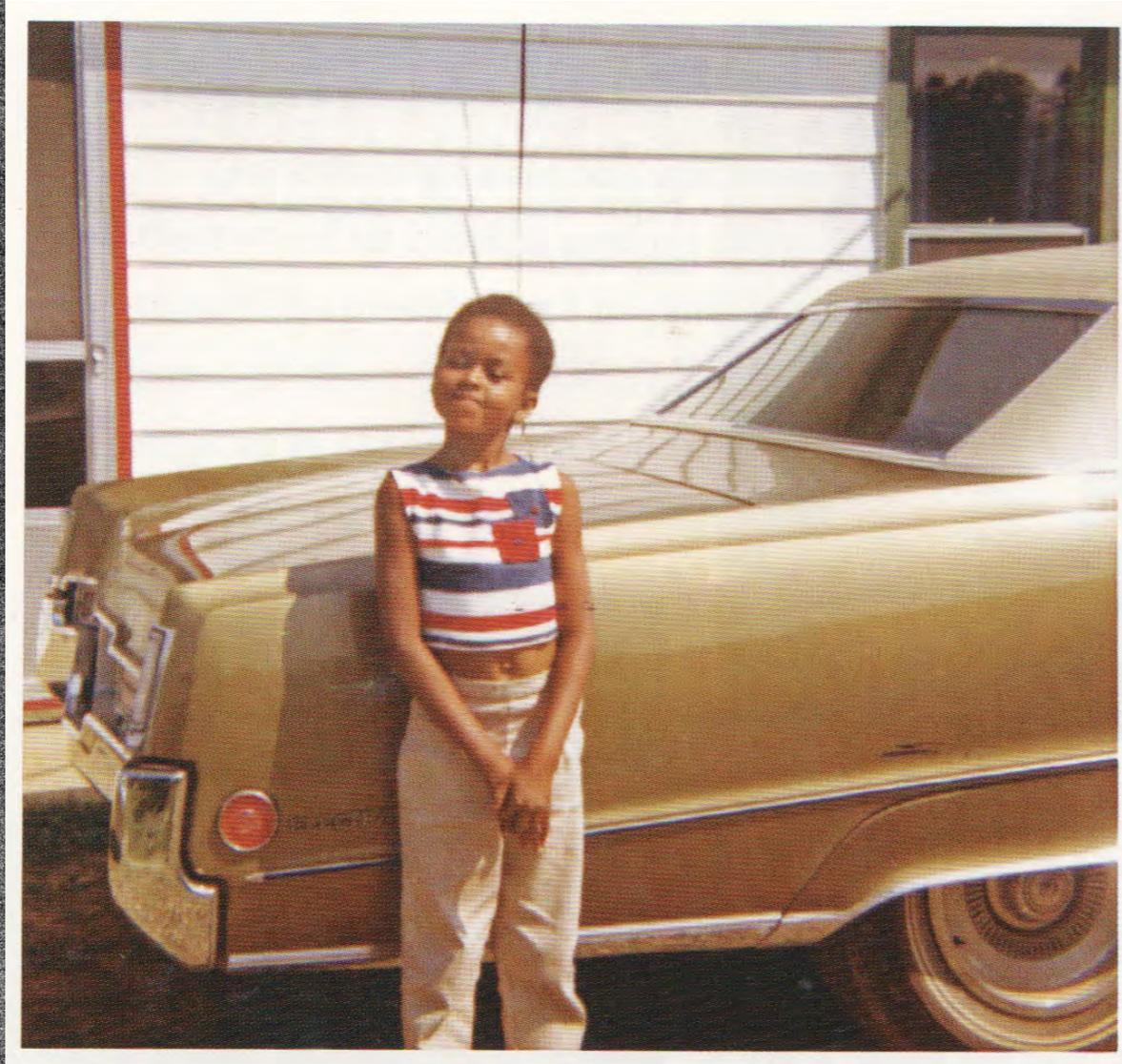


the

MICHELLE ROBINSON

story

CASE STUDY:



A woman who grew up on the south side of Chicago and went on to make a significant contribution to improving the lot of disadvantaged kids.

MICHELLE ROBINSON

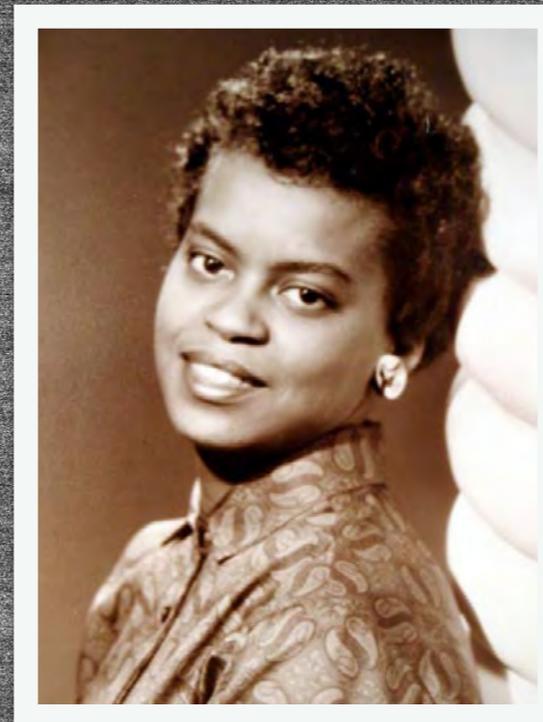
MICHELLE ROBINSON:



her father never missed a day of work tending boilers, despite crippling multiple sclerosis



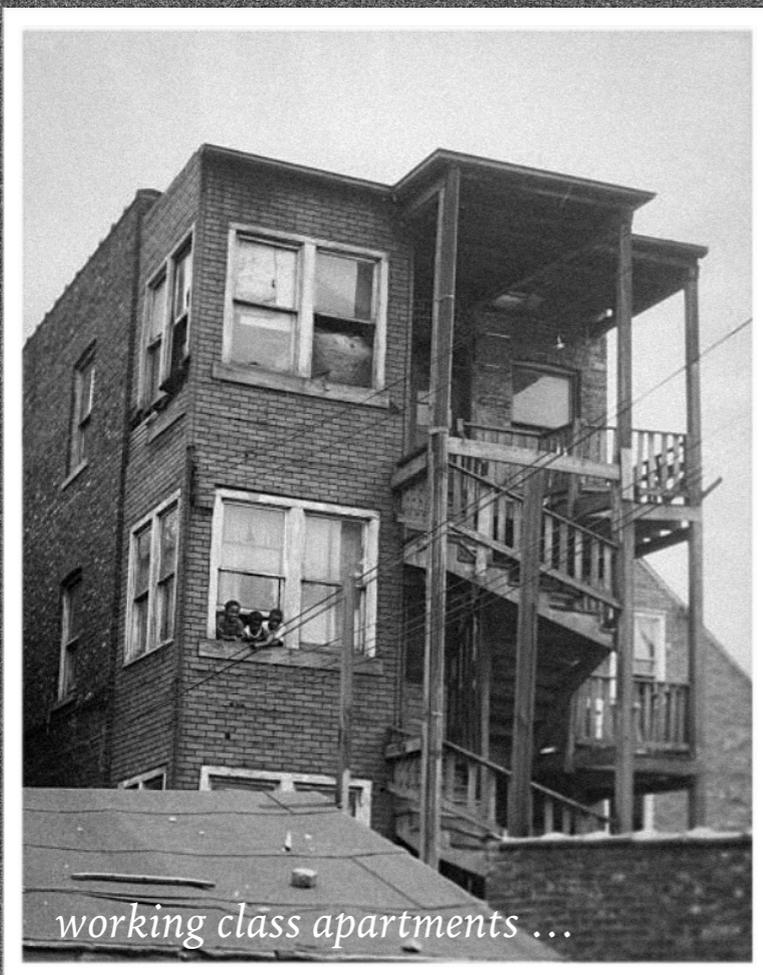
was born in 1964 to a family of modest means



her mother worked as an administrative assistant



In the declining neighborhood she grew up in, “everything that mattered was within a five block radius—my grandparents and cousins, the church on the corner where we were not quite regulars at Sunday school, the gas station where my mother sometimes sent me to pick up a pack of Newports, and the liquor store, which also sold wonder bread, any candy, and gallons of milk.”



“On Euclid Avenue, we were two households living under one not very big roof. Judging from the layout, the second floor space had probably been designed as an in-law apartment meant for one or two people, but four of us found a way to fit inside.

My parents slept in the lone bedroom, while Craig and I shared a bigger area that I assume was intended to be the living room.”

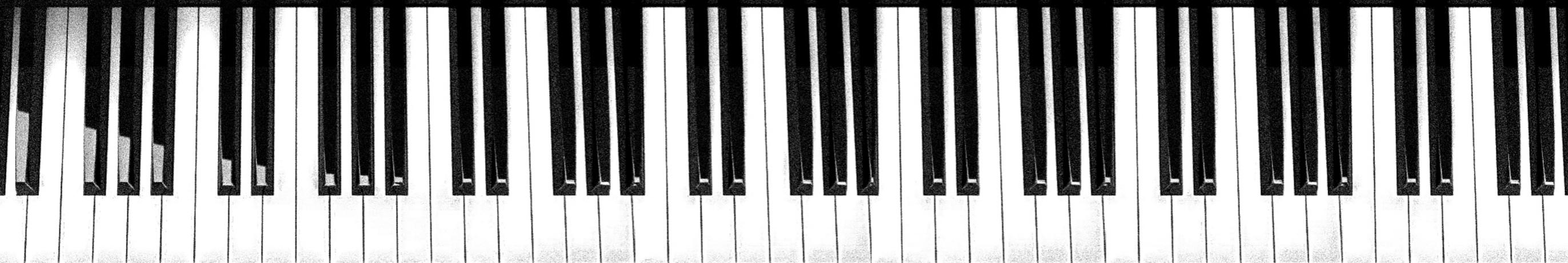


Michelle's Great Aunt Robbie

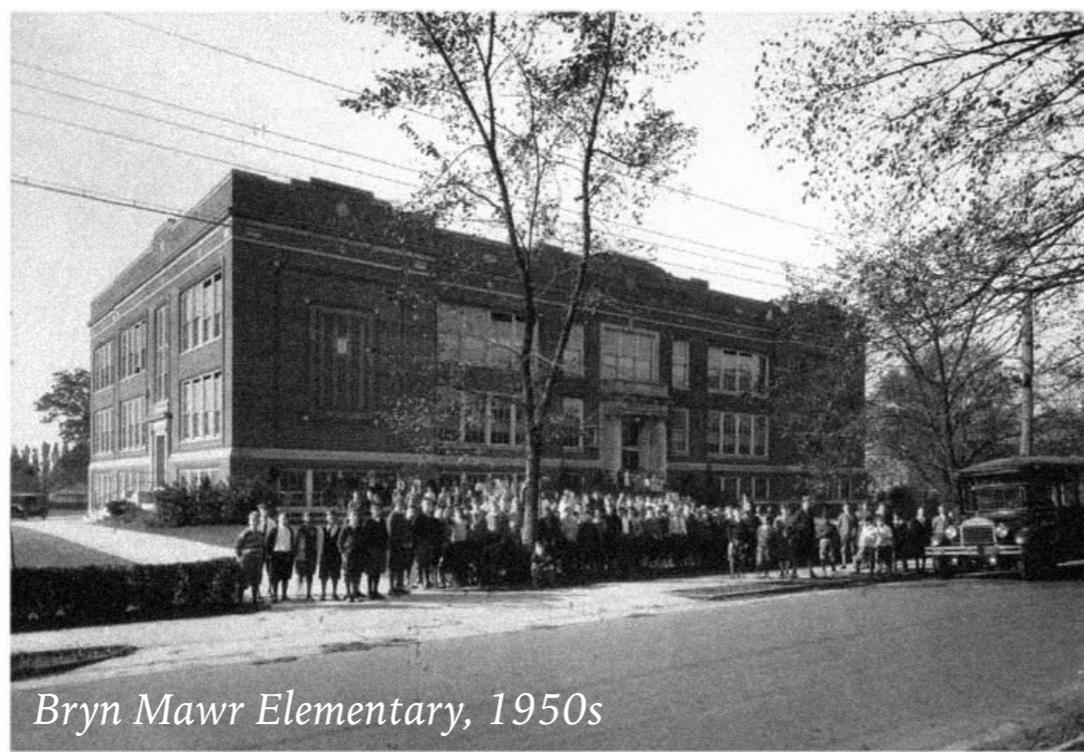
Michelle took piano lessons with her Great Aunt Robbie. One time a recital hall was rented outside the neighborhood for a special occasion. She remembers this one indelible moment:

“I was sitting at a perfect piano, it turned out, with its surfaces carefully dusted, its internal wires precisely tuned, its 88 keys laid out in a flawless ribbon of black and white...”

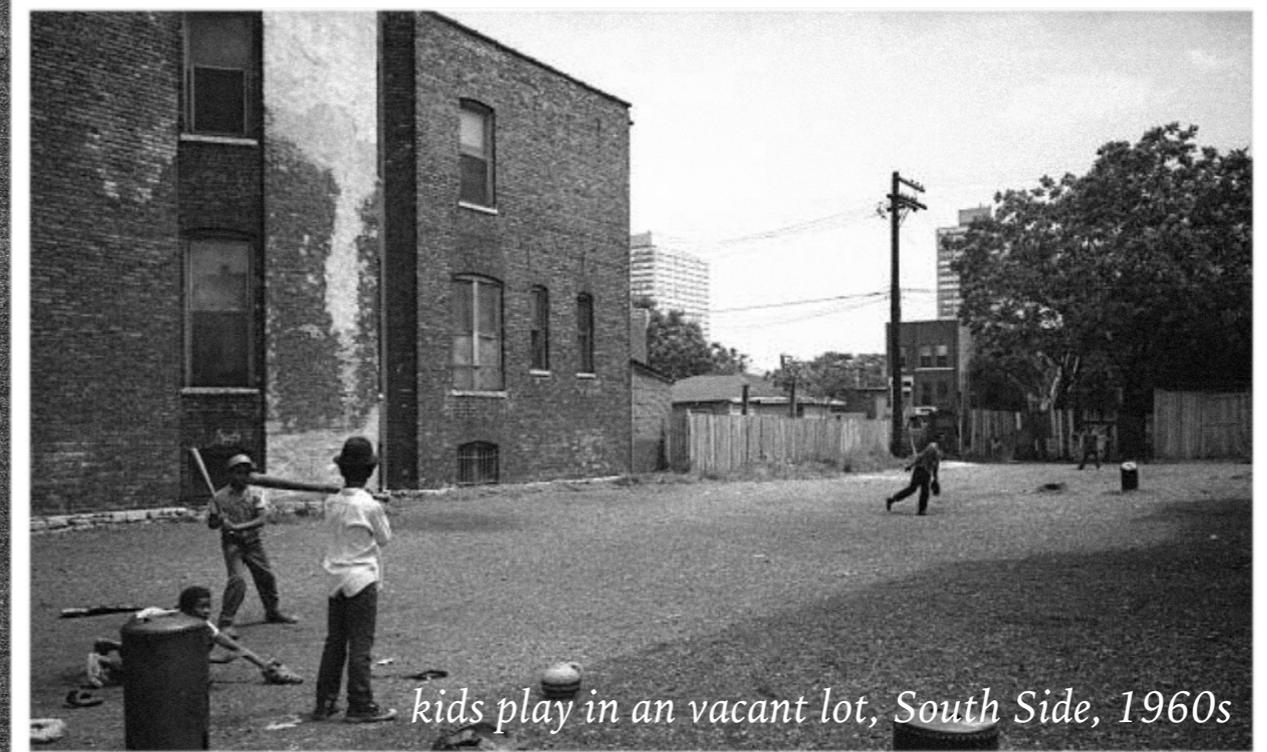
“The issue was that I wasn’t used to flawless. In fact I never once in my life encountered it.”



