

00:00:00 Michelle Obama: You guys are here, because of real basic qualities that. And that's, honesty, integrity, hard work, and a level of resilience. Those are the kind of things that, you can't buy and you can't teach.

00:00:17 MUSIC

00:00:37 BREAK 00:01:02

00:01:05 Michelle Obama: Hi everybody. I am Michelle Obama and this is The Michelle Obama Podcast. On this episode, we are revisiting the mentor-mentee relationship—but this time, we're looking at it from the other side.

On a recent episode, I spoke with my dear friend and mentor, Valerie Jarrett, about how the best mentorship experiences grow and evolve over time.

And in this episode, I want to talk with some people who have been important in my life. So, I want to welcome three very special young women to our podcast today: Kristin, Chynna and Yene.

These three all started out working with me in various capacities in the White House... and they've all stayed in my life for years. Each of them has grown and matured and impressed me at every turn.

00:02:05 While I like to say I've known them since they were babies, today I count them as true friends. And I know that I've learned as much or more from them than they have from me.

So in this episode, I just want to talk — about our relationships, and also what's been going on in the world, and what it's like to be black women in this moment in history.

So why don't you all start by introducing yourselves?

00:02:34 Kristin Jones: I'm Kristen Jones, and, I think I met you back in like 2009 when I was an intern in the first White House class, which was pretty cool, and then I came back and, uh, started as your research associate, in the East Wing, and then spent, like seven and a half years, like, as your assistant, and kind of, doing a lot of everything.

Michelle Obama: [laughs]

00:02:57 Chynna Clayton: Chynna Clayton: Hey, so I'm Chynna Clayton, um, originally from Miami Florida,

Michelle Obama: Always gotta rep Florida,

(multiple) Always. [laughs]

Chynna Clayton: Um, I was actually an intern in the White House during fall 2010, um, and from there, I went on to do something called advance, following my internship, and then, I got a call from the First Lady's Office, um, to become her body person, or trip director. In, 2015? And, I've been with her ever since.

Yene Damtew: Um, my name is Yene Damtew um, I'm your hair stylist. Um, I got into the Obama world in 2009. But yeah, I've been a part of your life ever since, started off, uh, with your daughters, primarily, and your mom, and then kinda made my way up the ranks and I'm now with you.

Michelle Obama: Mmm. But you're not just with me, because when you are

Yene Damtew: I'm not.

Michelle Obama: not doing my hair, you're also, a little baby baller yourself.

00:03:55 Yene Damtew: I am, I also have a salon that I opened in 2017, and in 2019 I launched my uh, business coaching program for hair stylists. So, when I'm not with you I'm always finding something else to do.

Michelle Obama: Always.

Yene Damtew: Always.

Michelle Obama: And you were how old when you came on to the?

Yene Damtew: 21. I had just turned 21 I think, like a few months prior. Um, and I was scared. I didn't want to come at first.

Michelle Obama: Yeah, well why don't you talk a little bit about that?

Yene Damtew: So, when I got the opportunity to move to D.C. to work with you all, I'm a child of immigrants, my dad was not having it. He was like, Oh you're gonna drop out of college?

Michelle Obama: Well you can't brush over that. You were the child of immigrants.

Yene Damtew: Yes.

Michelle Obama: Because that, that says a lot right there.

00:04:39 Yene Damtew: Yeah, so I'm first generation Ethiopian-American, and, my parents came to this country, obviously to provide a better, better life for us, and so, traditionally, when they, when anyone thinks of success, and when they measure success to be, it's like, you're going to be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer. Me, saying that I wanted to drop out of college to do hair, it just wasn't accepted, it was just like, You're gonna do what? No. No. That's just, that's not accepted, and, and even once I relocated, and I took the position and I moved to

D.C. I remember my dad didn't talk to me for three months. And it was my mom kinda of like, smoothing it over to be like, look she's taking care of herself financially, like, she's OK, she's fine, and, there was opportunity to come work for the first family, the first Black family in the United States, it was like how was I gonna turn this down, because, there was this path that my parents created for me? And I, and I understood that, what they understood to be success was like very limited. Right. By American culture, by African culture, so for me, it was just kinda like I'm just gonna be good at it, and I'm gonna show you. Like I could still make something of myself if I don't, go work in an office, you know?

00:05:44 Michelle Obama: Well each of you, you know, pretty much, all of your roles, are, the the paths you've taken, are very, unconventional. Cause Kristen you were, you know, coming out of college, you worked for Teach for America, you know, your parents are Black too. Um, So, the notion that you were gonna intern, in an unpaid internship, cause let's just make that clear, starting out in the White House, is for free. So what did it take to convince your families or what was it in you, that made you decide, to take this leap?

Kristin Jones: My mom actually was the one who pressured me into applying for the internship. She was really relentless about it. I mean she just got, you guys know those emails, that go around to like Black people, where there's like literally like 50,000 emails on it, and it's like for scholarships and stuff. That's how we found out about the White House internship and so, I applied, um, and came, and, my parents were pretty supportive, and I think the biggest stretch for them has really been post White House, um,

00:06:46 Michelle Obama: So in many ways, your mom was thinking, OK. You know, my, my baby girl, is gonna be working with the President, President Obama, and First Lady, she's gonna be a judge, or she's gonna be, a lawyer, there's, this is gonna be an,

Kristin Jones: Yeah, she's gonna be set for life.

