

TRIMMING THE FAT

First Lady tackles a weighty issue

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FIRST LADIES WITH A CAUSE

A look at campaigns of past first ladies:

Dolley Madison: Helped found orphanage for girls, donated a cow to provide milk and helped sew uniforms.

Mary Todd Lincoln: An ardent abolitionist, she worked to provide housing, jobs and medical care for freed slaves.

Helen "Nellie" Taft: Pushed for health and safety standards for federal workplaces.

Florence Harding: An outspoken advocate for the humane treatment of animals.

Eleanor Roosevelt: Spoke out on behalf of homeless, hungry, unemployed, labour unions, women, coal miners, European refugees, African-Americans and soldiers in World War II.

Jacqueline Kennedy: Promoted historic preservation of the White House.

Lady Bird Johnson: Promoted rural and urban environmentalism and national parks conservation.

Nancy Reagan: Promoted drug education and awareness.

Barbara Bush: Focused attention on eradicating illiteracy.

Hillary Rodham Clinton: Crusaded for health-care reform.

Laura Bush: Worked to promote reading and education.

Source: National First Ladies' Library (www.firstladies.org) and its historian, Carl Anthony

WASHINGTON—By now, it is abundantly clear that Michelle Obama loves french fries.

The First Lady talks about this "guilty pleasure" all the time, trying to ward off any notion that she is a nutrition nanny even as she cajoles Americans to eat better.

Now, her conversation with the public about health and fitness is about to get a lot more pointed.

After laying the groundwork for nearly a year, she launches a campaign Tuesday against childhood obesity that she hopes will change the way millions of Americans eat, exercise, look and feel.

To succeed, she will have to take on powerful forces that have left one-third of children overweight:

- Busy parents who hit the fast-food drive-thru rather than cook a balanced dinner.
- Schools where cafeteria meals compete with vending machines and à la carte lines stocked with pop and candy bars.
- Food companies that spend billions hawking fatty snacks to kids.
- Poor neighbourhoods where nary a banana nor a bunch of broccoli can be found on store shelves.
- The screens – computer, TV, video – that keep kids off their bikes.

The First Lady's goal is ambitious: to put the U.S. on track to solve the childhood obesity problem in a generation. It's a far cry from the days when Dolley Madison, the first first lady to

associate herself with a specific cause, helped found a home for orphaned girls.

"Thank God it's not going to be solely up to me," Obama said recently, stressing that the solution will require stepped-up effort from parents, schools, businesses, non-profit groups, health professionals and governments.

To underscore that point, she's bringing together cabinet members, mayors, sports and entertainment figures, business leaders and more to announce the details of the administration's effort. That will involve promoting healthier schools, increasing physical activity for kids, improving access to healthy foods and giving people more nutrition information.

Health advocates couldn't be happier to have Obama adopting childhood obesity as her cause. They're also keenly aware of how difficult the problem will be to solve.

"You don't just go from epidemic obesity to epidemic leanness," says obesity expert Dr. David Katz, director of Yale University's Prevention Research Center.

Still, Katz says, Obama can provide the inspiration to help "shift the massive momentum of our society in the right direction."

Lofty goals have come and gone before. A decade ago, the government's "Healthy People" program set a 2010 target that just 5 per cent of children would be overweight. The most updated figures, released last month, weighed in at 32 per cent for 2007-2008. The childhood obesity rate has at least held steady in recent years but at levels that still leave today's children on track to die younger than their parents.

The First Lady has prepared for the obesity campaign by studying briefing papers, consulting with legislators and policy experts, and speaking about the challenges that overstressed parents face in doing right by their children. And, famously, by hula hooping on the South Lawn to promote the need to get kids moving.

She says she spent the past year figuring out how to talk about all of this "in a way that doesn't make already overstressed, anxious parents feel even more guilty about a very hard thing."

That's where the french fries come in, part of the First Lady's message that nobody's perfect and that there's plenty of wiggle room in a healthy diet.

The First Lady said last month she won't be satisfied unless she knows she's made a difference.

"That's the legacy I want," she said. "I want to leave something behind that we can say, because of this time that this person spent here, this thing has changed."