

Michelle Obama addresses youth violence in Chicago

Written by
Friday, 12 April 2013 09:36



I want to thank all of you for coming here today on behalf of this city's young people. I want to thank you for your commitment to their safety, their wellbeing, and their God-given potential. And I know that many of you aren't new to this work. For years, you have been sponsoring sports leagues, afterschool programs, summer jobs and more.

So you in this room know firsthand the impact that we can have when this city truly invests in our children. And that's something I know from my own experience, which is why it was so important for me to be here today.

I'm here today because Chicago is my home. I was born and raised here. I built my career here. Several of my bosses are here -- former bosses are here. I met and married the love of my life here. I raised my children here, who, by the way, still refer to Chicago as home. They believe it gives them a little more credibility.

So let me tell you, when it comes to ensuring the health and development and success of young people in this city, for me, this is my passion, it is my mission. And for me, this is personal because my story would not be possible without this city.

And that's where I want to start today -- by talking about our city and the neighborhoods that make us who we are. As you all know, Chicago is truly a city of neighborhoods, separated by parks and boulevards. It's a city where walking just a few blocks can put you into an entirely different world of experiences. Cut through a park, and you go from English to Spanish, black to white, Puerto Rican to Polish. Cross a few streets, and you go from historic homes and manicured lawns to abandoned buildings and dark street corners.

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So the opportunities available to a child growing up in one neighborhood in this city might be vastly different than a child growing up just five blocks away. And that difference can shape their lives and their life prospects from the moment they're born.

That was certainly the case for me. As Rahm said, I was born and raised in South Shore. Our neighbors were teachers and secretaries, city workers; also a few professionals, doctors, lawyers, business owners. Most folks weren't wealthy. A lot of people never went to college. And we generally couldn't afford things like private music lessons or tutoring.

But thanks in part to this city, our lives were still rich with opportunities. We had decent public schools. I am a product of our public schools. We attended the Chicago Park District summer camps. Got a lot of ribbons from those camps I'm quite proud of. Played basketball on city courts. Our churches ran programs to expose us to music and the arts. So we didn't have to be children of privilege to get the opportunity to enrich ourselves.

And back then, our parents knew that if they loved and encouraged us, if they kept us off the streets and out of trouble, then we'd be okay. They knew that if they did everything right, we'd have a chance.

But today, for too many families and children in this city, that's simply no longer the case. Today, too many kids in this city are living just a few El stops, sometimes even just a few blocks, from shiny skyscrapers and leafy parks and world-class museums and universities, yet all of that might as well be in a different state, even in a different continent.

Because many of our children have never been to the Art Institute or Millennium Park. Many of them don't even know that the University of Chicago exists, let alone dream of attending that university — or any university for that matter. They haven't strolled along Navy Pier. Some of them have probably never even seen the lake. Because instead of spending their days enjoying the abundance of riches this city has to offer, they are consumed with watching their backs. They're afraid to walk alone, because they might get jumped. They're afraid to walk in groups, because that might identify them as part of a gang and put them at risk.

At Harper High School in Englewood, where I'll be visiting later on today, a newly-hired teacher noticed that when classes ended in the afternoon, kids would leave the building and walk right down the middle of the street. Now, at first, she thought this was just typical adolescent misbehavior. But one student explained that it's actually safest that way, even with all the cars whizzing by, because it gives them the best view of any fights or shootings, and they have more time to run.

Thousands of children in this city live in neighborhoods where a funeral for a teenager is considered unfortunate, but not unusual; where wandering onto the wrong block or even just standing on your own front porch can mean putting yourself at risk.

Those are the odds that so many young people are facing in this city — young people like Hadiya Pendleton, whose funeral I attended back in February. And we all know Hadiya's story. She was 15 years old, an honor student at King College Prep. And she came from a good

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family — two devoted parents, plenty of cousins, solid godparents and grandparents, an adoring little brother. The Pendletons are hardworking people. They're churchgoing folks. And Hadiya's mother did everything she could for her daughter. She enrolled her in every activity you could imagine — cheerleading, majorettes, the praise dance ministry — anything to keep her off the streets and keep her busy.

And as I visited with the Pendleton family at Hadiya's funeral, I couldn't get over how familiar they felt to me. Because what I realized was Hadiya's family was just like my family. Hadiya Pendleton was me, and I was her. But I got to grow up, and go to Princeton and Harvard Law School, and have a career and a family and the most blessed life I could ever imagine.

And Hadiya? Oh, we know that story. Just a week after she performed at my husband's inauguration, she went to a park with some friends and got shot in the back because some kid thought she was in a gang. Hadiya's family did everything right, but she still didn't have a chance. And that story — the story of Hadiya's life and death — we read that story day after day, month after month, year after year in this city and around this country.

So I'm not talking about something that's happening in a warzone halfway around the world. I am talking about what's happening in the city that we call home, the city where we're raising our kids, the city where your businesses operate.

This kind of violence is what so many young people like Hadiyah Pendleton are dealing with every single day. And those two boys charged with her shooting — this is the violence they were facing as well. And you have to wonder: What if, instead of roaming around with guns, boys like them had access to a computer lab or a community center or some decent basketball courts? Maybe everything would have turned out differently.