Michelle went to the local public elementary school ...



Bryn Mawr Elementary, 1950s

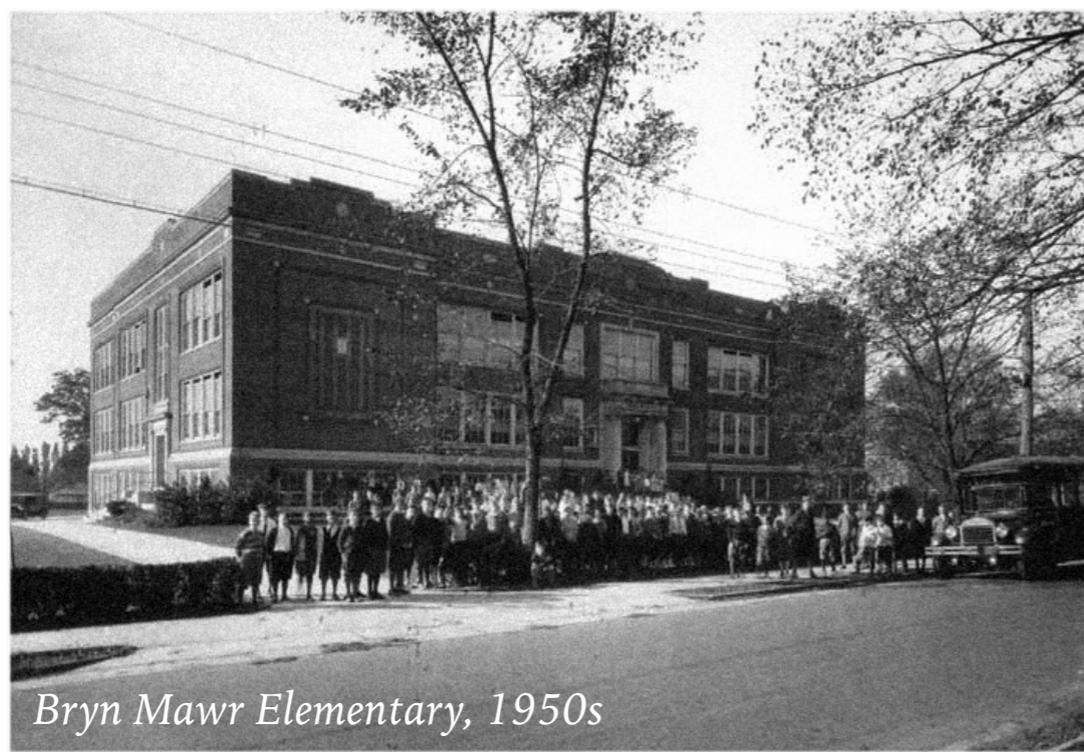


kids play in an vacant lot, South Side, 1960s

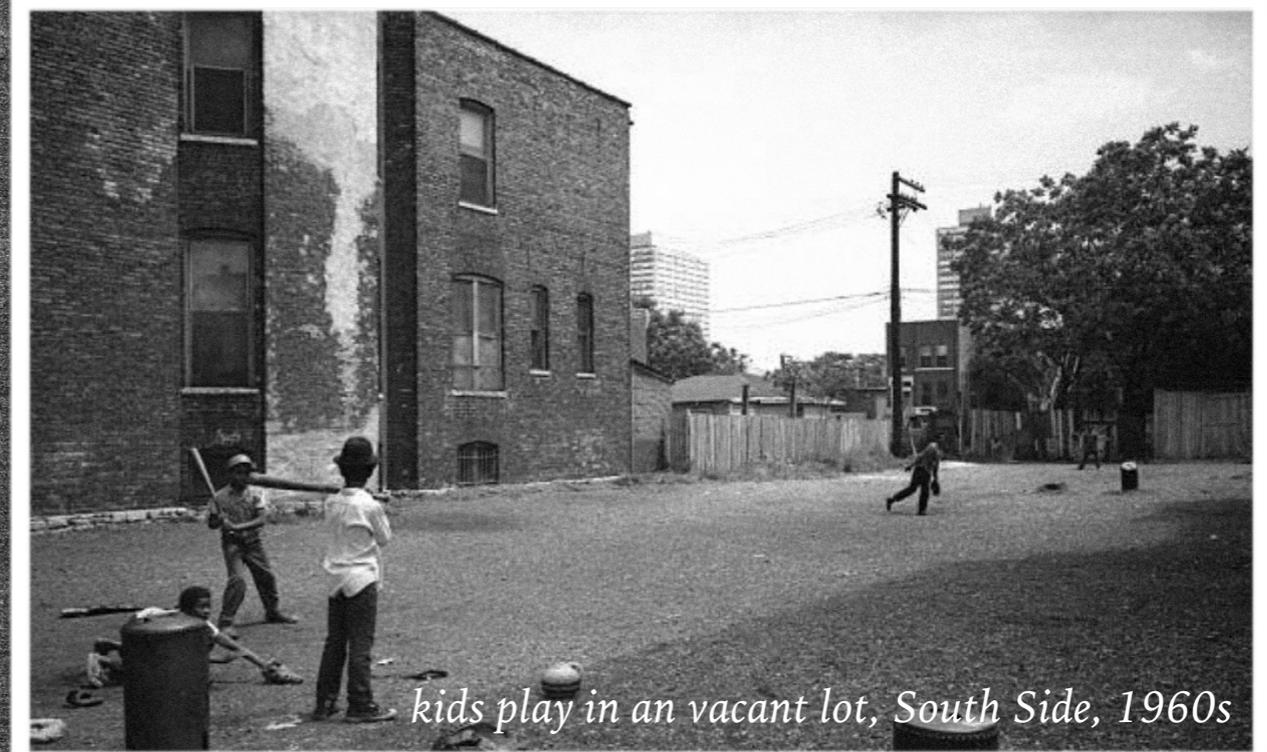
... where it was clear the kids had other things on their minds

“My second grade classroom turned out to be a mayhem of unruly kids and flying erasers. All this seemed due to a teacher who couldn’t figure out how to assert control – who didn’t seem to like children, even.”

Michelle went to the local public elementary school ...



Bryn Mawr Elementary, 1950s

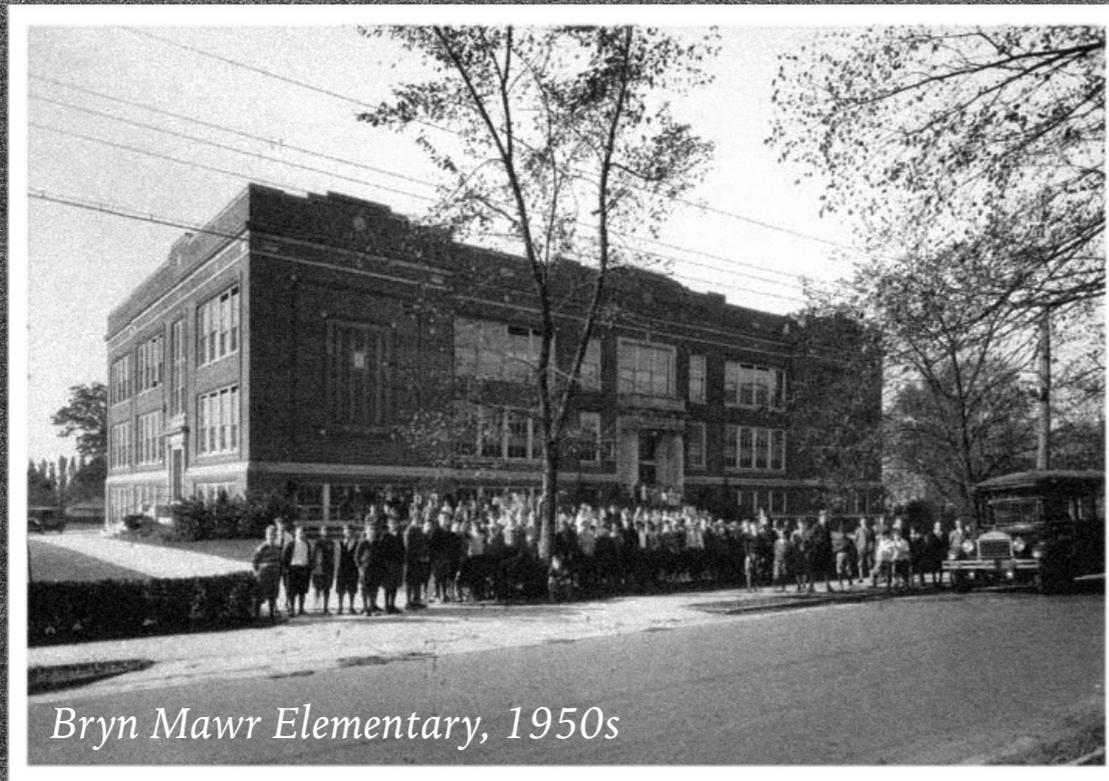


kids play in an vacant lot, South Side, 1960s

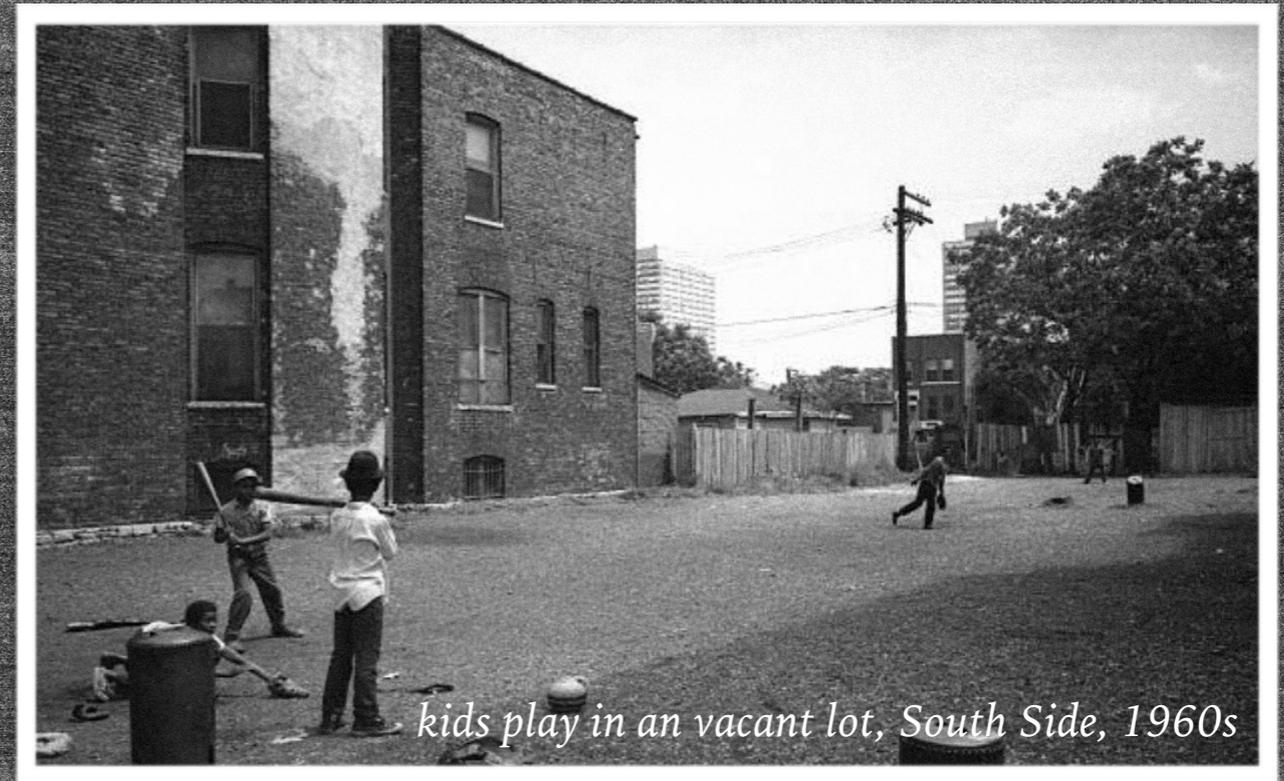
... where it was clear the kids had other things on their minds

“It wasn’t clear that anyone was particularly bothered by the fact that the teacher was incompetent.”

Michelle went to the local public elementary school ...