Michelle Obama: Oh, err, you took a turn!

Right. And I'm like, I want to try to build something all the way from the ground up, and she's like, uh, that's not what you're supposed to do, people leave the White House, and then you get a huge salary and you stay there, and like, but, I have to say, like it was my time at the White House, my time with you, our time traveling the world, that really made me want to build something of my own.

00:07:22 Michelle Obama: And Chynna what about you? You don't come from wealth, and privilege,

Chynna Clayton: Yeah, yeah, so, I applied to the White House internship, I get accepted, did advance for a few years. And at that point I was at Disney. And, my mom,

Michelle Obama: Cause you had left,

Chynna Clayton: Right, because, sorry, so I, yes, so I left doing advance, in 2013. And began working at Disney for about two years. Um, and then this you know, once in a lifetime opportunity came about, to be Mrs. Obama's body person. I was hesitant, because, I'm someone who, really believes in stability. So, in my mind, I'm like, why would I take that leap, and potentially be out of a job, in the next two years, versus staying at Disney and climbing the

corporate ladder. So my mom, explained that, you know, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. And she was right.

00:08:18 Michelle Obama: Mmm Yay for mom!

Chynna Clayton: I know!

Michelle Obama: I always thank her. Thank her everyday. Everyday.

00:08:31 Michelle Obama: We're raised, to um, especially in Black families, cause everybody here is Black. To, take the safe route. Go to college, get your education, get your degree, get a job, with good benefits, but what was it in you guys do you think? That led you to get off those traditional paths, and make a decision to do something a little more risky? What gave you the courage?

Kristin Jones: I think I've always had that in me, in some way, I was always fine kind of closing my eyes and jumping in the deep end, it was never like as thoughtful of meditative as maybe it should've been. I think even if we just look at like the past ten to eleven years, I know that we've talked a lot about failure. And so, I think, even though I've had the bravery in me, I think being more and more comfortable with the idea of failure, and being less terrified of that concept, um, that that has helped me be a little more mindful. In my risk taking, more present in my risk taking. And I think that's helped me be like, more successful in my risk taking, too.

00:09:43 Michelle Obama: Mm hmm. Well I know I talk a lot about, not being afraid to fail. I mean that's one of the things, when I talk to young people, because that is the thing we sort of breed into, kids, it's like, you know, you've gotta get straight A's, there's a certain way to do everything. And a lot of parents try to shield their kids from failure, because as a parent, you just don't want to see your kids go through that kind of pain, but failure is something that, you do, kinda have to, get adjusted to. Um, because it's a natural part of life. You know, you don't do anything successful without a little stumble. Along the way. And so many people are trying to, avoid the stumble, at all. Ever. That they never take the chance. And then they miss out on some really interesting, opportunities.

00:10:32 Yene Damtew: We've had conversations about, this isolated world that we all live in, and we think that we have to go through everything independently, and I think for me, especially within like the last, five to ten years, everything that I do, even if it's a risk, I know that I have a tribe and a community behind me, right, so it's like, even if I fail, there is somebody in my like, communal orbit, that will be like, I got you.

Kristin Jones: And I do think that like, watching you with your friends, the way you guys, communicate, the way you guys link up, like, I, I often tell people, when I'm, with my friends, outside of the White House world, and they're talking about their twenties, you know, it's like when they were all like clubs, and having a ball, we were at Camp David, and I'm sitting around a dinner table with you and your friends talking about, childbirth and college tuition, and all of these things, checking my phone, like, somebody text me! Um.

00:11:28 Michelle Obama: [laughs]

Kristin Jones: But, you know after, eight years of that, I was, you know, I do think that, I came into my thirties with a lot of wisdom, um, with a lot more insight than I think I would've had, on who I want to be in the world, and how I want to show up, and even though I'm still practicing that, and there are still failures along the way, um, I do feel very supported by you, your friends, the kind of family that we've all created. With each other out here, because I don't know, there's something about, the way I grew up in LA, or my school, where I just, mistakes, like, gave me anxiety. I even remember, like, probably the first six months at the White House, now to be fair, I was like 24, didn't talk to you, was offered a job at the White House, I was cocktail waitressing in LA, so obviously my answer to the question was yes, I will take any job at the White House, and, I walked in and they offered me the job to be your assistant. And I was like have you guys asked her? Because she doesn't know me!

00:12:30 Michelle Obama: [laughs]

Kristin Jones: And they were like, yes. we've asked her. Do you want to think about it, and I was like does it come with any more money? Like a hundred dollars, and I remember Mel was like, we can, maybe work something out. And I was like, I'll take it! But I remember, like coming in to your family, to me, you were this woman who was on TV, right, so, I wasn't on the campaign, I didn't have these connection points with you, and I, was, twenty four at that point? Twenty five? Running your life?

Michelle Obama: Yeah, and, and you definitely walked around the house the entire time, with that look on your face, like I'm gonna be fired at any moment.