Maybe they would be doing their homework, or taking jump shots, or learning a new program instead of looking for trouble. Maybe if these kids saw some kind of decent future for themselves, instead of shootings, there would just be fistfights, some angry words exchanged. And then maybe -- just maybe -- today, more of our young people would be in classrooms and at jobs, instead of in custody, facing even worse odds than they started out with.

See, at the end of the day, this is the point I want to make — that resources matter. They matter. That what it takes to build strong, successful young people isn't genetics, or pedigree, or good luck. It's opportunity. And I know from my own experience. I started out with exactly the same aptitude — exactly the same intellectual, emotional capabilities — as so many of my peers. And the only thing that separated me from them was that I had a few more advantages than some of them did. I had adults who pushed me. I had activities that engaged me, schools that prepared me to succeed. I had a community that supported me and a neighborhood where I felt safe.

And in the end, that was the difference between growing up and becoming a lawyer, a mother, and First Lady of the United States, and being shot dead at the age of 15. And that is why this new fund that you've created here in Chicago is so important. It is so important.

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As you've heard, this fund will help create those ladders of opportunities for all of our kids. It will give our children mentors who push them and nurture them. It will teach them the life skills they need to succeed. It will give them alternatives to gangs and drugs -- safe places where they can learn something and stay out of trouble.

Because we know that every single child in this city has boundless promise no matter where they live. And whether we give them the chance to fulfill that promise and grow into productive adults who lead meaningful lives -- see, that's on us. That's our job. And our kids know when we're fulfilling that obligation. They know. They know the difference between lip service and reality. They see it and feel it every single day.

So we can host all the luncheons and make all the announcements we want. But at the end of the day, if our kids keep waking up in neighborhoods where they don't feel safe on their own front porches, if they're still attending schools with crumbling ceilings and ripped-up textbooks, if there's nowhere safe for them to go when that afternoon bell rings, then nothing speaks louder than that. Nothing.

So let's be clear. This is going to take a serious and sustained investment over a very long period of time, people. This is forever. And I am here today to join the call to all of you -- Chicago's most distinguished business and community leaders -- to take up this challenge with fervor. And I hope that communities across America will follow Chicago's lead to get our young people off the streets and back on track to successful lives.

Right now, my husband is fighting as hard as he can, and engaging as many people as he can, to pass common-sense reforms to protect our children from gun violence. And these reforms deserve a vote in Congress.

As he has said, we can't stop all the violence in the world. But if there is even one thing we can do, even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent from the grief that's visited families like Hadiya's and so many others here today, then don't we have an obligation to try?

But we all know that these reforms must be just one part of a comprehensive effort to rebuild our neighborhoods and build a better future for our children. And if anyone can make that happen, it's all of you. You all are some of the most creative, innovative, influential people not just in this city, but in the entire country. You have brought together folks from all across Chicago to do great things for this city, like build Millennium Park, host the NATO Summit -- quite well, by the way -- make the lakefront the cultural jewel of the Midwest.

And today, we need you to dig deep and apply that same passion, determination and civic pride to this city's most precious asset -- our children. Now, we all take great pride in this city. And I don't just mean the center of it; I mean every single one of the 77 neighborhoods that make us who we are. Each of these neighborhoods is a vital part of this city, as is every single child.

And as business leaders, you all know that this city's young people are your future workers, your future customers. Their success is critical to the success of your businesses, which is

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critical to the success of this city.

But you all are also here, I know, today because you know that this is about more than just fulfilling a business obligation or a civic obligation. You all know that this is a moral obligation. Because ultimately, this city and this community will be judged not just by the beauty of our parks and lakefront, or the vitality of our businesses, but by our commitment to our next generation.

I think my husband put it best when he spoke to the people of Newtown, Connecticut back in December, and he said this is — and this is a quote: "This is our first task, caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged. And by that measure, can we truly say, as a nation, that we're meeting our obligations?"

That is the question my husband asked — are we truly meeting our obligations to our children? It's a question we should also be asking in Chicago and in every corner of this country.

And it was the question weighing on my heart when I met with Hadiya Pendleton's classmates on the day of her funeral. Dozens of them later spoke at the service, each referring to her as "my best friend." And let me tell you, it is hard to know what to say to a room full of teenagers who are about to bury their best friend.

But I started by telling them that Hadiya was clearly on her way to doing something truly worthy with her life. I told them that there is a reason that we're here on this Earth — that each of us has a mission in this world. And I urged them to use their lives to give meaning to Hadiya's life. I urged them to dream as big as she did, and work as hard as she did, and live a life that honors every last bit of her God-given promise.

So today, I want to say the exact same thing to all of you. I want to urge you to come together and do something worthy of Hadiya Pendleton's memory and worthy of our children's future.

Join me and Hadiya's classmates and young people across this city who, by the way, even in the face of so much hardship and such long odds, are still fighting so hard to succeed.

We need to show them — not just with words, but with action — that they are not alone in this struggle. We need to show them that we believe in them, and we need to give them everything they need to believe in themselves.

I would not be here if it weren't for that kind of belief. And I know that together, we can do this. So let me tell you this: I look forward to the work that you do. I look forward to you hitting this goal and surpassing it. I look forward to this city being the model of what communities can do to wrap their arms around our youth and make them the best they can be, to embrace all of our neighborhoods and every last one of our children.