

Malia and Sasha's big move

As the Obama girls get ready to move into the White House, their parents must decide how to help them live in the fishbowl of the presidency.

By Faye Fiore and Geraldine Baum
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Reporting from Washington and New York -- One of the few times Barack Obama lost his famous cool during the presidential campaign was the day photographers got too close as he walked his youngest daughter, who was dressed as a corpse bride, to a Halloween party near their Chicago home. "You've got a shot. Leave us alone," Obama barked.

The moment revealed Obama's ambivalence even as he prepared to move his daughters -- Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7 -- into the fishbowl known as the American presidency: when to share them with the country and when to snap the curtains shut.



As the youngest children to occupy the White House since the Kennedys', the Obama daughters -- or Rosebud and Radiance, as the Secret Service dubs them -- are poised to serve a dual role in America's new first family. They humanize a future president seen by some as aloof, while presenting an image of vitality to a nation mired in economic despair.

Already, there is talk of sleepovers, bedroom makeovers, soccer balls and a hypoallergenic puppy at a White House that for years has seemed cloistered and off-limits. Glimpses of the girls fidgeting and yawning as their parents voted on election day, or kissing the president-elect goodbye as he dropped them off at school offered a point of personal connection with everyday Americans, whether or not they voted for Obama.

But sharing his daughters with the country exposes them to the harsh scrutiny that has plagued first families since the nation's founding, ever more pervasive in today's relentless news cycle and often-vicious blogosphere.

Past presidents took varied approaches. The Clintons virtually hid Chelsea, who was 12 when she came to the White House, from mass media exposure. Over the objections of his wife, President Kennedy beckoned photographers into his children's lives; Jackie was out of town when the celebrated under-the-desk photograph of John Jr. was taken.

The Obamas have signaled they will land somewhere in between, allowing discreet peeks at a family life that includes Uno tournaments and charades, bike rides and a lot of reading aloud. (Malia and her father cracked the Harry Potter series together.) But most of it will be presented with images, narration and little direct access. "Right now they're not self-conscious . . . they don't have an attitude," Obama said of his daughters in a "60 Minutes" interview that aired Sunday, calling their well-being "one of my greatest worries."

"If at the end of four years, just from a personal standpoint, we can say they are who they are -- they remain the great joys that they are -- and this hasn't created a whole bunch of problems for them, then I think we're going to feel pretty good."

Obama has struggled throughout his political life to reconcile his ambition and his children, often lamenting missed soccer games and family dinners. When he couldn't attend one of Sasha's dance recitals -- 20 6-year-olds in red cowboy hats tapping to "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" -- he was "broken up about it," Michelle Obama recently told the Associated Press.

Friends portray the Obamas as protective parents, the family closely knit despite his grueling schedule. As Illinois' junior senator, he spent workdays at the Capitol and evenings in a spare one-bedroom apartment writing his books. On weekends he returned to the family's \$1.6-million home on Chicago's South Side and cocooned with his children. On the campaign trail, aides say, he called them every night, sometimes by webcam, flew home to pick up the Christmas tree and never missed a parent-teacher conference.

"Books are a huge bonding between him and his daughters," said Ann Walker Marchant, a friend of the Obamas and a former special assistant to President Clinton. Marchant predicted children's literature will find a shelf in the Oval Office. She recalled vacationing with the Obamas on Martha's Vineyard when Sasha asked her father, hoarse from the campaign trail, to read to her. "He could hardly speak but as long as she wanted him to read, he read."

Because young families rarely occupy the White House, the Obamas beg comparison to the Kennedys. Caroline and John Jr. -- 3 years and 10 weeks old when they moved in, respectively -- reinforced the fresh, youthful image that defined their father's presidency.

But in many ways, the two families could not be more different, one shaped by an elite pedigree and the other by hard work and an absent father. It's difficult to imagine Michelle Obama -- who mixes designer dresses with off-the-rack J. Crew -- ordering her children's coats from a London fashion house as Jackie Kennedy did, or letting a pony named Macaroni graze on the South Lawn.

"These children have not been raised by nannies, they don't have a summer home and they don't ride ponies," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies' Library, noting that the extravagances of the Kennedy era would not set well in today's struggling economy. "In a democracy, these children cannot be treated too much like little princesses because the public will have an adverse reaction."

The Kennedys had a nanny and a nurse; the Obamas have grandma -- Marian Robinson, 71, who plans to move to Washington as baby-sitter in chief, though it has not been decided whether she will live at the White House. (Obama's position: "She sure can if she wants to.") Her Chicago

apartment was the girls' second home after she retired as a bank secretary, freeing daughter Michelle Obama to expand her campaigning beyond day trips.

Inside a White House staffed with servants, the future first lady is expected to set a casual tone, where her daughters can pour themselves a bowl of cereal or a glass of milk. It is unlikely that the girls will escape their chores, which include making their beds and setting their own alarms.

"We want to make sure that we're upholding what that house stands for. But I couldn't help but envisioning the girls running into their rooms and running down the hall and -- with a dog," Michelle Obama said on "60 Minutes." "Our hope is that the White House will feel open and fun and full of life and energy."

A working parent through most of her motherhood -- Michelle Obama was a hospital executive until her husband ran for president -- she is not one to fuss over swatches and sterling. She has chosen as her signature causes work-family balance and military families, and envisions herself more as mom in chief than first lady. But her first priority is to settle her children into life in the White House. On her recent tour with Laura Bush, Michelle Obama scouted out a room where the kids could "just flop," an aide said. They will play in a children's garden walled off from public view, and add their handprints in cement to those of previous occupants such as Amy Carter, Chelsea Clinton and the Bush twins.

But this is Washington, after all, and everyone wants a piece of the new first family -- so frenzied jockeying among schools and soccer teams is well underway. Last week after touring the White House with the Bushes, Michelle Obama visited two private schools: Chelsea Clinton's alma mater Sidwell Friends School and Georgetown Day School, which became Washington's first integrated private school in 1945. She's also looking at the Maret School, not far from the White House.

For all of the potential pitfalls, there is one great advantage: The White House is the ultimate home office and the Obama family will spend more time together under one roof than they have in years. "I envision the kids coming home from school and being able to run across the way to the Oval Office and see their dad before they start their homework," Michelle Obama said in the "60 Minutes" interview. "And having breakfast. And he'll be there to tuck them in at night."

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