Kristin Jones: Yes! Terror!

Michelle Obama: And my husband used to say whenever he'd see Kristen, he's like what are you doing to her? She looks terrified. She looks terrified and worried the whole time. Cause you were in your head,

Kristin Jones: I was so in my head.

Michelle Obama: Very much in your head.

Kristin Jones: Obviously, there were, there was a lot in my head.

Michelle Obama: Oh yeah you were working it out, all, it was all over your face, it wasn't like you had a poker face,

Kristin Jones:... No, I do not have a poker face.

Michelle Obama: You were on the verge of just, terrified, the entire time.

00:13:39 Michelle Obama: Let's talk about that, that self doubt, that am I good enough? syndrome that, runs through all of our heads, because there are a lot of young people listening, and they would assume that if you're Michelle Obama, or somebody who's worked for her, then you must have this innate confidence. That you must not have ever doubted yourself, because how could you take on these big roles, lot of young girls are listening and thinking, you all have something or see something that they don't. In themselves. When the truth is, we all experience that doubt.

Kristin Jones: I think, you know, in so many ways, even as I sit here and I hear you say that, I'm like yeah, that's how I feel everyday, still, right, and I'll be, thirty five, in a, two weeks,

Michelle Obama: But we talk about the fact that a lot of men don't think that.

(multiple) At all. [laughs] Clearly, at all.

Michelle Obama: lot of men just go yeah, of course, of course I'll take the job, of course they picked me out.

00:14:36 Yene Damtew: For me, everything I did, everything, everything I continue to do, it's like you can't get that. Like, high school, I grew up in Orange County, my freshman year my counselor was like, you can't, you're in international baccalaureate, are you sure you can handle this? It was this constant reminder of, you're not good enough, and and I'll be honest, once I, started working with the Obama's, it was just kinda like, how did she get that? Who is this young girl. I was too young to have, the resume, that allowed me the opportunity to do something like this, it was just like, Why her? And then you felt it. You felt it like, and and D.C. like the whole titles thing, I didn't have a college degree, like I ended up getting a degree while I was here, but D.C. is one of those cities where it was just like so where'd you go to school, who do you work for? And, I started being proud, I was like oh I'm a college dropout.

Michelle Obama: Mm hmm.

00:15:25 Yene Damtew: But I'm like, you don't know what I do, and you don't know who I sit at the table with. I found comfort in knowing that like, Kristen, Chynna, everyone around us, was young. And we were all kind of struggling and like the three of us, as they both mentioned, we were away from our parents, so we became our own little family, like when we thought we were gonna get fired, I'd be like, Kristen and I would text each other, in the salon, all the time,

Michelle Obama: See y'all act like you were cool then, every other minute, you're about to be fired, at no, lemme just make clear, at no point did any of you all ever have a conversation that led you to believe that you would be fired,

Multiple: No no no, It was, in our heads!

Michelle Obama: But it was, but it's interesting. you know, it's

Multiple: It was us, like! Girl, it's in our heads, Kristen and I, girl, This is the day!

Michelle Obama: This is the day!

Yene Damtew: I may have to move in, today's gon' be the day. If I could tell you how many times we text each other when we're in the same room to be like, did, did I, did I say that wrong, should I have said that?

00:16:19 Kristin Jones: That's right!

Yene Damtew: Should I have like, not come in the room right now? Like just the craziest things that we put in our heads, but it's like, it's all what, it it's little things along the way, the baggage that we carry, that when we get to this opportunity we're just like mm mm, we shouldn't be here, we messed up, we, gon', we're gonna mess up.

Michelle Obama: Chynna you amen-in' over there, talking about baggage the baggage that we carry,

Chynna Clayton: Well yeah, the baggage that you pick up along the way. I was just thinking, the first time I was told I wasn't good enough, I was in the first grade, um, and there was a gifted program at my elementary school, and my mom went to my teacher and was like I want her tested for gifted, um, and the teacher told my mom, oh no, she's not good enough for that program.

00:17:06 Michelle Obama: Those little cuts, that we experience, women experience them at higher rates than men, Black folks in higher rates than others, of these little bitty cuts and slights that, we, experience throughout our lives. And the interesting is, thing is, we never forget them. And that's why I try to remind adults, it's like we have to be very careful, about how we talk to young people, not just teachers, but parents. Mothers and fathers, you know, because, if you, tell your child shut up and be quiet, they may never talk again. And all of us, are running around with those ghosts in our heads.

Multiple: Mm hmm. Mmm hmm.

Michelle Obama: So how do, how have you guys started to overcome that?

Michelle Obama: Or maybe you still have 'em.

