

Georgian recalls rooming with Michelle Obama

By BRIAN FEAGANS Published on: 04/13/08

Catherine Donnelly shopped at Kmart, settled into her dorm room and soaked up the Gothic stone buildings where, over the next four years, she would grow into her own woman. But her first day at Princeton held a surprise, too. And Donnelly knew it would mean confronting the past. She walked into the historic Nassau Inn that evening and delivered the news to her mother, Alice Brown. "I was horrified," recalled Brown, who had driven her daughter up from New Orleans. Brown stormed down to the campus housing office and demanded Donnelly be moved to another room. The reason: One of her roommates was black. "I told them we weren't used to living with black people — Catherine is from the South," Brown said. "They probably thought I was crazy."

Today both Donnelly, an Atlanta attorney, and Brown, a retired schoolteacher living in the North Carolina mountains, look back at that time with regret. Like many Americans, they've built new perceptions of race on top of a foundation cracked by prejudices past — and present. Yet they rarely speak of the subject.

Barack Obama's run for president changed that. When the Democratic senator from Illinois invited more dialogue on race last month, Donnelly and Brown, both lifetime Republicans, were ready. But their willingness to talk isn't a response to the candidate born to a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya. It's more about Obama's wife, Michelle. She's that roommate from a quarter century ago.

Shock to the stereotype

The acceptance letter from the Ivy Leagues was really the culmination of two peoples' hard work. "My mother was thrilled," Donnelly jokes, that she got into Princeton. Divorced and living paycheck to paycheck, Brown found a way to get her only child into New Orleans' elite Isidore Newman School: She taught 8th-grade science there. They were a mother-and-daughter team, then with the surname Rodrigue.

Donnelly, now 44, captained the basketball and volleyball teams. She was the homecoming queen. And she racked up science and math awards, often with the help of her mother. But the "Three R's" weren't the only thing Donnelly learned from an early age. There was a fourth one. Her mother and grandmother filled her head with racist stereotypes, portraying African-Americans as prone to crime, uneducated and, at times, people to be feared.

Brown, 71, explains that she was raised to think that way. She recalls hearing her grandfather, a sheriff in the North Carolina mountains, brag about running black visitors out of the county before nightfall. And Brown's parents held on to the n-word like a family heirloom. In fact, upon learning that her daughter had a black roommate at Princeton, Brown's first call was to her own mother. Her suggestion: yank Donnelly out of school.

Girl was likable, but black

The fourth-floor room had three beds, three desks and space for little else. The ceiling sloped in concert with the roof, creating a cramped perch atop the upper crust of American education. Quick-witted and nearly 6 feet tall, Michelle Robinson had no problem filling the room, Donnelly recalls. The future Michelle Obama, from Chicago's Southside, would playfully tease the third roommate, who was white. Obama's long fingers still narrate stories in Donnelly's mind. "From the minute we met," she says, "I liked her." Donnelly doesn't think Obama ever picked up on her mother's behind-the-scenes maneuvering. She remembers nothing but friendly words. Only now, looking back, does she see the wall between them. Donnelly was surprised to find something familiar — segregation — alive and well on a prestigious campus in the Northeast. The university's private eating clubs, host to frat-style parties, were largely white. The social scene for many minority students, including Obama, revolved around an activity building called the Third World Center. When Obama began hanging out with other black students on campus, Donnelly never thought to join them. "Here was a really smart black woman who I found charming, interesting and funny," Donnelly says with disappointment. "Just by virtue of having different color skin, we weren't going to be friends."

Other than confirming that Donnelly was her freshman roommate, Michelle Obama declined, through a campaign spokeswoman, to comment for this story. Her senior thesis, however, delved into the experience of black alumni at Princeton and provides some insight into her mind-set at the time. In the introduction, Obama wrote that Princeton made her more aware of her "Blackness" than ever before. "No matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don't belong," she wrote. "Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second."

Donnelly, meanwhile, was struggling with her own identity. She came out that first semester, chopped off her hair and partied with other lesbians on campus. Soon she, too, learned what it feels like to be part of the "other" group, to be seen as a student second. Donnelly said she and Obama had established separate circles of friends by second semester. That's when another room — the one her mother had requested — opened up. By then, it just made sense to trade cramped quarters for roomier ones. Donnelly doesn't remember having another meaningful exchange with Obama. She graduated with a psychology major in 1985 and forgot all about that tall roommate from Chicago.