Bryn Mawr Elementary, 1950s

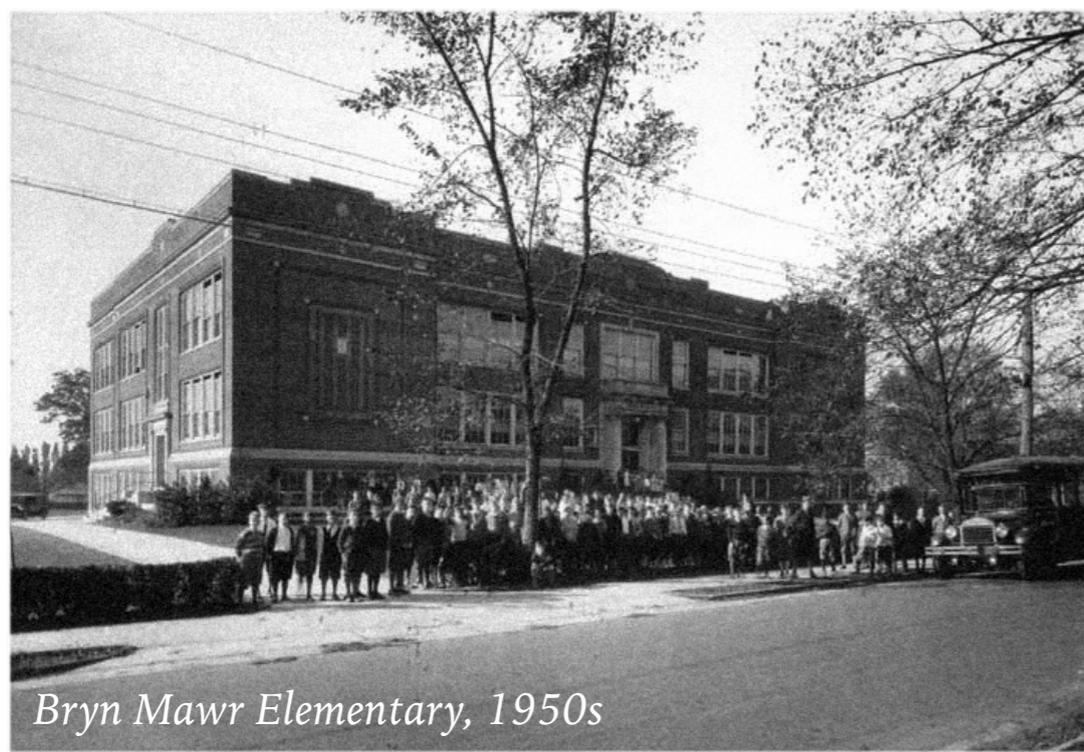


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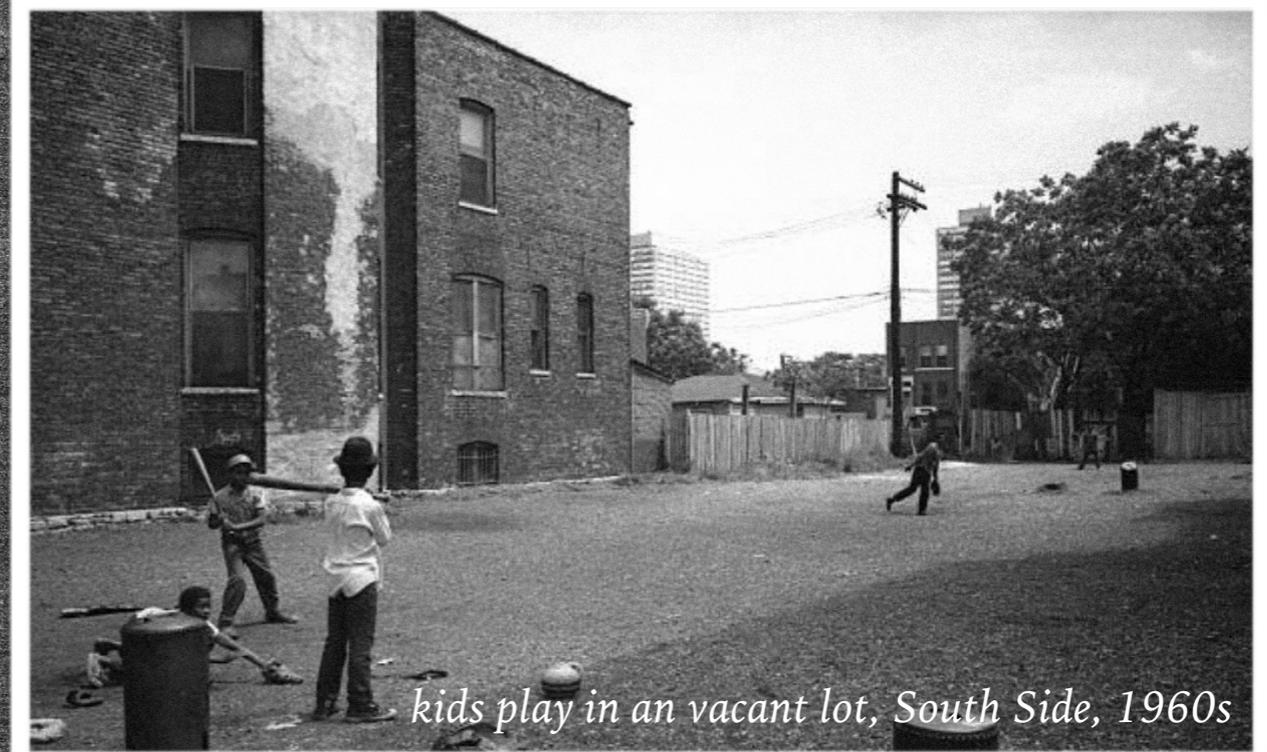
... where it was clear the kids had other things on their minds

“Every hour there felt hellish and long. I sat miserably at my desk ... learning nothing and waiting for the midday lunch break, when I could go home and have a sandwich and complain to my mom.”

Michelle went to the local public elementary school ...



Bryn Mawr Elementary, 1950s



kids play in an vacant lot, South Side, 1960s

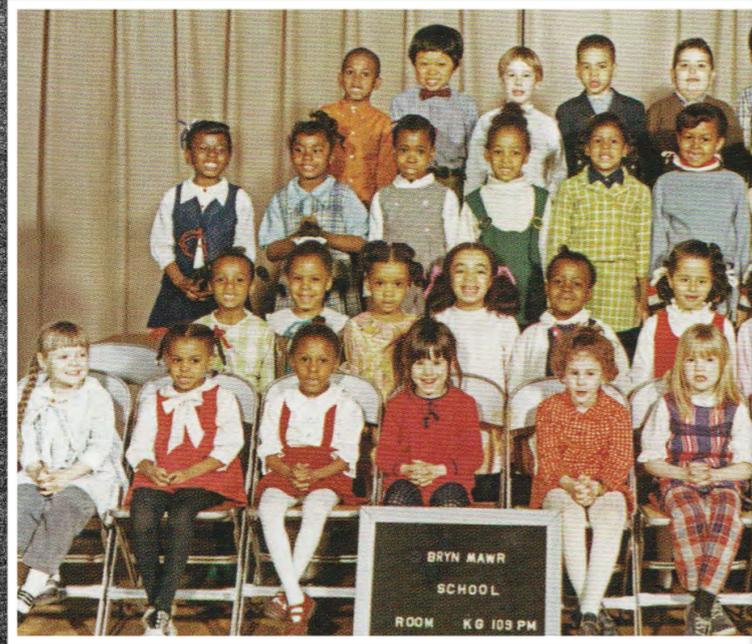
... where it was clear the kids had other things on their minds

“Without telling me, she went over to the school and began a weeks-long process of behind the scenes lobbying, which led to me ... getting pulled out of the class ... and reinstalled permanently into an orderly class governed by a no nonsense teacher who knew her stuff.”

Michelle's Kindergarten Class:



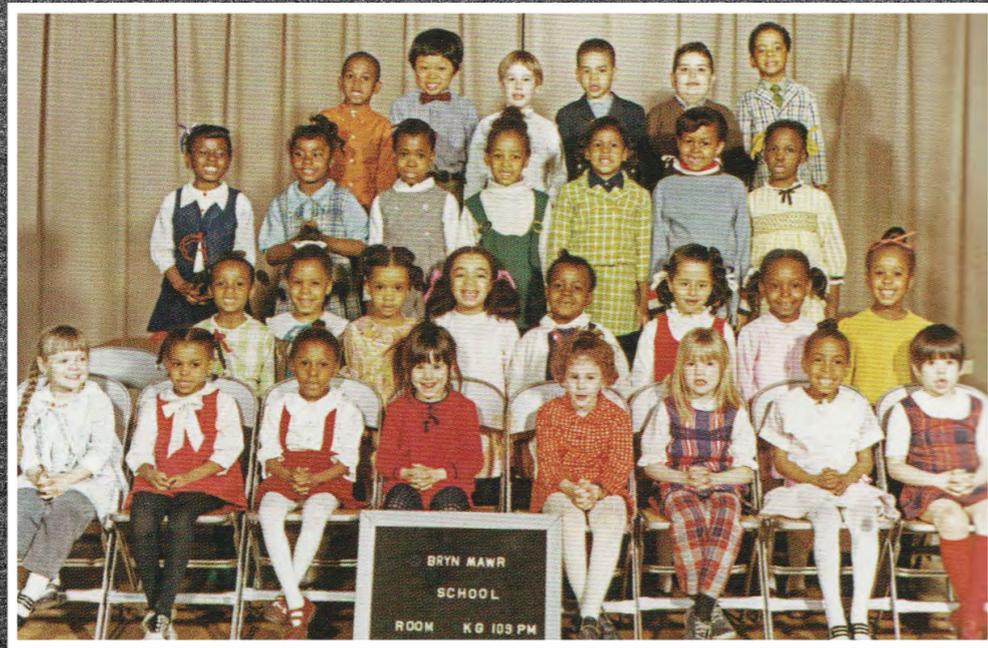
Michelle's Kindergarten Class:



Michelle's 5th Grade Class

“Every September ... at Bryn Mawr elementary, we’d find fewer white kids on the playground. ... It soon seemed that anyone who had the means to go was now going.”

Michelle's Kindergarten Class:



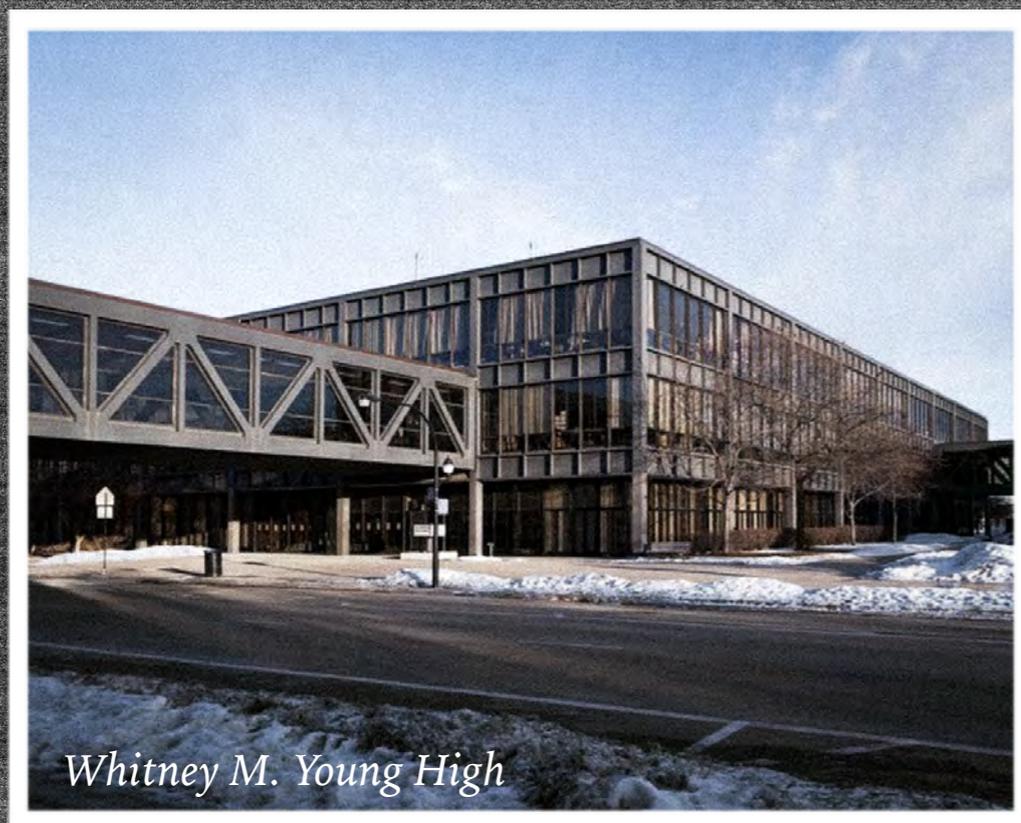
“Racial and economic sorting in the south shore neighborhood continue to the 1970s, meaning that the student population only grew blacker and poorer with each year.”

Michelle's 5th Grade Class



“As I was entering the seventh grade, The Chicago Defender ... ran a vitriolic opinion piece that claimed Bryn Mawr had [become] a rundown slum governed by a ghetto mentality.”

“I was lucky enough to test into Chicago's first magnet high school, Whitney M. Young High School, which sat in what was then a run down area just west of the loop and was on its way to becoming a top school in the city.”



Whitney M. Young High



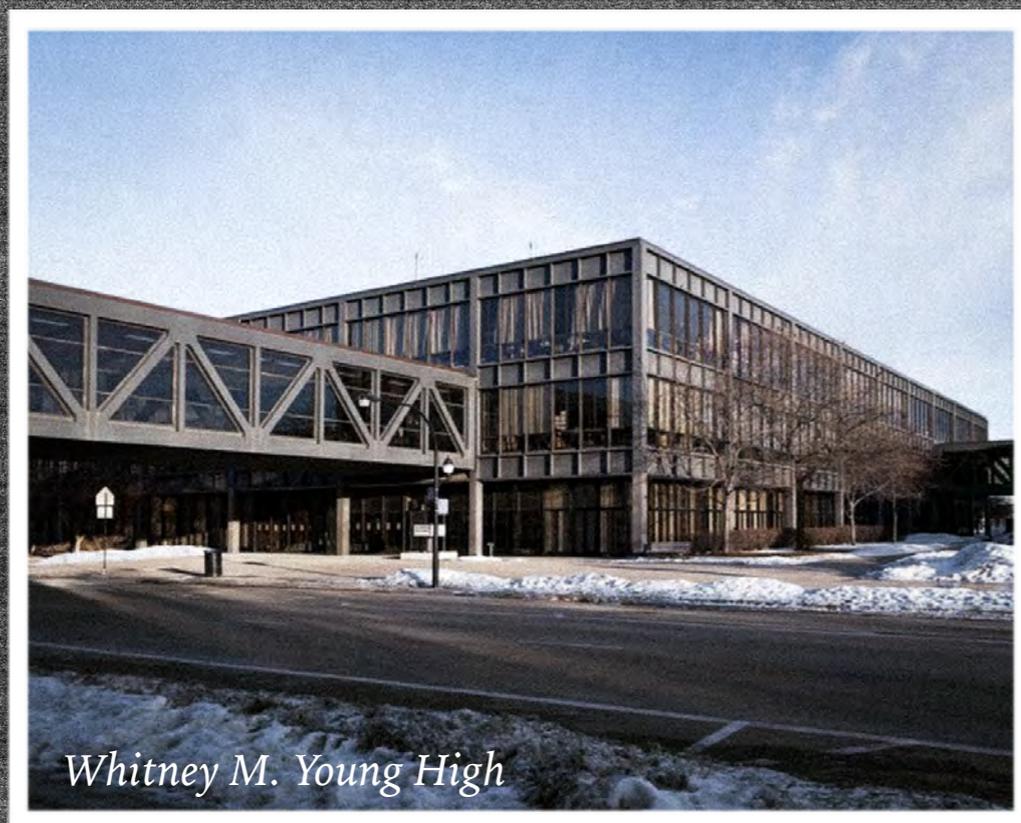
Freshman Year, 1978



Junior Year, 1980

“There were about 1900 kids at Whitney Young, and from my point of view they appeared almost universally older and more confident than I’d ever be ...

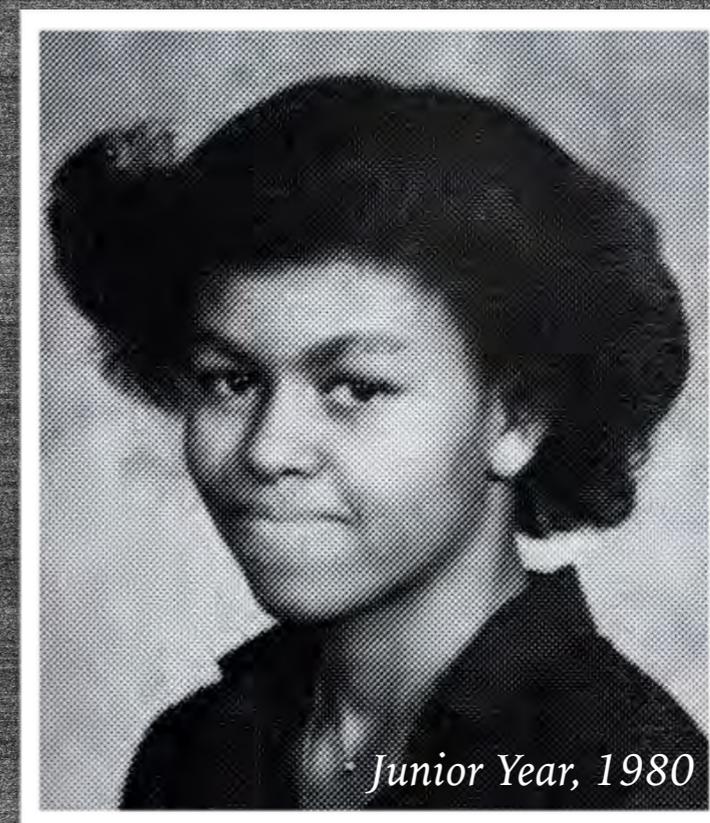
...looking around, I felt small.”