00:18:00 Chynna Clayton: I was gonna say, I'm still struggling! [laughs]

Kristin Jones: I definitely still have them, and you know, even a second ago when I was like I'm thirty five, I still have them I was like oof, like, take that off the tape. I don't want people to know, but as you're asking this question of how do you get over them, I have to be honest, I've come a lot further by sharing them, by speaking them out loud, you know, the three of you in this room kind of pulled them out of me, even if I'm trying to hide them, And I think, the more, I say them out loud, the less power they have, the freer I become from them, because, I'm able to connect, deeply with other people. Over, that shared experience of having doubt. We are the only things that we can't see. We can't see ourselves. Like, I can see the greatness in you you, you, you, but I don't ever see myself unless I'm looking in a mirror. And so surrounding yourself with people who can reflect back to you, who you can trust to reflect back to you, the good and the bad, and stay, the people who can stay around to work through, the the bad parts with you,

00:19:10 Yene Dامتew: I think, as Kristen mentioned earlier, for me, it's not only having the people around me that are gonna be like oh you're doing good, you're amazing, it was like nah, girl, that was shady! Like, you were wrong for that, and I think that, when you, when you have those people around, you're able to kinda work through things, but it, all starts with like, you being honest and telling your truth. You have always, always encouraged us to like, just say our truth.

Michelle Obama: And that is the opposite thing that we're taught. Um, we're taught, keep to yourself, don't be vulnerable, don't share, don't say it out loud, um, but the the reverse is true. If you hold all that stuff in, as we've talked about you practice the negative narrative, that

negative loop that's in your head, I'm not good enough, because there are no other ways to break that cycle. You know, vulnerability is the key to our success.

00:20:07 Chynna Clayton: Well I was gonna say, self reflection, is something that also helps me to overcome doubt. When you just take the time to sit with, your life and its trajectory. When I, think back over my life and I realize that, you know, from day one I should've been counted out, because I was the product of an, of a single parent household, my father went to prison when I was young, you know, my mom did what she had to do to make ends meet, the mere fact that I overcame that, in itself is powerful, and then you just keep thinking about everything over life and how much you've done, or accomplished, or struggled through, and, that just gives me the power, to, to kinda, get it, get out of my own head, um, and realize, you deserve everything that has come your way.

00:20:52 Michelle Obama: Well share with folks, the the story, if you feel comfortable, about, the time that you pulled me aside, this was recently, this was in the last couple years, cause you were gonna tell me something, right, and I was like oh my goodness, is Chynna gon' quit? Cause see, while you all are thinking that, you're gonna be fired, I'm thinking oh these, these kids are gonna quit, they're gonna need to make more money, I thought every conversation was ugh my god now I gotta figure out somebody else I trust, enough to be in my life, so, the reverse is often true. But Chynna, when you, talking about giving your truth narrative, it was, I laugh at it. Because, Chynna was like, ma'am, I need to have a conversation with you, this is really serious, and I was like oh my lord, what, what is, this child, cause Chynna also doesn't talk much. Right, she does not, like to share.

00:21:46 Chynna Clayton: Correct,

Michelle Obama: And she is working on, that vulnerability piece. But Chynna, is the last one to speak at a meeting, she likes to give her thoughts on the side, pull them over to write them down and think 'em through. So, you you have to really work to figure out what Chynna is thinking, so when Chynna wanted to talk,

Chynna Clayton: So, [laughs] to elaborate on this story, um, while I was at the White House, well, pretty much all my life I have never really shared that um, my father was in prison. And he spent a good chunk of my childhood in prison, um, he didn't get out until I was about ninth or tenth grade, and he went in when I was three years old. So I had never shared that with anything because, you know I was just always ashamed of that story, so, post White House, I sat Mrs. Obama down I'm like, OK, I just gotta tell you, in the event, anything comes out of it, in the event, anything happens, I want you to know this part about my story. Um, and I just told her, I was like you know, my father was locked up, while I was in, um, when I was a kid, and she was like is that all you had to tell me? Is that really all you had to tell me? And for me I was just like, yeah, I wasn't expecting that reaction, like that's heavy, that's deep, I've never shared it! um, and at that moment, she encouraged me, to always share my story, because you never know what young person can relate to that. You never know what that can do for somebody who might've been in the same situation. And they can see themselves in you now, and they know that something's achievable.

00:23:13 Michelle Obama: But in you, you saw that story as a weakness.

Chynna Clayton: Absolutely.



Michelle Obama: You, and and this is why I say it's so important to put our truth on the table, because number one, you carrying that around like a burden, you know, if you, when you think you have to hide something about yourself, I always say you never bring your real, true, free self to anything. Right because you are always worrying that somebody's gonna find me out, right. Um, and there's so much in our lives growing up as, women of color, because there is an ideal way to have lived life, there is, there is an ideal pathway out there. That's why people follow rich people, why people follow wealth, and whiteness, and privilege, because those are the messages that we've been taught, that's the American dream. That's what, that's the right answer. 00:24:02 When the truth is, is that, nobody does it that one way. But putting that truth out there, it's like, what I said to Chynna, was like, girl, that is your power! That explains so much about you. And explains so much about your resilience, and your toughness, it tells me about what makes you hesitant, what makes you scared, that made you special. That made you different. That made you unique. Because, despite not having that relationship with your father, you grew up with a mother, that, you know, saw you through, who instilled in you the ability to get this far, you know. I mean, the fact that you rose this far with all that worked against you, makes you even a bigger winner, you know, your life was tougher and you, we're still sitting here in the same room together. Now isn't that something. Isn't that god, right.