'I was inspired I was envious'

More than two decades passed, and Donnelly, who normally doesn't care much for politics, found herself intrigued by one of the Democrats running for president. She was a little surprised to hear her mother liked Barack Obama, too. Brown had never voted for a Democrat. But she's a sucker for Harvard grads, especially eloquent ones. "He thinks well," Brown said recently, though she and Donnelly are still undecided voters. "He seems to be a thoughtful person. He considers everything."

When Donnelly first saw Obama's wife on TV, she was struck by how tall and graceful she looked. Then she studied her more closely. Michelle Obama looked so familiar, down to those long fingers. Could that be Michelle Robinson? A Google search gave Donnelly the answer. Obama was far more than a first-lady hopeful. She had gone to Harvard Law School, had been an associate dean at the University of Chicago and rose to vice president at the University of Chicago Hospitals. Like Donnelly, she was mother to two children. "I was inspired," she says. "I was amazed. And I was envious of all she had accomplished." Donnelly called her mother, who in turn phoned the friend who had traveled with her to Princeton all those years ago. The friends had stayed up that night calling everyone they knew with a connection to the university, hoping to get Catherine moved. "We thought this is so ironic," Brown says. "[Obama] could be the first lady, and here we wanted to get my child out of her influence."

Some empathy for lingering anger

As her 2- and 5-year-old boys play on the front porch, Donnelly flips through a photo album of her own childhood. Brown, in Atlanta for her monthly hair appointment, looks over her daughter's shoulder.

"There we are," Brown says, "at your graduation." In the photo, Donnelly clutches a bouquet in front of her white dress, smiling next to her mother and her grandmother. The story of race in America is one of generations: what's passed on, what isn't and the friction between the two. When Brown heard about Barack Obama's former pastor — his angry rants against white America — she didn't like it. But she understood. "If I had been treated the same way blacks have been treated," she says, "I'd be resentful, too." It was Donnelly, however, who understood Obama's response: "The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static." Society changed, and Donnelly has seen her mother nudged along with it. Says Brown: "It's become politically incorrect to talk about black people in a negative way. It's like smoking." Brown quit smoking in 1996. She's still working on the other. Brown says she wouldn't mind if her child or grandchild roomed with a black person today. But she's far from colorblind. "Where I draw the line is interracial marriage," Brown says. "That I can't quite deal with." She holds firm to the belief that African-Americans don't take enough responsibility. "Bill Cosby says the same thing," she says. "Get off your rear end and work hard and improve yourself."

Donnelly has more empathy. Her junior year psychology paper on affirmative action concluded that the effects of "covert, deep-rooted prejudice" are enduring. And she generally agrees with what Barack Obama said last month: "The disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to the inequities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of Jim Crow." Living as a gay woman has made Donnelly far more aware of what it's like to be judged by a trait beyond your control. "Being gay is such a small part of who I am." Now she wishes she had reached across racial lines at Princeton. "I don't think I ever set foot in the Third World Center," she says of the popular hangout for minority students. "It's like this mystical place." Since then, Donnelly has worked and socialized with African-Americans. Yet she hasn't grown close to any of them. "I've just never had an opportunity," she says, "to have a good friend who was black."

"You did with Michelle," Brown snaps. Donnelly rolls her eyes. She believes the cycle of racism can be stopped.

Donnelly turns the pages in the photo album to a picture of an African-American boy standing next to her at school back in New Orleans. "He and a white guy and I would fashion ourselves after the Mod Squad," she says. "We liked to think of ourselves as a little club." The friendship started in fifth or sixth grade. And Donnelly sees it as evidence that children have the right instincts. Truth is, many paths to the future start with the past. Donnelly thought she'd left that Princeton dorm room for good. Then those long fingers from the campaign trail waved her back inside. At first, she saw only herself and two roommates. Now she sees her children and Obama's children waking up in those beds, in a room with no barriers.

http://www.ajc.com/news/content/news/stories/2008/04/12/roommate_0413.html