways."

Submissions came not only from the United States, but from Kenya, South Africa, the Caribbean and beyond. The book was published by State University of New York Press.

On the Net:

Uncrowned Queens Institute: <http://wings.buffalo.edu/uncrownedqueens>
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