00:25:00 Michelle Obama: You guys are now, as I've said to you, you are now the mentors, while you are still being mentored, by me, and you will until the day I die. So what would you say to young people that, you know, were you? Ten years ago?

Yene Damtew: Bet on yourself, um, trust your gut, and don't be scared to reach out and ask for help. Uh, I'll slide in somebody's DM with intent, right, to learn from them, that's probably the greatest thing, and like, no one is gonna root for you like yourself, so like root for yourself and know that there are other people out there that are just like you, that have had the same hardships, and and failures, and and triumphs, and just, keep betting on yourself and trust your gut. If I didn't trust my gut, I would've never worked with Michelle Obama. If I didn't say, I'm dropping out of college, and I want to do hair, this would've never been, Just like you said, I'm not, anything special. I'm not, I didn't come from money, I didn't, I, I'm, my mother was a waitress, my father has his own company, like, I'm average middle class child of immigrants, but look at where my life has taken me, and it's because I listened to that little voice inside of me that's like, Little girl you gon' do hair! You're gonna do hair!

00:26:16 Michelle Obama: Or let's start that sentence, you are everything special, because, you are the product of immigrants, because you are a smart Black young woman, because you are, I mean that's the example of retelling that story, it's like starting out with, that is, that's what makes you special.

Kristin Jones: I would say, um, do things, practice doing things that make you uncomfortable. Um, and I would also say, don't be afraid to bring, your, personal into the professional, and your professional into the personal. I find that like, with the people in my life who are younger than me, who I mentor, I'm so curious and interested in like, their life life, like, who they follow, what they watch on TV, what their perception of the world is, I think that's where there's like this mutual teaching that happens, where, how they live really informs, my understanding of the

world. Be open, to, doing things that are uncomfortable, um, and yeah, just, just bring your full self. Even as, even as it evolves, and is in a, incomplete nature, to all of your relationships.

00:27:36 Chynna Clayton: For me, um, I'd want young folks to know, um, that hard work is, truly valued. Especially minorities, um, we aren't given free passes. So, to always put in the work, because it can and will pay off in the end, you shouldn't be out here looking for the free ride or the free pass if you're putting in the work and doing your due diligence. Something else that's key is exposure. Making sure that when you have the opportunity to gain exposure you are, if that's surrounding yourself with different people, if that's making sure you go to out of state college, or anything like that, if that's traveling, exposure is key. Because it opens your mind up to so much more than what's just within your three block radius of a neighborhood.

00:28:26 Michelle Obama: Mm, all, all good sound, advice. No wonder, you're my mentees. You make me proud!

00:28:41 Anna Holmes: More from Michelle Obama and her mentees in just a moment.

00:28:57 BREAK 00:29:27

00:29:31 Michelle Obama: So let's talk about, the state of things now. I mean, sort of where we are, because yes, we are still, in the midst of a semi quarantine-ish, because the world is responding differently to that, but we, believe, in science, so we are still taking the coronavirus very seriously, um, but we're also in a time when once again, we are dealing with, uh, racial strife, blatant signs of injustice. Things that, people, naively thought, were all taken care of, issues that had gone away in America and around the world, and, lo and behold, here they are. Um, Black men, Black people still being killed on the streets. Black folks, poor folks, brown folks dying at higher rates from a virus, and not much going on, let's just check in, how are you all feeling as, young women, women of color?

00:30:29 Yene Damtew: I'm angry, I think I'm more angry at the fact that so many people, like, ignore what's going on, right. I feel this responsibility, um, to no longer stay quiet, right, like things that bothered by or the fact that people want to ignore because they don't know what to say, to just be like, this is what it is, I'm a Black woman, you are going to recognize what is going on and how I'm feeling, you don't have to, your experience is not my experience, and I would, like, I know that, but you're going to address it.

00:31:02 Kristin Jones: I think for me, it's interesting because this is kinda like the first time I feel like I've been visibly in a room with you guys, since this has all happened, and you guys know this, my grandfather, who's a Black man, passed away from COVID, um, so we, as a family were dealing with that, for six weeks, the ups and downs, of that whole experience, and you know, my grandpa was 94, he lived a long life, and there are hundreds of thousands of people, who, have family members who passed away who are young, I'm angry too. I go through these really interesting moments of like, trauma, I think, and we texted a little bit about this, but there's this, trauma of just being Black in America, that you're seeing on social media,

there's the trauma of watching people kill y-, people who look like you based on how they look, and, having a brother who, you know, god forbid he ever got pulled over, is not gonna have chill, he's not gonna be somebody, who, Yene's brother isn't either, plenty of my friends' brothers aren't, then also the trauma of like, watching white people process it, has been, that's, sent me over, there have literally been days in the past three weeks where I have been watching social media, um, there was this one clip that was floating around of this really brave young girl, she's a teenager, she was a white girl, trying to convince her parents not to be racist, like that Black people weren't all, whatever, adjective, they wanted to come up with, I literally had a panic attack for about fifteen seconds, and then had to pull it together for a call, I had to get on a call. Um, and so, just this idea that like, the humanity of people was being discussed or defended or debated, that that's a conversation that, we don't have, that we've never had, Um, so I'm tired I'm exhausted, I will, just cause we'll be vulnerable, I'm probably, like, Elizabeth wrote about this in her, uh, essay,

