

FABI STUDENT MEETS US FIRST LADY

By Osmond Mlonyeni

The United States of America's First Lady, Mrs Michelle Obama, paid her first official visit to Africa between 20-26 June 2011, during which she spend three days in South Africa and and three days in Botswana. The visit aimed at fostering goodwill between Africa and the USA with a specific focus on youth empowerment (leadership), education, health and democracy. She was accompanied by her mother, Mrs Marian Robinson, her two daughters, Malia and Sasha, and her nephew and niece, Avery and Leslie Robinson.

The first port-of-call on the African Continent was South Africa. The atmosphere and excitement generated by the news that the "Obama's have landed" was euphoric within the group of students and officials who were to meet her. I considered this to be because the "Obama's" represent change – positive *change* involving triumph of the human spirit, restoration of dignity, aspirations of unity, defeating the fear of the unknown and a recognition of a people's determination to *change*. Indeed this *change* is summarized by the now all-too-famous presidential campaign slogan of then-Senator Obama, "YES WE CAN"!

At 09h00 on 21 June 2011, the Mandela Rhodes (MR) Foundation group, led by Shaun Johnson (CEO) and Theresa Laaka-Daniels (Deputy CEO and Scholarship Manager) together with three Mandela Rhodes Scholars (MR scholars), Lali Dangazele (MR scholar 2008), Zamafuze Ngcobo (MR scholar 2011) and I (MR scholar 2009 and FABI student) had the privilege of being part of approximately 100 invited guests to meet the US First Lady at the Ambassador's residence in Pretoria. This was coordinated by the US Ambassador to South Africa, Donald Gips, and his wife Lize. Other guests included former freedom fighters, former and current senior government officials, business leaders, traditional leaders, NGOs, members of the justice system and independent thought leaders. The employees at the Embassy also shared the excitement of this occasion.

Ambassador Gips introduced Mrs Obama who then went up to the podium armed with her warm smile and gracious demeanour. She started off by sharing her personal and her family's excitement at being in Africa - in particular, in South Africa. She further extended an apology from her husband, USA President Obama, who unequivocally stated that he would have loved to have also been in South Africa, especially because of the role that the South African struggle had played in shaping and influencing the young Barack Obama during his college years. She also emphasized the enormous respect President Obama has for the former South African President, Nelson Mandela, and, by extension, the generation of freedom fighters which he represents. To illustrate this point, she directed the audience to the picture on the wall behind her taken in 2005, of the then Senator Obama shaking the hand of former President Mandela in a hotel room in Washington D.C, when Madiba visited the USA. The significance of this picture

she explained, was the humility shown by former President Nelson Mandela when “he made time available, in his busy schedule, to meet with the then relatively unknown Senator Obama”.

In her address, Mrs Obama spoke about the history of South Africa, the 1956 Women’s March, the 1976 Youth uprising and the democratic dispensation, and highlighted their significance and lessons to be learnt. The overarching message was the need to recognize and pay tribute to the role women have played in the attainment of freedom to realize a just future. Similarly, the youth, especially young women, needed to draw strength from the lives of people of integrity such as the late Ma Sisulu in this quest.

To conclude the proceedings for the day, Mrs Obama took time to hug, briefly converse and take pictures with a couple of guests following her address. Fortunately each MR scholar had an opportunity to chat with her, which was one of the most humbling moments I have experiences. In my brief conversation with her I stressed the need to equally address both young men and women when dealing with contemporary challenges.

For me, my meeting with America’s First Lady was an unforgettable experience. The rest of South Africa waited with bated breath to meet her and I am sure that she was amazed at the wonderful country in which we live.

