

DIANE MCKINNEY-WHETSTONE

THE FIRST FAMILY

The Obamas made for a stunning visual as they took center stage in Grant Park on election night. When the crowd surged forward, hearts bursting with love and pride, the lens shifted and altered the world's view of the Black family. Here, in President-elect Barack Obama, was a handsome and charismatic father exuding adoration for his daughters; a husband whose affection for his wife was so evident that, as we watched them on the campaign trail, we got the sense that after 16 years of marriage, he still got weak in the knees at the sight of her walking toward him. Here, in Michelle Obama, was a brilliant wife and an attentive mother, eyes trained on her children, protective and strong. And here were the beautiful daughters, Malia and Sasha, in their ebullience and velvet-and-taffeta dresses and their Sunday school hair.

As the tears washed down our faces, we flashed on all the moments over the past months that had filled us up, filled us with a recognition of family that has for too long been missing from the public stage: There was Barack, eyes closed for a moment, leaning against his wife in a Normal Rockwell-esque diner, or scooping his daughters into his arms on yet another airport tarmac. And Michelle, exchanging that playful fist dap with her husband, or wiping Malia's brow on a hot summer day, or absently, tenderly, smoothing Sasha's flyaway hair. And there, in family snapshots were the girls, sprawled across their parents, owning them, with perfect assurance that the man who would be president and his first lady were theirs, first and forever; the campaign, the world, everything else, came after.

And there, on election night, for all to witness, was the picture-perfect image that the world has not seen enough of because the camera has too often been trained on our dysfunction—the absent father, the hysterical mother and the maladjusted kids. But in Grant Park on that night, we saw an image that could have been lifted from those cardboard fans we used to sway in church, fans adorned with pictures of the smiling Black parents and their well-appointed children. We saw a family not unlike any number of Black families we know, who live quietly in towns and cities and suburbs throughout the nation. That night, watching the Obamas, even if we didn't leave our seats, inside we were jumping up and down just like the Kenyan relatives. Finally, the world could see what we've always known: Black families can be loving, intact, nurturing worlds that produce confident, talented children.

We moved by the image of the Obamas on that stage for other reasons too. We knew intimately about the fractured pasts and defiant dreams that had culminated in a present that was so wonderfully whole. Barack's story is so familiar to us: the child whose father goes away, the single mom struggling on welfare, the grandparents who step in and supplant. We've lived Michelle's past as well, in the dearth of material privilege, and the sacrifice and the encouragement that never quit. Like Barack and Michelle, many of us were raised by those who would not allow excuses for underachievement. We studied our books and garnered scholarships, and began the quest for a purposeful life. Then there was the miracle of falling in love and partnering with

one who had the capacity for compromise. The children came. And for the Obamas, the moment came.

It was our moment, too. On the stage at Grant Park the light passed at just the right angle to capture the splendid realness of the Black family. We saw ourselves in the small gestures: Michelle touching Malia's shoulder; Barack sweeping Sasha into the air, the president-elect, buoyant in the presence of his family. And we felt the wonder of the moment, wrought by God's grace, through which even the fractured parts of our history could unfold into such miraculous wholeness. Deep down, we've always known what our families could be. Now with the Obamas' victory, the world knows, too.

Diane McKinney-Whetstone is the best-selling author of five books, including her most recent novel, *Trading Dreams at Midnight* (Harper).