Michelle Obama: Elizabeth Alexander,

00:33:01 Kristin Jones: Elizabeth, auntie Lizzie, killing it in the New Yorker, um, but, you know that we probably all have very low grade depression, that, that is obvious from Insecure, the TV show, which is brilliant, and I think they do a great job addressing, not just mental health directly, but also this low grade, like we're just not that happy, nobody's that happy in our community, um, and, yeah, so I'm exhausted a lot, and I'm trying to work. What has been helpful is, I do feel like, our agency right now, is doing important work, we employ Black people, by the grace of god, our, we've been able to stabilize, our business, through COVID, we've been able to pay our workers, every paycheck. Um, which is really important to me and Ari, and we continue to get work, and be able to continue to employ people of color. So that feels good, that feels meaningful, that feels significant and important, that keeps me going, it's why I get out of bed, but, it's a lot. And I think it's a lot to be quarantined and not be able to be in conversation with loved ones, like we typically would be in this room right now.

00:34:13 Michelle Obama: Well that's why this, this podcast is important,

Kristin Jones: yeah,

Michelle Obama: Um, because, hopefully it will give people an opportunity to hear, to listen, to process, to share, um, Chynna I see you writing notes over there, [laughs]

00:34:27 Chynna Clayton: Yeah, I think, for me, um, a feeling, that I haven't been able to shake is guilt, and it's guilt, um, when it comes to the coronavirus, because I feel like, I'm now, at a place where I'm a few steps removed from my old hood. And I know that there are people in that neighborhood who may not bounce back like I had the opportunity to bounce back from, and I feel guilty because of that, because I'm not in that same position anymore, um, there's a guilt that comes, with, the, you know, the the protests and and, and seeing, you know, these Black folks, being abused and killed, by police officers, because, I'm trying, I'm trying to process why, when I initially saw these videos of the Sandra Blands, and the Philando Castilles, why I didn't feel this same anger and hurt, um, you know when I first saw them that I'm feeling now, and I think, a lot of that has to do with the pandemic. 00:35:27 And the mere fact that, I am forced to sit in it. And sit with it. Whereas before, it was business as usual, you saw it, you're like damn, another one, and then you kept going. But right now, since everything

is at a standstill, you know, I'm processing these things a little bit more in depth than I ever have before, and there's a guilty feeling there, there's a guilty feeling of, feeling as if I've, failed, gen-z because I wasn't out there protesting and making sure this stuff was corrected prior to them, being involved. Um, and ma'am you and I had this conversation, of, just the mere fact that, the world was a little different back then, right, we thought we were headed in the right direction, things felt a little better. So, my, my activism back then was being a part of your husband's campaign, getting him in that White House, making sure he was elected, you know, but, I just, I just feel very guilty.

00:36:19 Kristin Jones: What do we do as Black women, with feelings of guilt, like the one that Chynna articulated?

Yene Damtew: And I'm gonna ask more to that, I think more so I feel like as Black women we feel this, different weighted pressure, of guilt.

Multiple: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Yene Damtew: Right, like, I feel like, I have this extra responsibility, that I have to fix it, I have to be the voice, I have to be the voice for my brother or my dad, and my sisters and my cousin,

Kristin Jones: And the industry,

Yene Damtew: and the in, oh, the industry part, don't get me started on that. I'm tired of that. But, there's, why, why is there this, feeling we feel, another layer?

00:36:57 Michelle Obama: Yeah, well, some, some if it, I don't think I have all the answers, but I can say, yeah, I, you, you're talking to somebody where the, lot of people, said that I should be running. And, there's a guilt that comes with the fact that, well, there were a lot of people who thought, well you guys were in there eight years, and so you should go back in there, and, so yes. I understand, the guilt. I understand the feeling of, you know, can't we do more? There's, there's, it's never enough. Um, so yeah, I feel the guilt, and I don't know whether, I feel it more because I'm a Black woman, um, maybe it is, maybe that's our nature, um, maybe that's our nature of fixing things. Of nurturing people, of being, the, you know, the glue. Uh, in our families, and in our communities, that, you know, when things fall apart, usually, it's the women in our lives who keep it going, because, in the Black community, so many of our men were emasculated, were imprisoned, were wrongly dealt with, were, you couldn't get jobs, that we could get, um, it you know, because out, the Black men in our community were so destroyed by the systemic, continuous racism, that we were the ones left. 00:38:18 To keep everything afloat. The country has put so many roadblocks up for men of color, that, the the burden does fall on us as women, left behind, it's been our legacy as Black women in this country, for four hundred years. But like I say, the first thing we have to do is claim it.

Kristin Jones: Yeah.