Whitney M. Young High



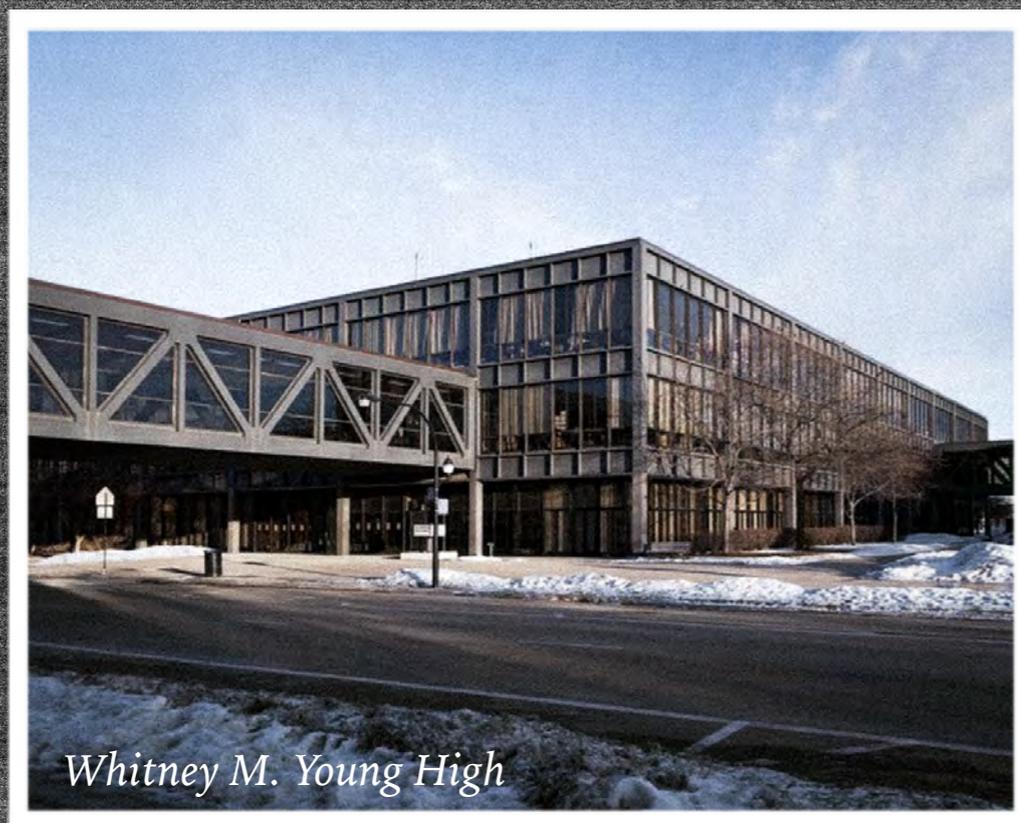
Freshman Year, 1978



Junior Year, 1980

“My worries about high school ... could mostly be filed under one general heading:

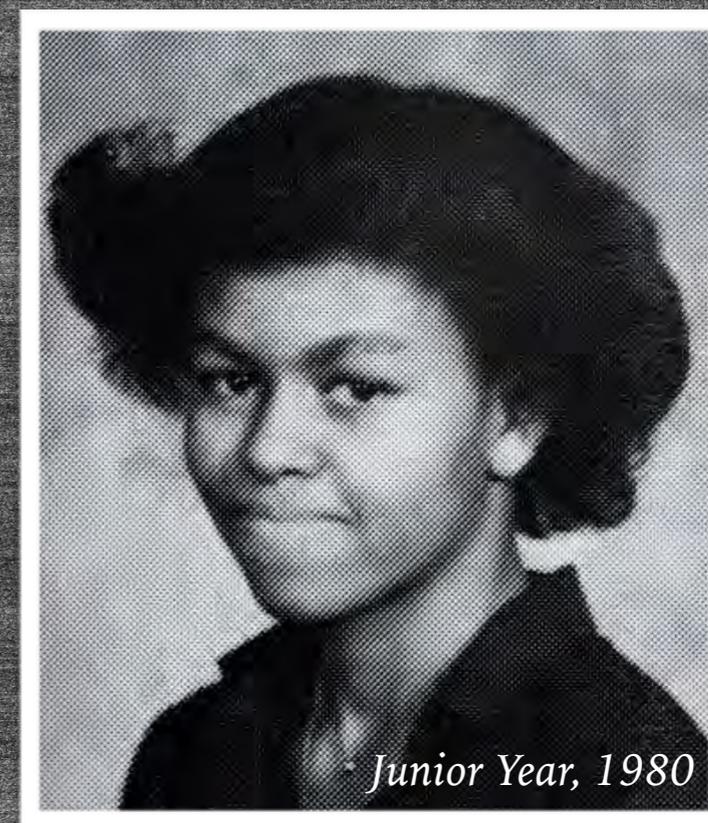
am I good enough?”



Whitney M. Young High



Freshman Year, 1978



Junior Year, 1980

It was doubt

about where I came from and what I believed about myself ... it was like a malignant cell that threatened to divide and divide again, unless I could find some way to stop it."

Whitney Young was walking distance of "The Loop," Chicago's thriving commercial district.



State Street, 1980s



Fort Dearborn Coffee, 1977



State Street, 1980s



Fort Dearborn Coffee, 1977

“My first month at Whitney Young give me a glimpse of something that had previously been invisible—the apparatus a privilege and connection.”



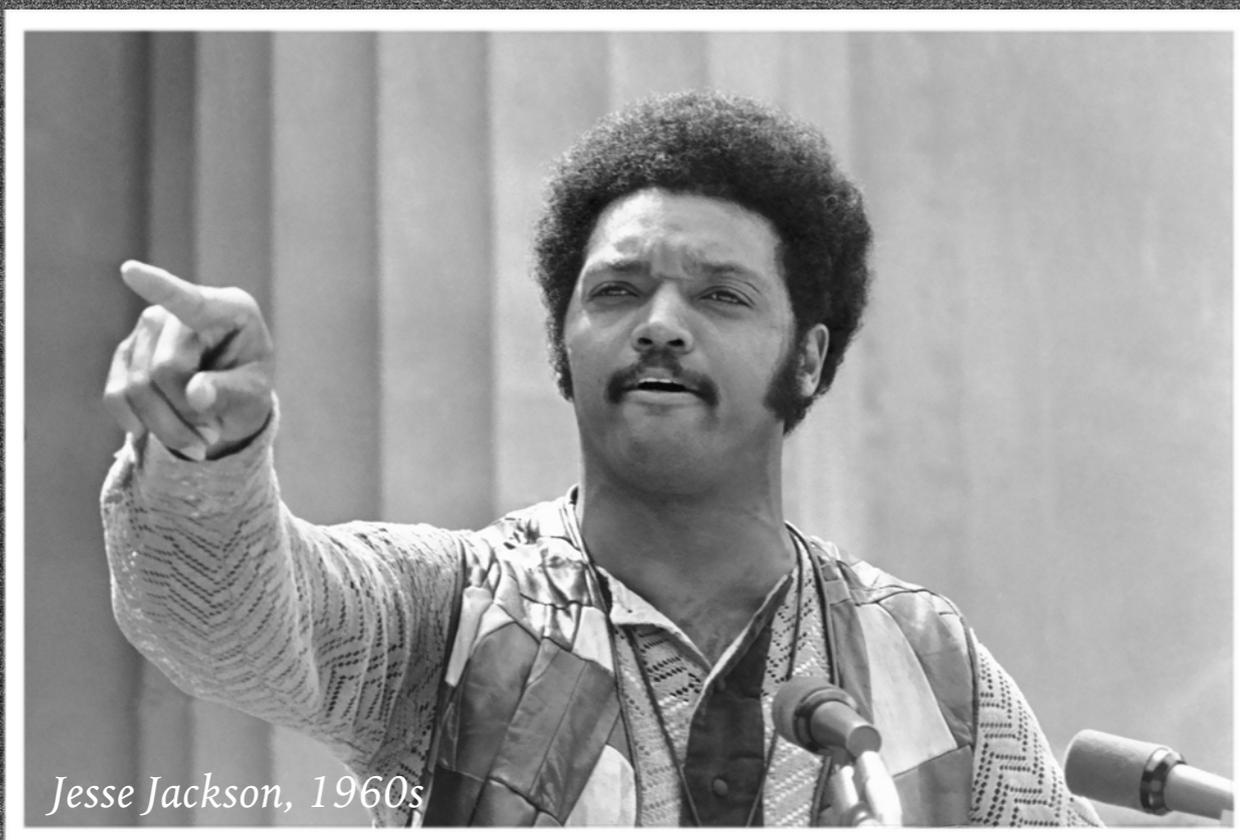
State Street, 1980s



Fort Dearborn Coffee, 1977

“I spent a lot of time with a classmate named Santita Jackson ... We passed hours at her family’s white tudor house in the Jackson Park Highlands ...

Santita’s father was famous ...



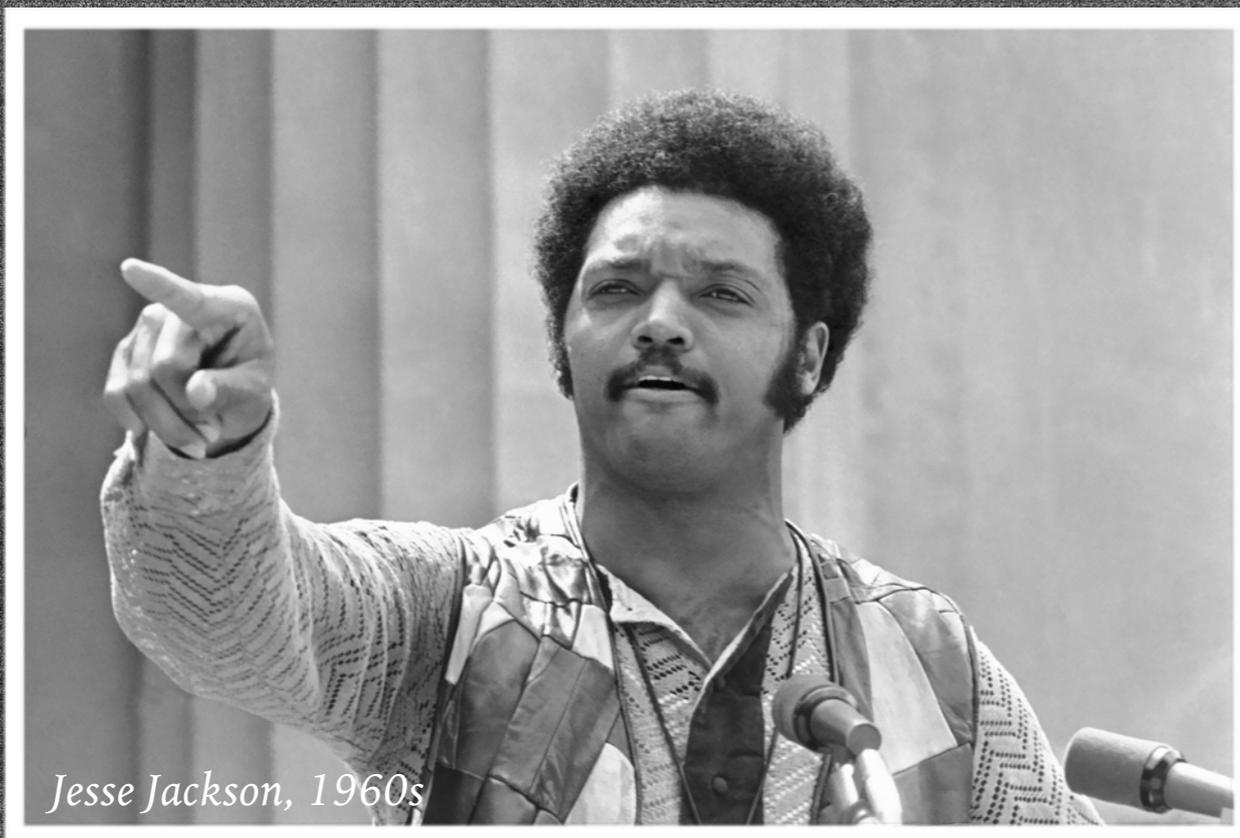
Jesse Jackson, 1960s



Jesse Jackson, 1975

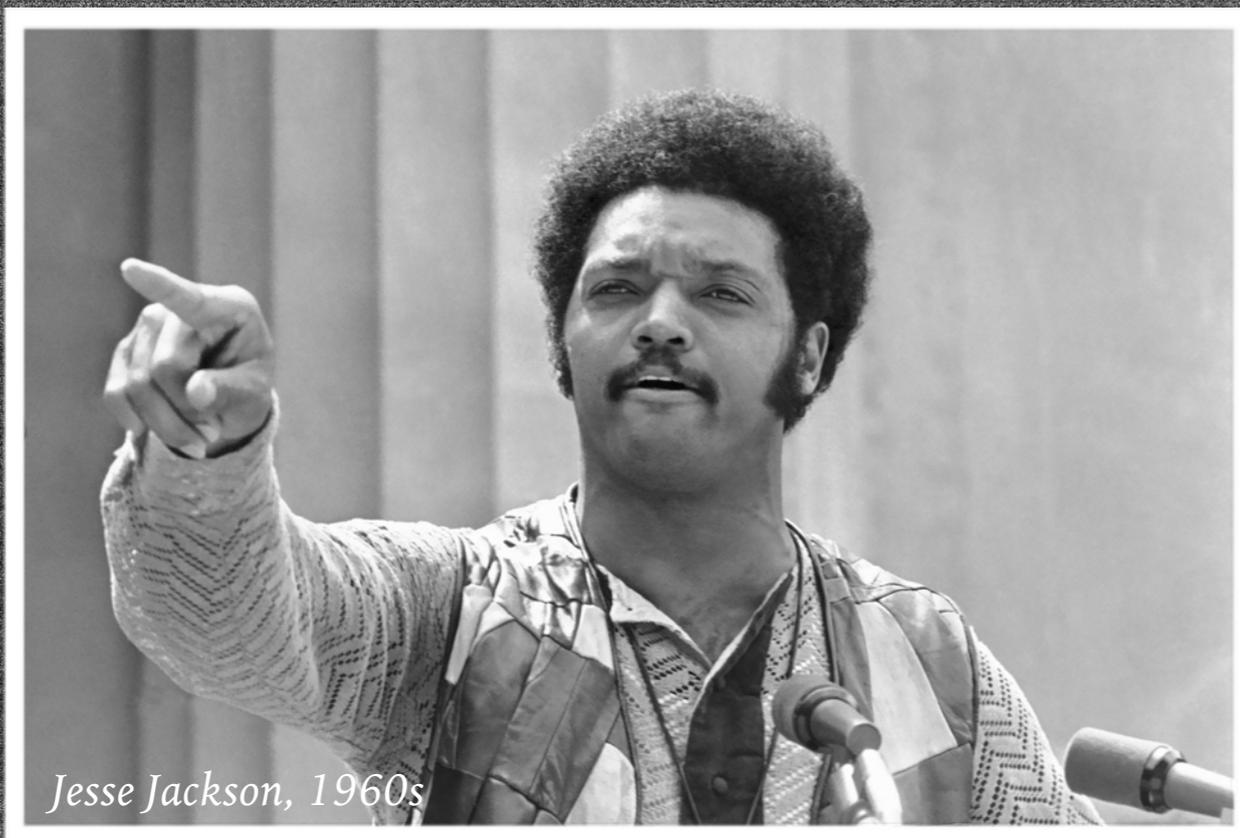
“... this was the primary, and impossible-to-get-around fact of her life. She was eldest child of

Reverend Jesse Jackson.”



