

# The Fayetteville Observer

## **First lady praises city for its support of military families**

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First lady Michelle Obama urged people in cities and towns across the country to follow Fayetteville's example of reaching out to military families, an example she praised repeatedly Thursday during a nine-minute speech downtown.

Obama said military families bear a heavy burden and deserve to have the load lightened by the rest of us.

She said she saw that burden on the campaign trail when talking to families, such as those who shuffle their lives to take care of a soldier's child when the soldier is deployed.

Help for those families can come from Washington in the form of better education, child-care or job training opportunities, or from a neighbor offering something as simple as a day of carpool duty, she said.

"Our soldiers and their families have done their duty," Obama said. "We as a grateful nation must do ours."

Speaking to a crowd of more than 100 at the Arts Center on Hay Street, Obama recognized some of Fayetteville's military support organizations, such as Fayetteville Cares. The group threw a baby shower last year for 1,000 pregnant military spouses that garnered national attention. More than 30 military support organizations were represented at the invitation-only setting.

"Fayetteville clearly does watch over those who watch over us," Obama said.

Obama encouraged everyone to find out if there's a soldier or a soldier's family in their hometown, and to see what they can do to help.

"There are servicemen and women, as I speak, they're standing watch to provide security for our daily lives," she said. "Never take the blessing of freedom for granted."

Thursday marked Obama's third visit to Fayetteville in the past year, and her first solo trip outside of Washington, D.C., since she became first lady.

She has said helping military families is one of her top three priorities.

Maria Dove was part of a group of military spouses Obama met with last year on Fort Bragg. She said she told Obama then how frequent deployments hurt families, and she felt like Obama took the message to heart.

The whole room, including Obama, was in tears during that meeting, Dove said.

Dove sat in the back row of the Arts Center during Obama's speech Thursday, and afterward praised the first lady's message.

"It's wonderful for the military to actually have a voice there in Washington," Dove said.

Wesley Bauguess was invited because of her work as president of the 82nd Airborne Division Wounded Warrior Committee. Her group gives items to soldiers who come back injured from war zones.

Obama's plea to Americans to reach out to wounded soldiers and the families of fallen soldiers hit home with Bauguess, a war widow herself. Her group has about 40 members, and all of them are military spouses or military widows, she said. And it's work that anyone could do.

"I think at the very least she can raise the awareness," Bauguess said.

Fayetteville's first lady, Joanne Chavonne, spoke about the ways Fayetteville supports its soldiers and airmen before Obama came on stage. Chavonne, wife of Mayor Tony Chavonne, helped organize the much-praised baby shower.

"What makes Fayetteville different is that the military support is part of the fabric of our community," she said.

Mayor Chavonne introduced Obama at 4:40 p.m. and gave her a gift. It was a framed photograph taken by Observer photographer Andrew Craft called "tearful departure," featuring Chief Warrant Officer Claude Jenkins grasping the hand of Capt. Shelia Jenkins from inside a bus taking him away, while their daughter Khadyajah cried into her mother's stomach. Obama said she planned to hang the photograph in her office at the White House.

Following her speech, Obama mingled with the crowd inside for about five minutes, shaking hands, posing for photographs and giving hugs.

Outside, small groups of people hoping to see the first lady began gathering around the Arts Center building about 2:30 p.m. Police cordoned off the area and moved people across the street.

By 4, about 200 people had gathered on the sidewalk across the street in a space about a half-block long. Most stood, some brought chairs, while others rested on the city's large brick planters or the round, black Hurley pots. A few more leaned out of open windows from lofts overlooking Hay Street.

Curiosity drew some, but most said they loved the first lady and simply wanted to catch a glimpse of her.

“I’ve never really seen a first lady or president just come to downtown Fayetteville,” said Randolph Choice. “Her coming here is really special. I’m impressed because you’re talking about a small eastern (North Carolina) city — Fayetteville.”

Helene Broomer stood directly across the street from the red door of the Arts Center building, camera in hand.

Broomer, who is from New York City, said she was visiting her son, who is stationed at Fort Bragg. When she heard Obama was visiting, she said she had to come out.

“I never would have had this opportunity in New York,” she said. “If she came to Manhattan, there’s no way I’d get within a mile of her. So, to be 50 feet away from the door? It’s amazing. It’s a tribute to Fayetteville.”

About 2:45., men in police uniforms replaced construction workers on top of 300 Hay St., a condominium development under construction.

The crowd slowly grew until, about 4:30, a motorcade of white vans with tinted windows arrived, and a gaggle of reporters spilled out.

But no Obama.

At 4:36, those gathered decided she had arrived. Maybe she would come see them after her speech, they figured.

After 5 p.m., the movement of the motorcade stirred the crowd. Someone waved out of the black SUV’s open windows. Nobody was sure who, though.

But as police officers relaxed, and press left the building, it soon became clear that Obama had left without coming to see them.

“Oh man!” said Edna Cameron, who’d rushed from work, still in her nursing scrubs. “She could’ve at least come to the door and waved!”

Cathy Johnston was also disappointed but decided to laugh it off.

Johnston, a retired teacher, had waited about three hours, dressed in the turquoise jacket and hat she would wear to church later that evening.

“I’ll go down in history saying I was there,” she said, with a chuckle. “I would love to have seen her, I would. But I still love her.”

<http://fayobserver.com/article?id=321030>



First Lady Michelle Obama visits Fayetteville



First Lady Michelle Obama listens as Fayetteville Mayor Tony Chavonne talks about Fayetteville at the Fayetteville Arts Center on Hay Street.