00:38:40 Michelle Obama: You know, we gotta put it out there, and look at it, in its truth. I know I've, have felt, for so long, that I don't have the luxury of falling apart. That if we don't get up, we may never get up. And that, that's one of my fears, it's like I got to get up. So, we learn how to adjust to the trauma. That we face. We learn how to adapt. Because, what is the alternative? And sometimes we turn off to it. Chynna, because that's our break. If I gotta wake up everyday and face the world as it is right now, ugh, you know sometimes you gotta turn it

off just to get through it. The one thing I can say to all of you is that, well yeah. That's how you feel. You know, I mean, when you put it out there like that, well of course, now the, the thing that's frustrating, is that, people who aren't in our position don't understand. That's that's the part that hurts. It's our, it's, it's all of the women, white women, uh, liberals, who are not in our position, who, don't know how hard this is.

Yene Damtew: How do you not resent them?

00:39:59 Michelle Obama: Well because there's a reason why they don't know. Um, you know it's empathy. You know, what I, what I what I've talked about throughout this entire series, it's like it's an emotion, that we, have underdeveloped. We don't teach it enough in our kids. Putting ourselves in the shoes of others. And, yes in these times, it's easy not to practice it, because, one could say nobody's trying to be in our shoes, [laughs] not as Black folks. You know we've had a country that has let us down by people not taking the time to figure out well what, how hard must it be, with me being who I am, and this system being the way it is, how hard must it be. So no, we we haven't had many people who are not us putting themselves in our shoes. But, like I've said, when they go low, [laughs] we go high.

Multiple: We go high.

Chynna Clayton: We have to.

Michelle Obama: So, how I get through it is that I put my my myself in their position. You know, number one, you can't understand what you don't know. And, when you're white in this country, you have the luxury of only knowing what you know.

00:41:09 Michelle Obama: So I think that, resentment, is a wasted emotion. When the truth is, is that we need to educate, you know, we now need to stop, trying to be so brave, and holding it together, because, what it has done is given other people the excuse to think that we're fine. Because we are showing the world everyday that we get on the bus and go to our jobs, and ignore the, the underlying racism, and not talk about it, and not bring it up at the office, and to, alter ourselves to fit into this, majority. Quote unquote majority. We deny our white brethren the opportunity to learn, about what our pain is like. Um, what our truth is like. You know, we we haven't, they don't know, because we don't share. Uh, and we don't share, because we were told sharing that, is a, is a risk.

00:42:18 Michelle Obama: The deep pain, is that, you know, still? You know. Still, y'all? Still you're afraid? Still, we don't belong? Still? Still you tryna put us in jail, still? You know, that, us living our lives right, going to church, raising kids, being president, going to school, all of that, before it's rewarded, it's questioned, it's challenged. How dare you be Black and intelligent? How dare you try to be president? You know, how dare you, try to own your own business? It's like man, we keep playing by your rules, and, as I said, you change the rules. Why? Because we're, because the hue of our skin is different? My god. We aren't even trying, it feels like we aren't even trying to, be better. Uh, we aren't trying to learn, that's the frustrating thing. Because it goes on both ends, cause on the one hand, I'm like OK, white folks, still? We're still here? But I'm also, Black folks, women young people, we're not voting? 00:43:25 I'd never

thought, uh, electing Barack Obama would end racism in America. That wasn't, I, you know I was too old to be that naive. Maybe young people did believe that. Maybe young people thought, you know, having that one Black man, without a Congress, and without a Supreme Court, and without full control over a three branch system, was supposed to, move heaven and earth, and change it all, in eight years. You know, I can understand, being confused by that if you don't know how this democracy works. Um, but that may lead to confusion, what does constitute change. How much work, and coordination, has to go in to move the needle just so slightly. Um, And to not get complacent, because when you're moving the needle that slightly, you take your eye off the ball and it slips right back.

00:44:23 Kristin Jones: I was having a conversation yesterday, it was just like, our team was talking, and we were talking about racism. And like, where it comes from, like how did we get here, like what is it about Black people that scare white people so much? And I was saying that, it's really, to me all about the power of storytelling, of narratives. And like, when you were saying, this idea that, Black people aren't human, is where it started. Then they were three fifths, then they were property, just this idea of lesser, this is like a story, this is like cultural heritage. The cultural heritage of this country.

Michelle Obama: It's the story of the birth of this nation.

00:44:57 Kristin Jones: Yeah! And so, on one hand, how exciting, that, you know, we all have the opportunity to create other stories. Storytelling is, huge in culture right now,

Michelle Obama: No I think you make a good point about the stories we tell ourselves. Um, You know, and in, and if we practice those stories over and over again, it becomes our truth, um, and that's why it is so important, to practice a different set of stories, in order to get our, ourselves as individuals into a different mindset about ourselves. I mean it starts from within. Right, so you can't, tell, a better story about your community, if you can't find a way to tell a better story about yourself. You know, the, the self doubt, the, the self hatred. Quite frankly, um, that can go on, among oppressed people, women, people of color, those that are not, deemed to be at the top of the hierarchy. 00:46:02 Those stories, if we can't unravel that, within ourselves, and start there? Then, we won't be able to see it in, in others who look like us. And it's one of those, you gotta love yourself first. You gotta believe you're worth it, to believe that your neighbor, the other, the the other woman across the way, who looks like you, deserves it too. Um, And we just don't see those images. Uh, enough. About ourselves. I think we're doing better, as a, as a culture now, we're seeing, a more diverse image of Black people. You know, the fact that Insecure, you know, is, a that is among our favorites. You know, I mean to see Issa every week, on the screen, living her life, and making her mistakes, and have it be just as ordinary, as watching Karen [laughs] you know tell her story, that's, that's powerful. And I do want to take this conversation into the positive, because, the truth is, that is what progress is. That's something that, I tell you guys. All the time. It is the progress of generations. 00:47:15 It isn't the progress of one, or two presidential terms. That's four years. That's eight years, that's nothing. But the, the progress of a generation, is, is really powerful, and I think we're seeing that, on display, in the midst of these protests. This is the first time, in my life, that I have seen, such diversity of people, out there, you know, of all ages and races, uh, Yene as you asked, is like how do you keep from being resentful? It's like well we have to stop and look at what is happening. Right. Because, there is something about this moment, that is uh,