“Hanging around Santita’s house could be exciting. The place was roomy and a little chaotic ... Unlike at my apartment on Euclid, the Jacksons seem caught up in something larger, something messier, and seemingly more impactful.

Their engagement was outward.”



Jesse Jackson, 1960s



Jesse Jackson, 1975

Indeed, only two years after Michelle & Santita would graduate from Whitney Young he would begin his campaign for the '84 democratic party presidential nomination.

But that is another story ...





“Early in my senior year at Whitney Young, I went for an obligatory first appointment with the college counselor ... I noted my interest in going to Princeton.”



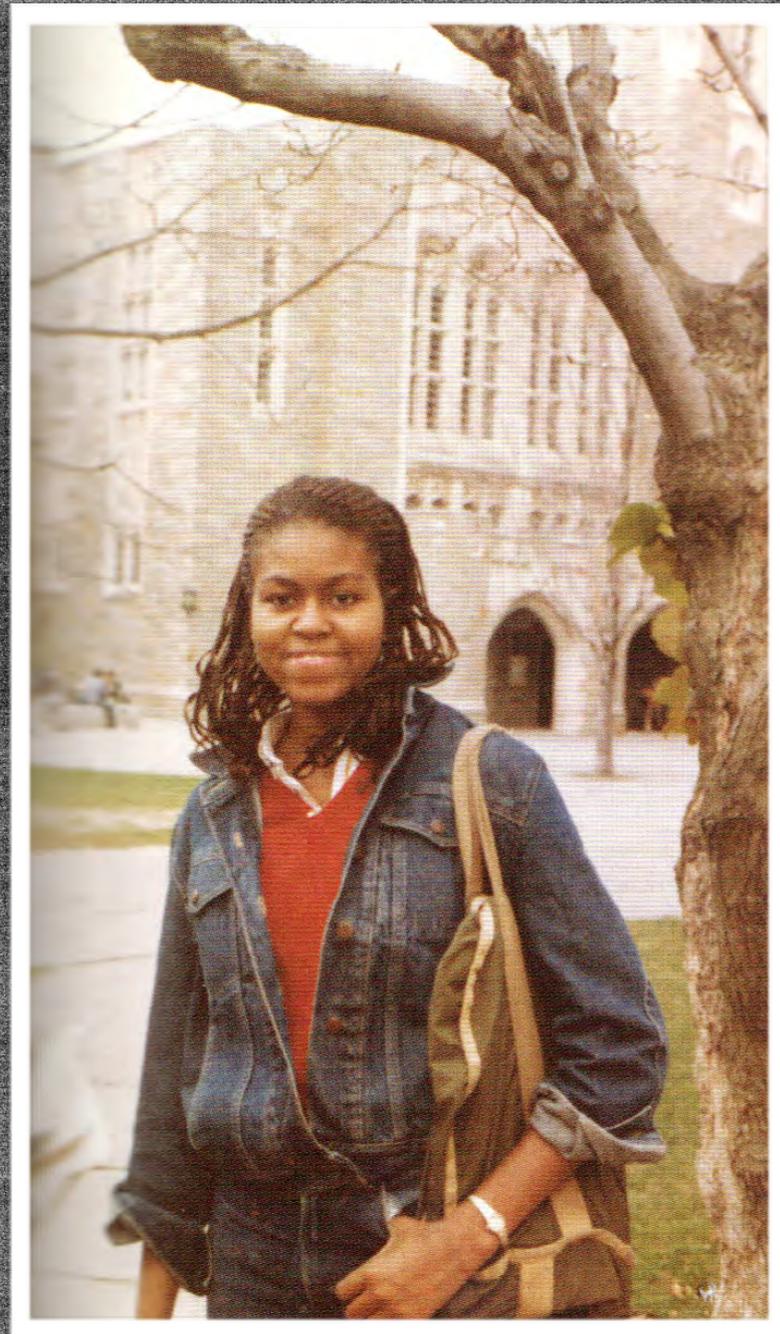
“... I can recall none of it. I got stuck
on one single sentence the woman uttered.”



‘I’m not sure,’ she said, giving me a perfunctory, patronizing smile ...

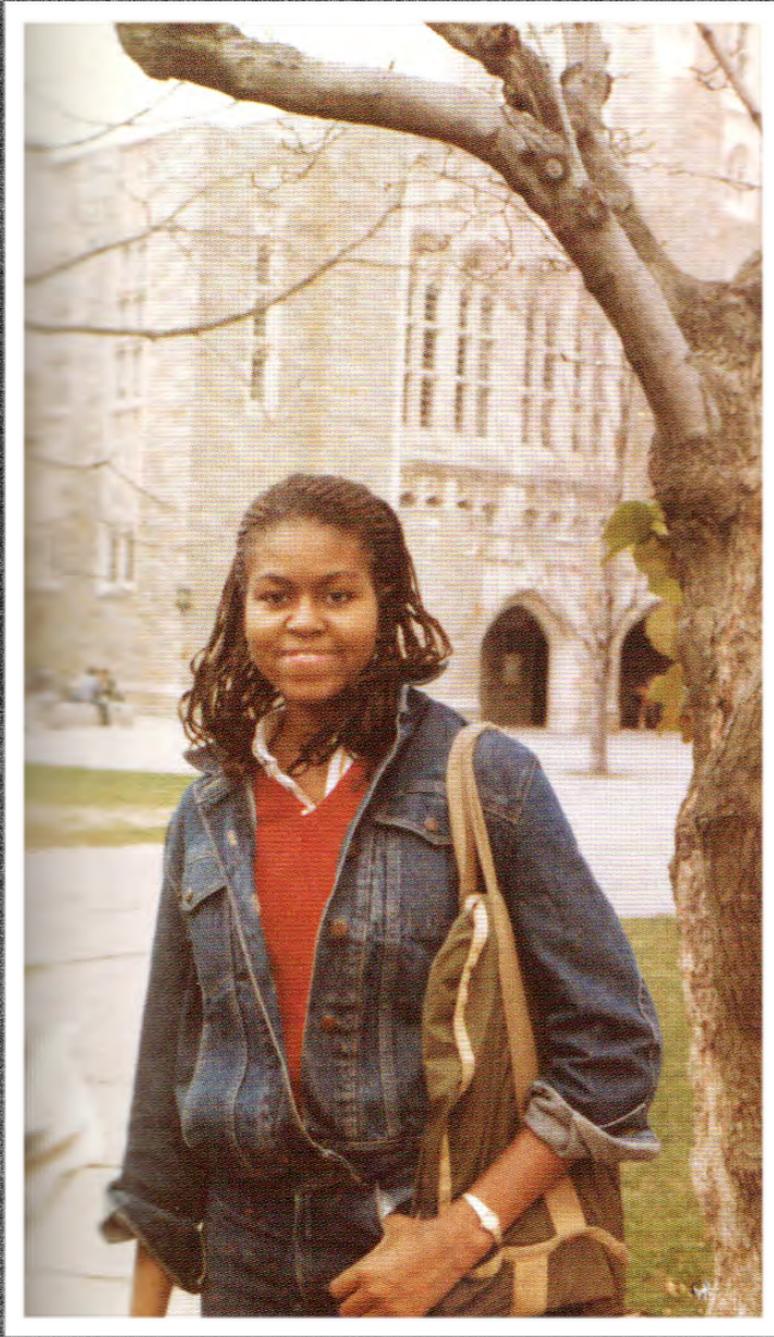
‘that you’re Princeton material.’

But of course Michelle didn't take no for an answer ...



Princeton University, 1981

“Seven months later, a letter arrived in our mailbox on Euclid Avenue, offering me admission to Princeton.”

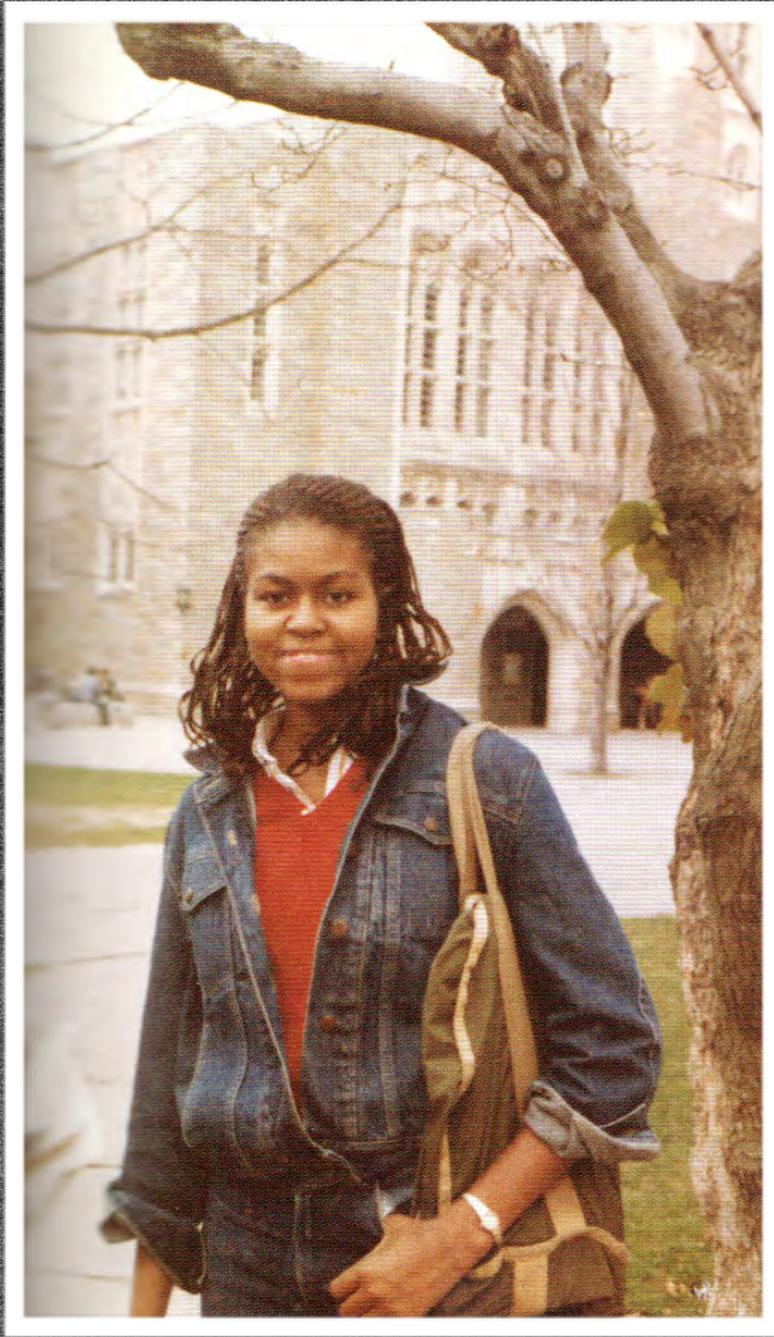


Princeton University, 1981

**One of my roommates
described many years later
that “her mother had been
so appalled that her
daughter had**

**been assigned a
black roommate**

**That she badgered the
University to separate us.”**



Princeton University, 1981

One of my roommates described many years later that “her mother had been so appalled that her daughter had

been assigned a black roommate

That she badgered the University to separate us.”

“Midway through our freshman year, Kathy moved out of our triple and into a single room. I’m happy to say that I had no idea why.”

In 1981, men outnumbered women almost 2 to 1 and black students made up less than 9% of the Freshman class.



7436 South Euclid Avenue
Chicago, IL 60649

January 17, 1964

Sociology

Stevenson Hall; Third World
Center — Work Study; Third
World Center — Governance
Board Member; Organization of
Black Unity; Third World
Center After School Program —
Coordinator

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson

There is nothing in this world more valuable than friendships. Without them you have nothing.

Thank-you Mom, Dad and Craig. You all are the most important things in my life.

Princeton University Yearbook, 1985



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“Just as it had been at Whitney Young my intensity was spawned at least in part by feeling of *I’ll show you*. If in high school I felt as if I were representing my neighborhood — now at Princeton I was representing my race.”



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Thank-you Mom, Dad and Craig. You all are the most important things in my life.

“I took the LSAT, wrote my senior thesis, and dutifully reached for the next rung, applying to the best law schools in the country.

I saw myself as a smart, analytical, and ambitious.”



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Thank-you Mom, Dad and Craig. You all are the most important things in my life.

“Professors, relatives, random people I met, asked what was next for me, and when I mentioned I was bound for law school— Harvard Law school, as it turned out —

the affirmation was overwhelming.”



Chicago, view from LaSalle Blvd. Bridge

“You live, as you always have, by the code of effort/results, and with that you keep achieving until you think you know the answers to all the questions—including the most important one.

Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am.”



Chicago, view from LaSalle Blvd. Bridge

“You reach for the next rung of the ladder, and this time it’s a job with a salary in the Chicago offices of a high-end law firm called Sidley and Austin.”



Chicago, view from LaSalle Blvd. Bridge

“You used to pass it by as the southside kid riding the bus to high school, peering mutely out the window at people who strode like Titans to their jobs.

Now you’re one of them.”



Chicago, view from LaSalle Blvd. Bridge

“You’ve joined the tribe ... You have an assistant. You make more money than your parents ever have. You wear an Armani suit and sign up for a subscription wine service ... you go to step aerobics after work [and] you buy yourself a Saab.”

