

A first lady's first year

By Washington correspondent Kim Landers

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Michelle Obama is hardly the first first lady to endure public fascination with her appearance. (AFP: Leon Neal/Pool, file photo)

It's been a little over a year since Michelle Obama stepped into her role as first lady.

It's a position that has no definition, no pay and no official power, but plenty of pressure. Every move, word and wardrobe choice is subject to scrutiny.

Michelle Obama has made Forbes' most powerful women list, People's most beautiful list and Time's most influential list.

Maxim magazine has her on its list of hottest women.

And the cultural resonance of being the first African American first lady cannot be underestimated. The Washington Post's fashion editor Robin Givhan writes, "Michelle Obama is Clair Huxtable made real."

Michelle Obama is hardly the first first lady to endure public fascination with her appearance.

And despite all the jokes about the right to "bare arms", she's not the first to pose with bare arms in her official White House portrait.

The National First Ladies Library says Mamie Eisenhower also went sleeveless.

Michelle Obama says she spent last year "figuring out the job" of the first lady. And for all her star power she did have a fairly quiet start.

But that's now changing. She's trying to channel the publicity surge that accompanies her every move into a campaign to end childhood obesity.

It's her first concerted foray into a policy area. While she's planted a vegetable garden on the South Lawn and showed off her hula hooping skills to promote the benefits of healthy eating and exercise, the first lady hasn't been involved in substantive policy debates about health care, even though before her husband's presidential campaign she was a senior executive with the University of Chicago Medical Centre.

But now Michelle Obama is the figurehead for the "Let's Move" campaign. About one third of American children and adolescents are obese or overweight. It threatens to make them the first generation to live shorter lives than their parents.

The first lady's public schedule is now being arranged around her pet topic. She's already given a speech about it to the National Governors' Association. This week she's addressing the School Nutrition Association's legislative action conference; visiting a school in Mississippi (which has the dubious title of America's fattest state); and attending a soccer clinic in Washington.

Michelle Obama doesn't look like she's ever had to battle the scales. Growing up in Chicago, she was a self described "tall, lanky, crazy-skinny kid". Her daily routine included riding her bicycle, playing tag and jumping double dutch.

It's not that the first lady is becoming the food police. She admits she loves burgers and fries. But she wants Americans to think about what they eat and how often.

As a mother, she's talked about the warning a paediatrician gave her about daughters Malia and Sasha and how they needed to cut down on snacks and sugary drinks.

While she's been earning accolades for drawing attention to healthy living, she's also been criticised for talking about her daughters' weight.

Others are accusing her of trying to propagate a "nanny state" where the government is telling Americans what they can eat.

The first lady insists "Let's Move" is not government intervention. But it highlights how anything Michelle Obama does can stir controversy and debate, particularly when a first lady moves beyond traditional roles like supervising the White House Christmas decorations and the Easter egg roll.

Still, Michelle Obama isn't attracting as much flak as first lady as she did in the early stages of the presidential campaign.

Back then she was characterised as bitter, angry, a socialist and unpatriotic. And who can forget the fist bump shared by the Obamas on the night Barack Obama clinched the Democratic nomination, which was referred to as a "terrorist fist jab".

These days her remarks are a little more tempered.

Last month she defended her husband during an interview with America's ABC TV network saying he had done a "phenomenal job" in his first year as president.

But in the popularity stakes, Michelle Obama is doing a better job than her husband.

A CBS news poll in December said 78 per cent of Americans thought she was doing a good job as first lady. Just 50 per cent approved of her husband's performance.