tapping into, the, humanity of more than just the people who've been victimized by it, in a way that I haven't seen since, the civil rights, uh movement, and, Chynna maybe that is because we are now sitting in it, all of us, you know, not just you, and me, but we're all, on quarantine, and we are all unable to turn away. 00:48:19 But whatever it is, that, it is is a sign that that humanity is there, in all of us. And it's also something that Barack and I have talked about, this generation, was the Obama generation. These were the kids, of all races, and political backgrounds, who grew up, only knowing a Black man as their President. And I know this is frightening to some people out there than wanna deny the impact of that, um, these kids were raised to believe in a different kind of America. And their parents, were part of that. Instilling that belief, that all men are created equal, I mean people were teaching that around the dinner table. And, young women, are being taught in ways, now, that they can do and be anything. And they have fathers who are parenting them differently, who don't believe that they should just go off and get married to the highest bidder, but that they have to have their own voices, and their own careers, and their own autonomy. Those have been the conversations around the dinner table, these kids, of all races, were told, that that, was America. And that there's honor, and truth. And now they're seeing the opposite. At the highest levels. They're seeing the very opposite of what they've been taught to be, by their parents, of all races, and they're seeing it on social media, and on their phones, and it is real, and it is, clear, the hypocrisy is right there. And it is hard to look away. 00:50:01 It is hard to look away. And that is change. And my, belief, is that, these kids will raise their kids differently. Assuming that we don't get so depressed and downtrodden that we give up the fight, which is directly tied to voting. You know, cause we could roll over, or we could just protest our way into, oblivion, absent the vote, but if we keep the momentum going and send a message, in this coming election, of the America that we want for our kids, then that next generation will be even better than we are. It is, generational change, it feels a little scary now, because we don't know what this is, because we've been disappointed, in the past, right, where things have started to change, and then we, just like, with our administration, we thought we were going in one direction and didn't realize that there was still some underlying stuff going on, some resentments and some beliefs, and some old stories. About who we were as a people, that were still out there, but, why, why wouldn't they still be out there? You know they don't go away by magic. 00:51:11 They go away by being replaced with other stories. So now our challenge is, is that we've got to tell those stories. And we have to start with telling our own. Loud and clear. And that starts with, not telling it with our voice, but telling it with how we exist in the world, by bringing our Blackness and brownness and womanness to every table that we're in. We've gotta bring it all, to the table, and say, deal with it! Let's talk about it. Why does it bother you? Why are you afraid? But if we're hiding it, and we make it comfortable, well, our our white brethren never have to adjust. Cause we're not asking em to. So we gotta start asking 'em, adjust. I can't be your only Black friend [laughs] where are the others? [laughs]

00:52:06 Michelle Obama: It has been a pleasure having you guys here, and I'm so proud of you.

Kristin Jones: Thank you for having us!

Chynna Clayton: Thanks for having us!

Yene Damtew: Thank you!

00:52:12 Michelle Obama: Well as you can see, I am proud to count on Chynna, and Kristin, and Yene in so many ways — they are thoughtful, empathetic, and just plain ol' brave. I am so incredibly impressed and proud by the women they've become... and are still becoming... and that's why I'm so grateful to count them as my friends.

The little sisters I've never had. So if you have some special people in your life, especially if you're a little bit older than they are, I hope you'll take some time to talk with them and hear what's on their mind, especially as we navigate this complex—and draining—process of wrestling with racial injustice.

Even if you just listen... especially if you just listen.

Because this process of growth and understanding isn't something that's gonna happen on social media, with a bunch of memes and tweets. And Lord knows our politics are not the best avenue for these kind of conversations. But if we can reach out... and share our stories... and allow each other to be a little vulnerable... then maybe we can make some progress, person-by-person, relationship-by-relationship.

Thanks so much for listening everyone. And we will talk again soon.

00:53:38 Anna Holmes: The Michelle Obama Podcast is a Spotify Original, presented and produced by Higher Ground Audio in collaboration with Dustlight Productions.

From Higher Ground Audio, Dan Fierman, Anna Holmes and Mukta Mohan are Executive Producers. Janae Marable is our Editorial Assistant. Adam Sachs is our Consulting Producer.

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The song you heard at the beginning of this show is "Made it" by Teyana Taylor.

Thanks for listening to The Michelle Obama Podcast.

00:55:11 BREAK 00:55:31