“This may be the
fundamental problem
with caring a lot about
what others think: it
can put you on the
established path, the

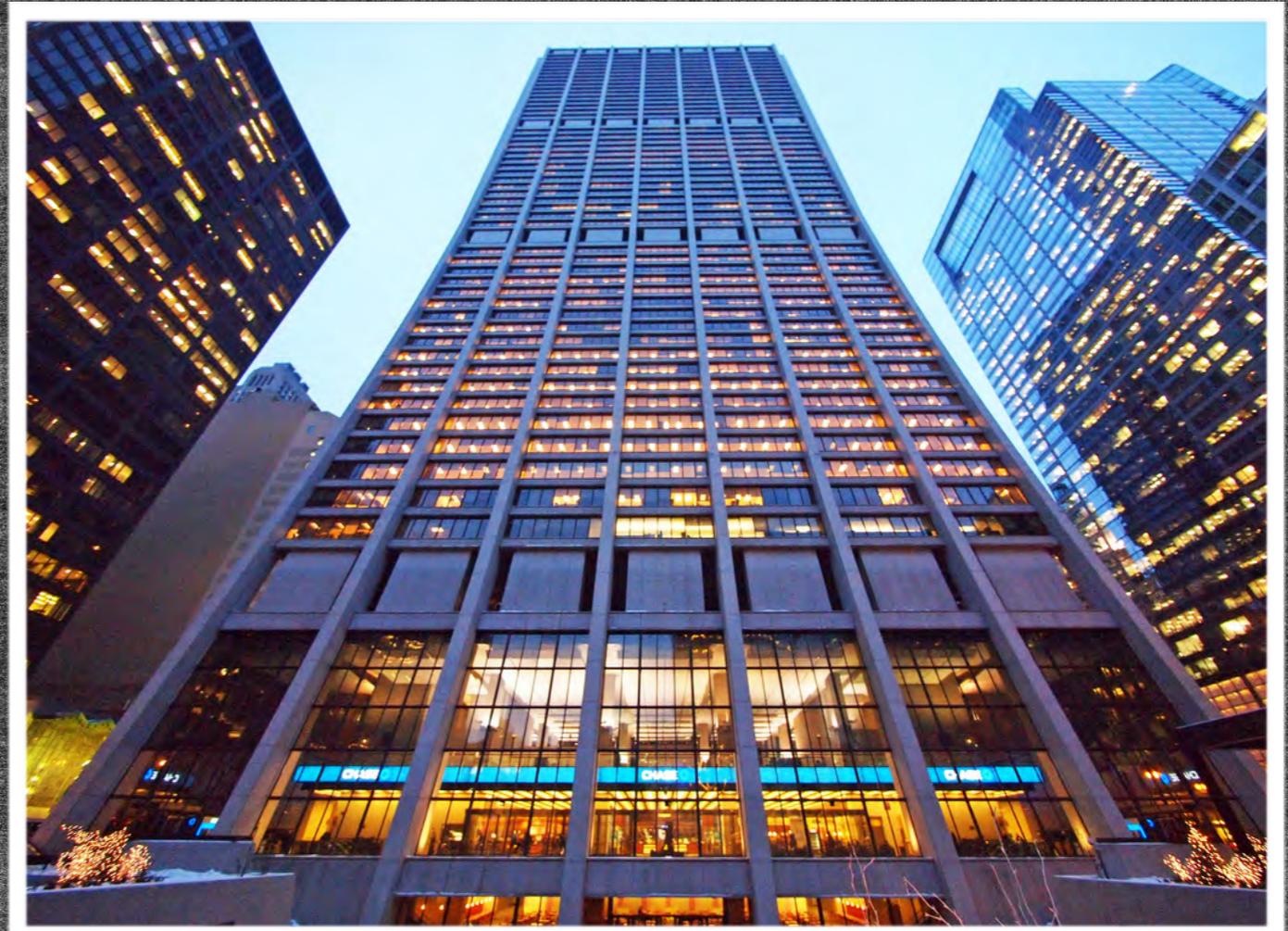


my-isn't-that-impressive path,
and keep you there for
a long time.”

“I just did my job. I was a lawyer, and lawyers work. We worked all the time. We are only as good as the hours we billed. There was no choice, I told myself.”



“[However,] I started keeping a journal. I bought myself a black cloth-bound book and kept it next to my bed. I took it with me when I went on business trips for Sidley and Austin.”



*I feel very
confused about
where I want
my life to go.*

*What kind of
person do I
want to be?*

*How do I want
to contribute
to the world?*

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confused about
where I want
my life to go.

What kind of
person do I
want to be?

How do I want
to contribute
to the world?

I'm confused
about what I
might do, what
skills I might
possibly have.
Could I be a
teacher, or a
college
administrator?

Could I run some
sort of after-
school program?

I was interested
in possibly
working for
foundation or
nonprofit.

I was
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I wondered
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still left
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time to do
volunteer
work, or
appreciate
art, or have
children.

I made a list of issues that interested me:

- a. education
- b. teen pregnancy
- c. lack self-esteem

A more virtuous job, I knew, would inevitably involve a pay cut.

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I made a list of issues that interested me:

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- c. lack self-esteem

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I felt a slow growing certainty of my own:

I wasn't built to practice law.

'You OK?' My mom
asked ...

'I don't know...'
and with that I
unloaded my
feelings. I told
her that I wasn't
happy with my
job, or even with
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her that I wasn't
happy with my
job, or even with
my chosen
profession.

I'm just not
fulfilled, I said.
But fulfillment, I'm
sure, struck her as
a rich person's
conceit ...

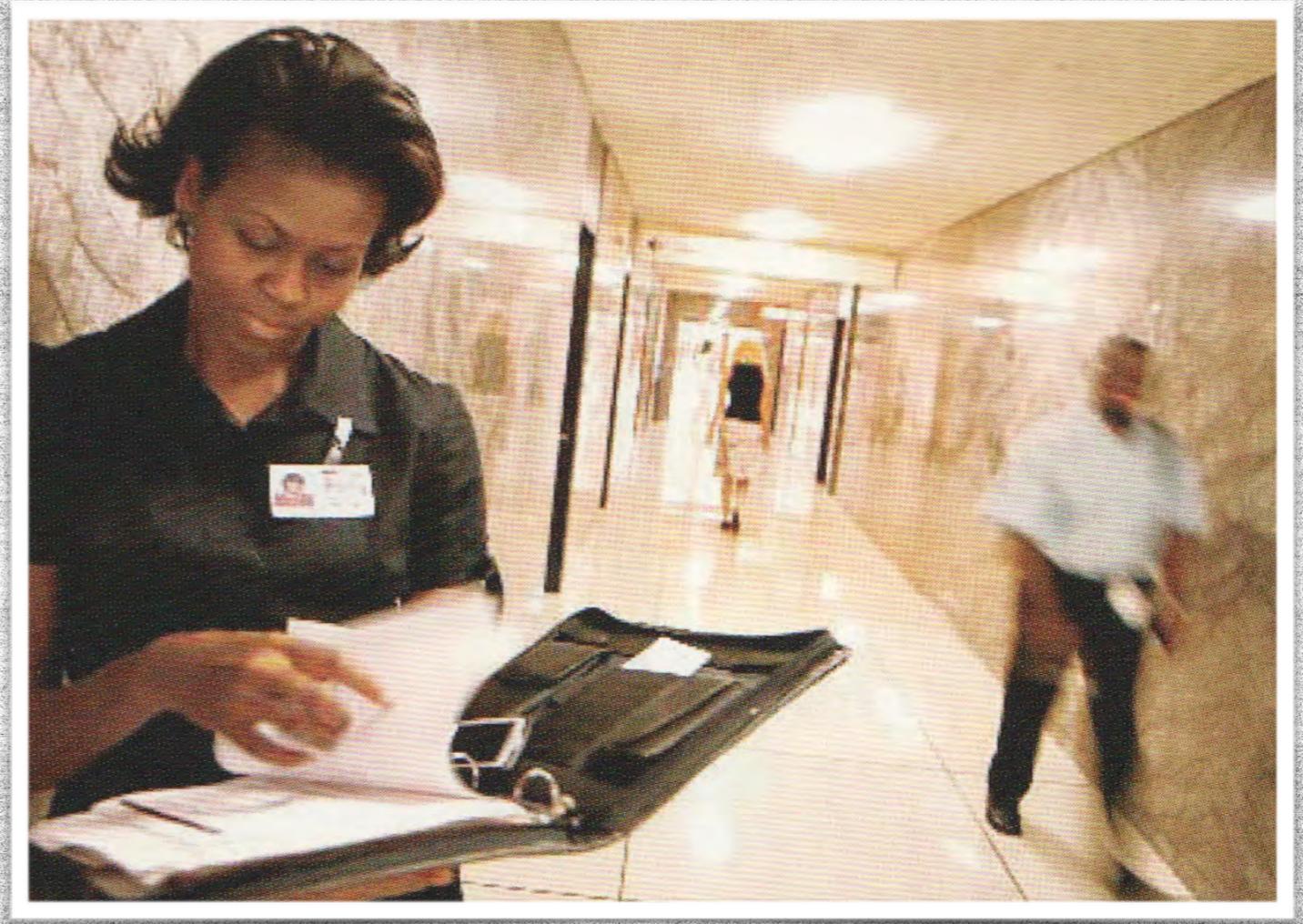
She gave me a wry,
sideways look ... and
chuckled just a
little. 'If you're
asking me, she said,
I say make the money
first and worry
about your
happiness later.'

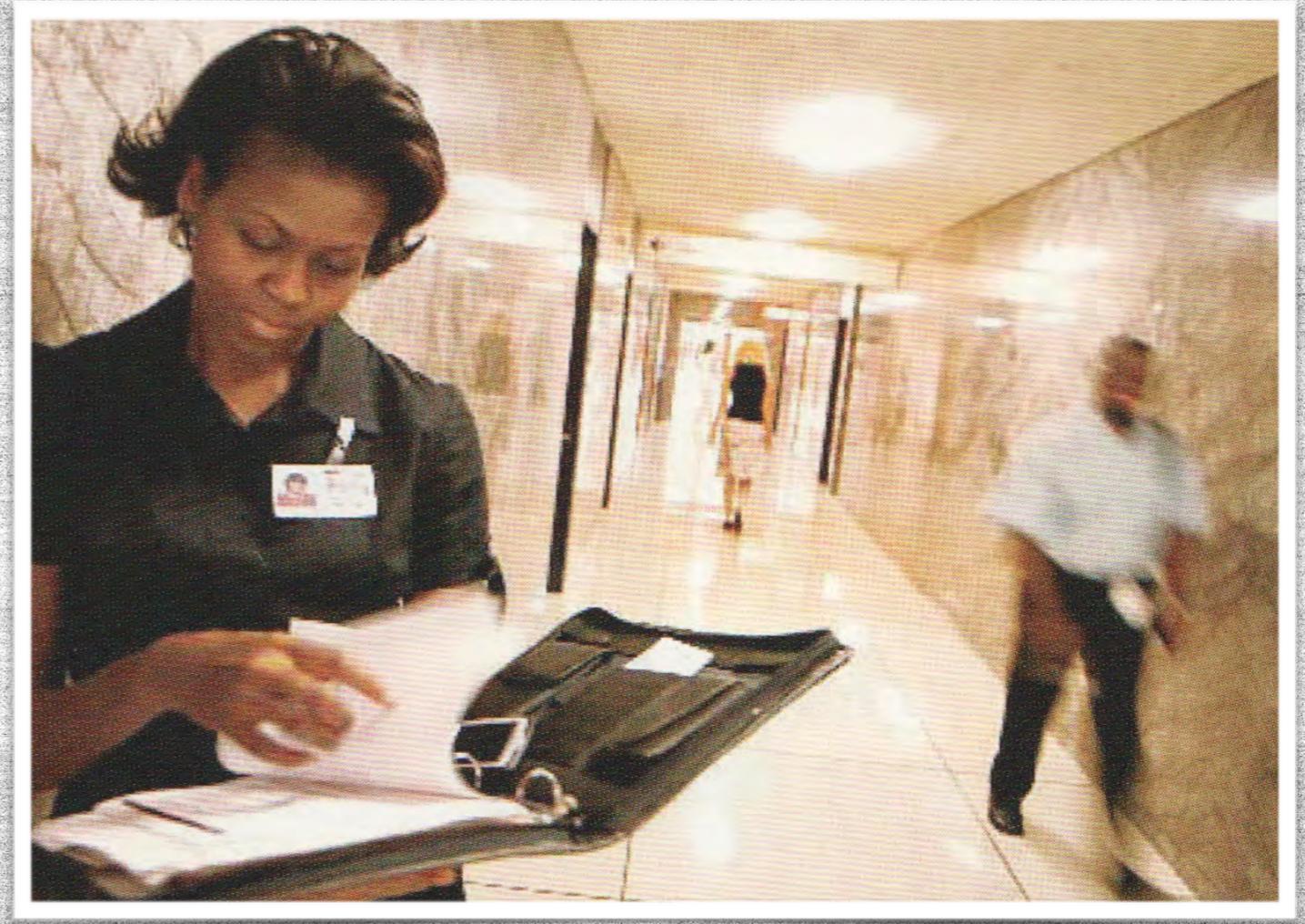
**MICHELLE NETWORKED
WITH FRIENDS WHO HAD
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INTO PUBLIC SERVICE.**

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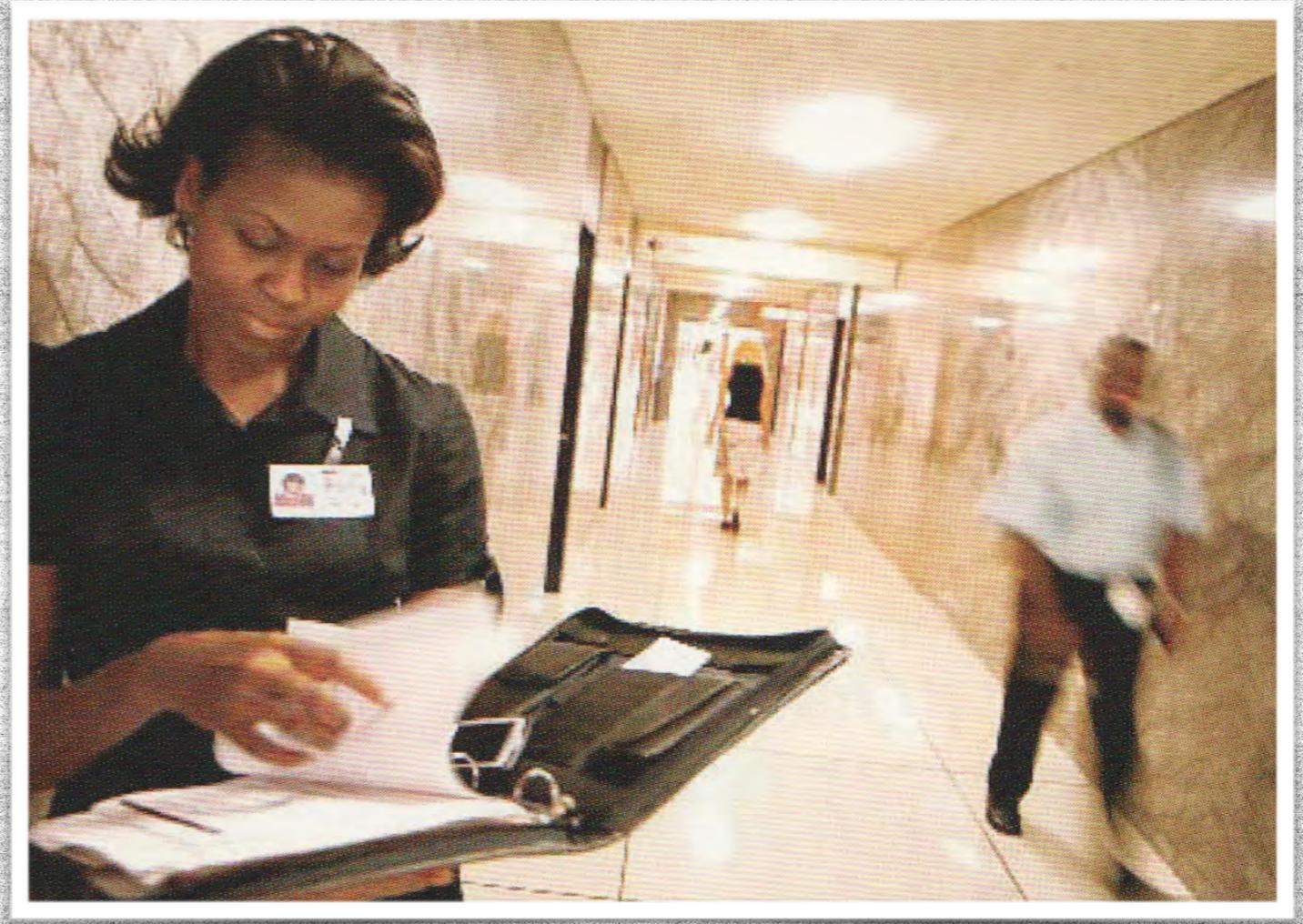
**SHE EVENTUALLY TOOK A JOB
AS ASSISTANT TO THE MAYOR.**

This is Chicago's City Hall ...

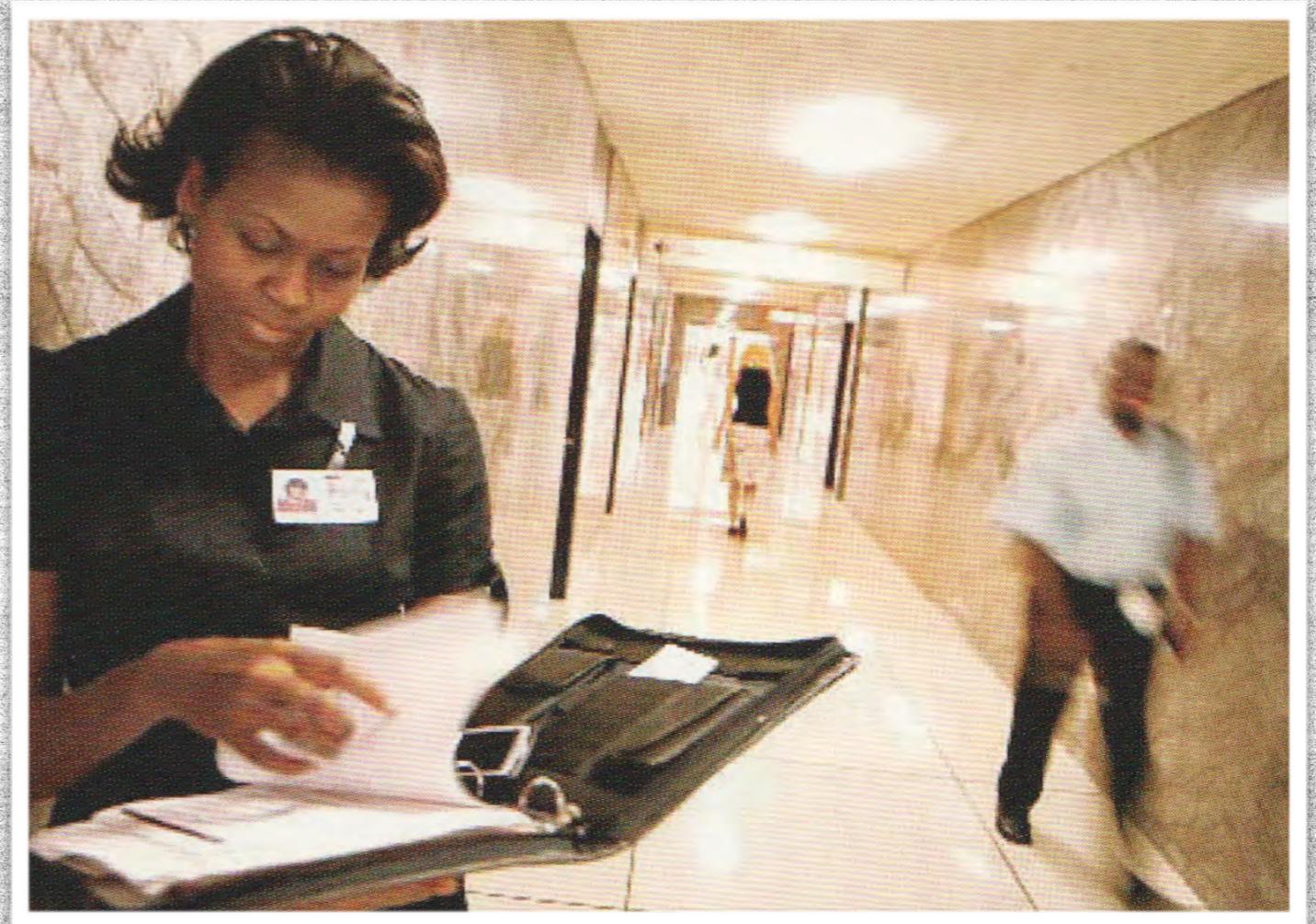




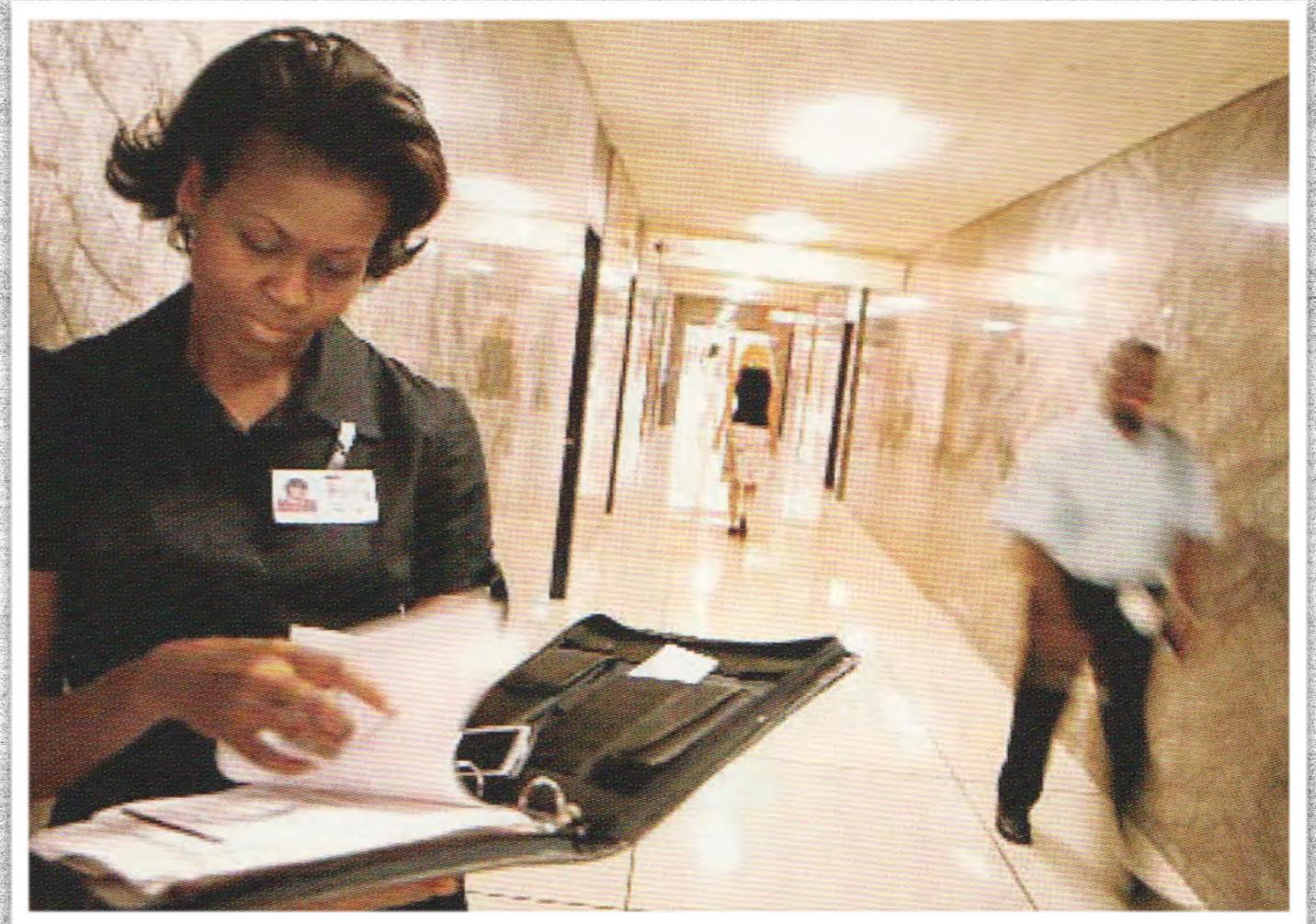
“I would no longer be practicing law. My salary would be \$60,000, about half of what I was currently making at Sidley and Austin.”



“City Hall belonged to the people. It had a noisy, gritty immediacy that I never felt at Sidley.”



“Whereas I had once spent my days writing briefs in a quiet plush-carpeted the office with a view of the lake, I now worked in a windowless room in City Hall ... with citizens streaming noisily through the building every hour of the day.”



“I went on missions to inspect fallen trees ... I talked to neighborhood pastors who are upset about traffic or garbage collection, and often represented the mayor’s office at community functions. I even had to break up a shoving match at a senior-citizens picnic on the north side.”

**AFTER A COUPLE OF YEARS
AT CITY HALL MICHELLE
MADE ANOTHER SHIFT TO
ALIGN HER CAREER MORE
CLOSELY WITH HER VALUES.**

Michelle's second major shift ...



“I was hired to be the executive director for the brand new Chicago chapter of an organization called **Public Allies**”



“Public Allies recruited talented young people, gave them intensive training and committed mentorship, and placed them in paid **10 month apprentice positions** inside community organizations and public agencies.”



“I still remembered ... at Princeton how so many of us had marched into LSATS, [or suited up for] corporate training programs without considering ...

that a wealth of more civic-minded jobs existed.”



“Public allies was meant as a corrective to this, a means of widening the horizons for young people thinking about careers.”



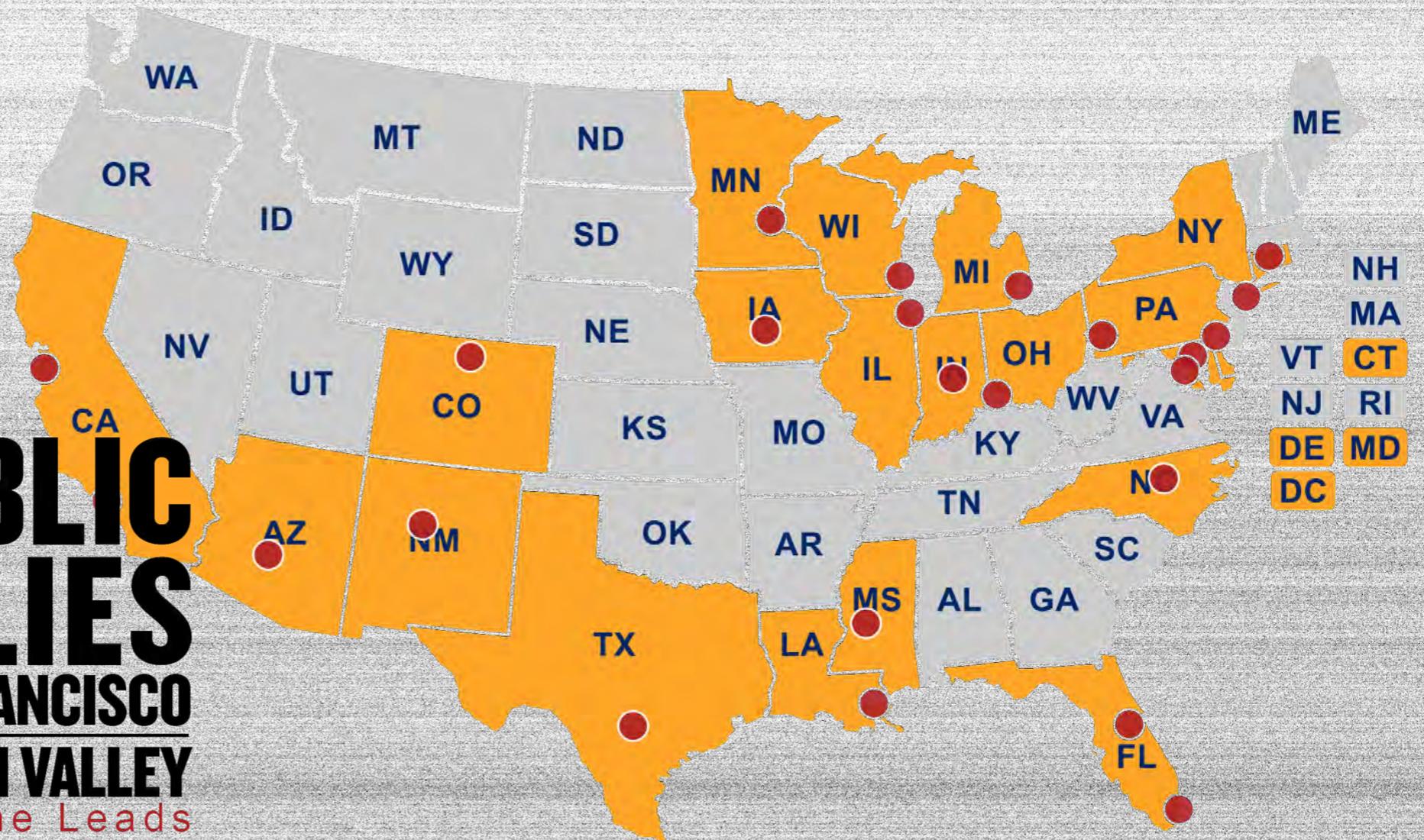
“Public Allies was all about promise ... It was a mandate to seek out young [who might be] overlooked and to give them a chance to do something meaningful.”



This career move involved a major pay cut, again ...



**PUBLIC
ALLIES**
SAN FRANCISCO
SILICON VALLEY
Everyone Leads



“I was initially offered a salary so small ... that I literally **couldn't afford** to say yes.”



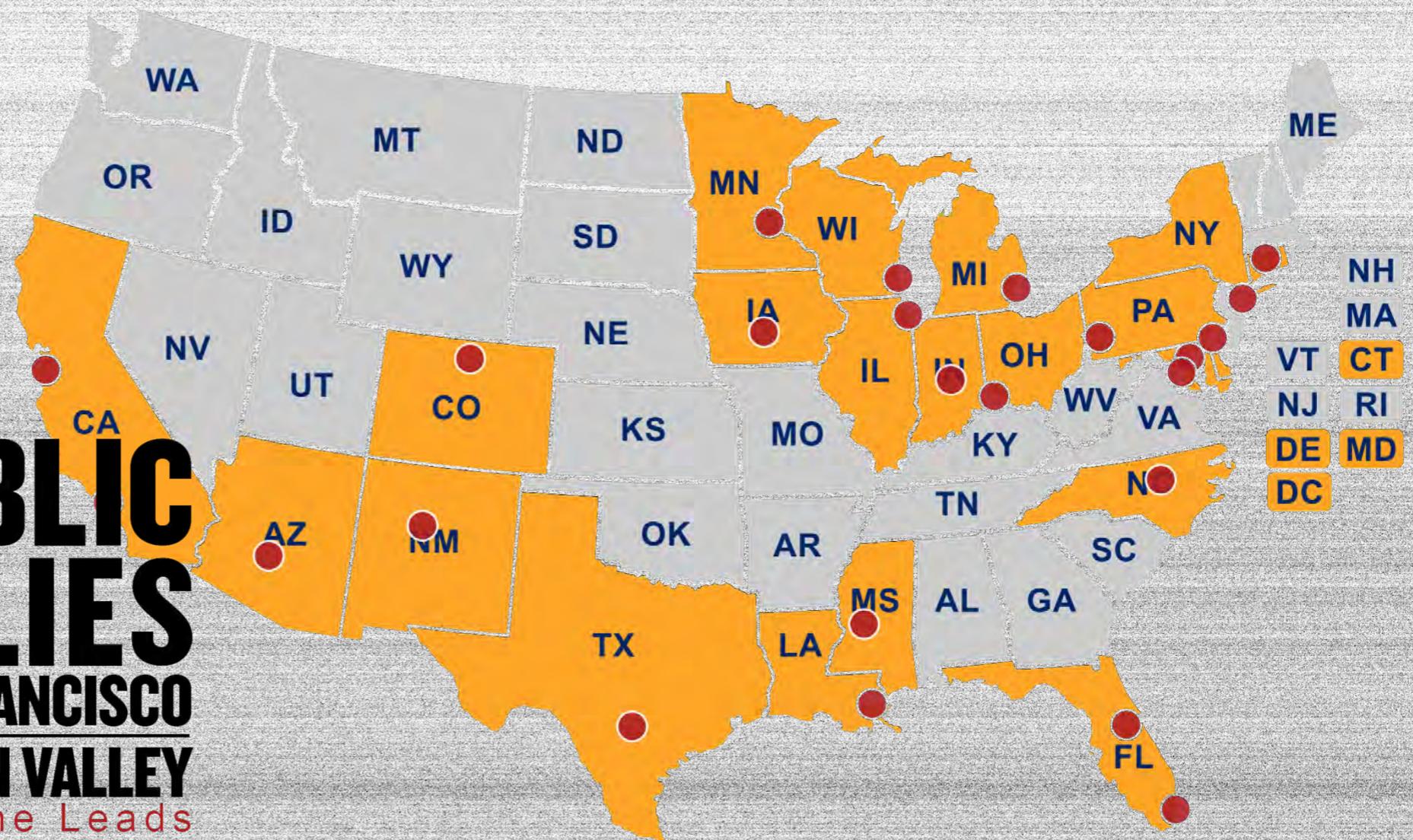
**PUBLIC
ALLIES**
SAN FRANCISCO
SILICON VALLEY
Everyone Leads



“I still had roughly \$600 of student debt to pay off each month on top of my regular expenses ...



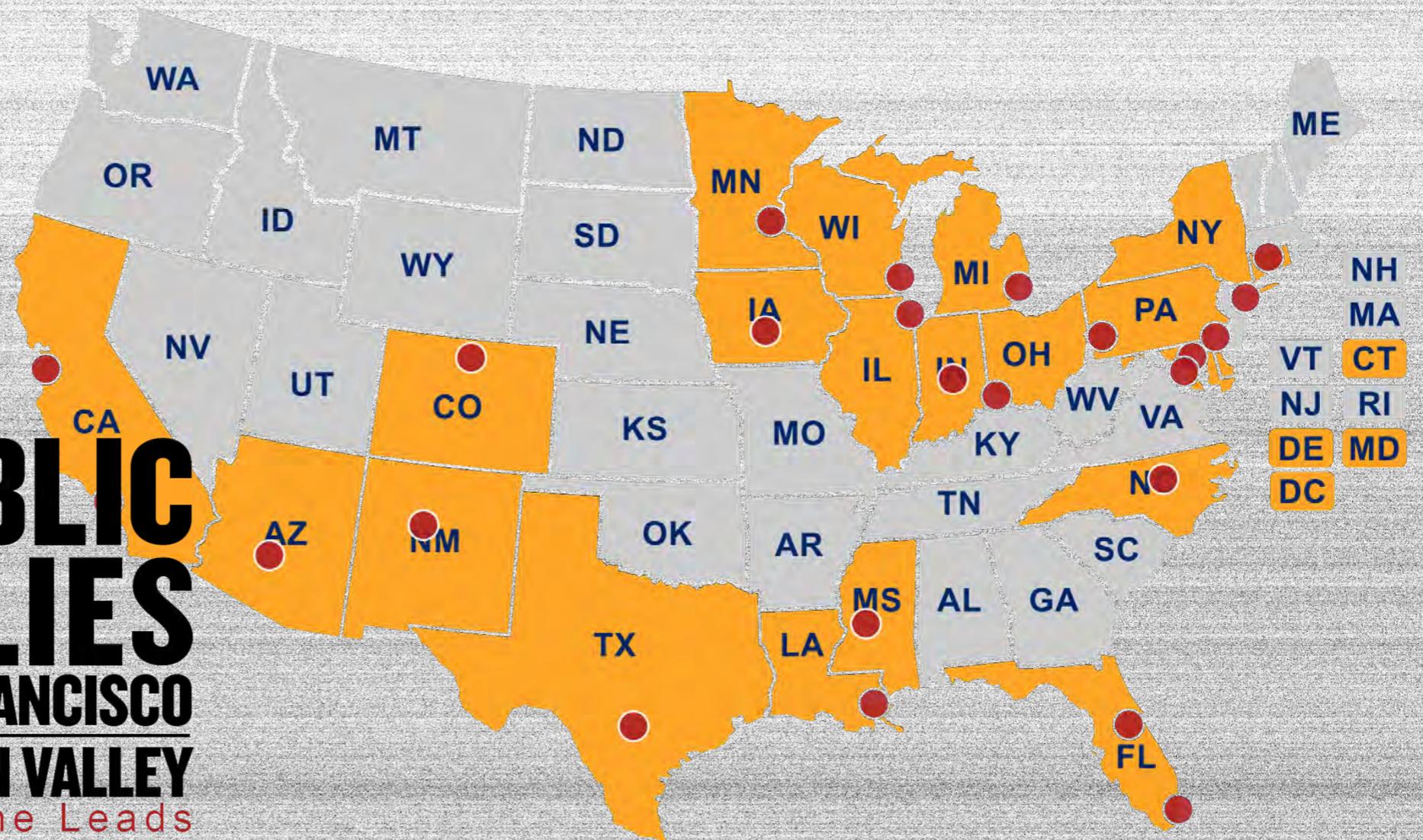
**PUBLIC
ALLIES**
SAN FRANCISCO
SILICON VALLEY
Everyone Leads



At Public Allies, “success or failure would depend almost entirely on my efforts, not those of my boss or anyone else.”



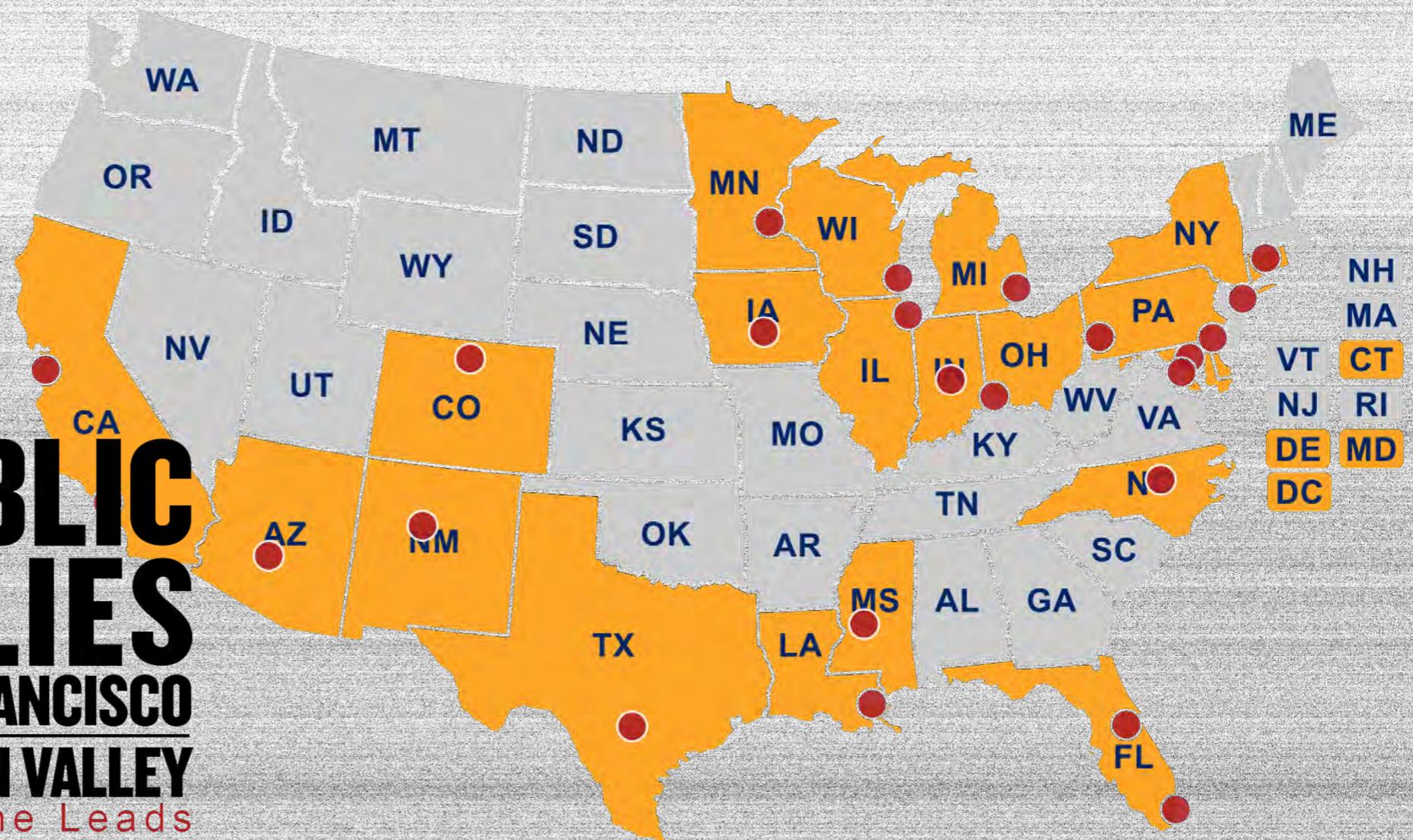
**PUBLIC
ALLIES**
SAN FRANCISCO
SILICON VALLEY
Everyone Leads



“I leveraged more less every connection I’d ever made in Chicago, seeking donors and people who could help us secure a longer-term foundation support.”



**PUBLIC
ALLIES**
SAN FRANCISCO
SILICON VALLEY
Everyone Leads



**BY THE TIME SHE WAS 30,
MICHELLE ROBINSON
HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO MAKE
HER MARK AS A SUCCESSFUL
ADVOCATE FOR DISADVANTAGED
YOUNG PEOPLE.**

**AS FIRST LADY OF
THE UNITED STATES,
MICHELLE OBAMA
CONTINUED CRUSADING
FOR THESE VALUES
WITH TWO PROGRAMS.**

the first was Reach Higher ...



REACH HIGHER

Complete your education. Own your future.



“During my time at Public Allies, I saw the benefits of more formal mentoring first-hand. I knew from my own life experience that when someone shows genuine interest [it matters,] especially for women, for minorities, for anyone society is quick to overlook.”



REACH HIGHER

Complete your education. Own your future.



“With this in mind, I started a leadership and mentoring program at the White House, inviting twenty sophomore and junior girls from high schools around greater DC to join us for monthly get-togethers.”



REACH HIGHER

Complete your education. Own your future.



“The Reach Higher program that came out of that effort would encourage kids to strive to get out to college and, once there, stick with it. Reach higher would seek to help them along the way, providing support for school counselors and easier access to federal financial aid.”



REACH HIGHER

Complete your education. Own your future.

LET'S
MOVE!

the second was about children's health ...



**LET'S
MOVE!**



**“At the time Barack took office,
nearly 1/3 of American children
were overweight or obese.”**

**LET'S
MOVE!**



“Most of what we knew about food had come through food industry advertising of everything boxed frozen or otherwise processed ...

Nobody, really, was out there advertising the fresh, healthy stuff.”

**LET'S
MOVE!**



“Planting a garden at the White House was my response to this problem.”

**LET'S
MOVE!**



“I planned to use the garden to spark a public conversation about nutrition ... which ideally would lead to discussions about how food is produced, labeled and marketed, and the ways that is affecting public health.”

LET'S
MOVE!



“Our dinners in the [White House] included broccoli, carrots, and kale grown on the South Lawn ... We [also] began to pickle vegetables and present them as **gifts to visiting dignitaries**, along with jars of honey from our new beehives.”



Michelle attacked the problem from many angles ...



This was not about government. “I thought it was worth making a human appeal as opposed to a regulatory one, to collaborate rather than pick a fight ... I wanted to speak directly to moms, dads, and especially kids.”



“I did interviews with the health magazines geared towards parents and kids. I hula-hooped on the South Lawn to show that exercise could be fun and made a guest appearance on Sesame Street, **talking about vegetables** with Elmo and Big Bird.”



“The three major corporate suppliers of school lunches announced that they would cut the amount of salt, sugar and fat in the meals they served.”



“We engaged the American Academy of pediatrics to encourage doctors to make body-mass index measurements a standard of care for children.”



“We persuaded Disney, NBC, and Warner Bros., to air public service announcements and invest in special programming that encouraged kids to make healthy lifestyle choices.”



“We made plans to help bring greengrocers into [areas] known as ‘food deserts,’ to push for **more accurate nutritional information** on packaging, and to redesign the aging food pyramid.”



“Walmart, which was then the nation’s largest grocery retailer, joined our effort by pledging to cut the amount of sugar, salt and fat in its food products and to **reduce prices on produce.**”

*Eventually Michelle took it
all the way to the top ...*



“I worked hard to push a new child-nutrition bill through Congress, expanding children’s access to healthy, high-quality food in public schools and increasing the reimbursement rate for federally subsidized meals for the first time in 30 years.”



In 2010 the bill passed in the House by a margin of

264 - 157



“The new law added more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy to roughly 43,000,000 meals served daily. It regulated the junk food that got sold to children via vending machines on school property while also giving funding to schools to establish gardens and use locally grown produce.”



what do you think?

**WORKING
BOTH BOTTOM UP
AND TOP DOWN
MICHELLE OBAMA
MADE A SIGNIFICANT
CONTRIBUTION
TO PROMOTING
CHILDREN'S HEALTH.**

