

Michelle Obama to start mentoring program for girls

By Katherine Skiba

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WASHINGTON — First lady Michelle Obama — and some of her Chicago "sisters" in the White House — will launch today a first-of-its-kind mentoring program with about 20 high school girls from greater Washington.

Observers say her leadership and mentoring initiative has not been done by a first lady before. Obama — and White House staffers including Valerie Jarrett, Tina Tchen, Susan Sher and Desiree Rogers, Chicagoans all — will act as mentors to high school juniors and sophomores.

Jarrett is a senior White House adviser. Tchen leads its public liaison office. Sher is the first lady's chief of staff. Rogers is her social secretary.

The protégés were chosen by area high schools, the Girl Scouts and military families, including Gold Star families who have lost a loved one, said Catherine McCormick-Lelyveld, Obama's spokeswoman.

A similar initiative for young men is coming later, she said.

Tchen, an attorney from Chicago long active in politics, said the leadership and mentoring program built on a "Women of Excellence" event at the White House in March.

That saw high school girls interact with the first lady, White House officials and a cast of stars: singers Alicia Keyes and Sheryl Crow; actresses and sisters Debbie Allen and Phylicia Rashad; actress Fran Drescher; Gen. Ann Dunwoody, the first woman to become a four-star general; and Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman to travel into space.

"This was one of my dreams, let me tell you ... gathering an amazing group of women together, and going out and talking to young girls around this country," Obama said then.

Tchen said the program launch would let protégés visit their mentors' offices and gather as a group for dinner. The duration of the inaugural class has not been decided, she said.

Tchen, formerly with a Chicago law firm, said she expected discussions of college, careers, life skills and balancing work and motherhood.

The mentors, she said, want to give protégés a "window to a wide variety of different opportunities to play out your dreams."

Washington's Letitia Baldrige, who was the top aide to Jacqueline Kennedy, said the

mentoring program was "definitely" a first for a presidential spouse. She called it "wonderfully imaginative" but cautioned that it would be difficult in part because of the ongoing commitment it required.

"This is not just a nice lecture or community gathering," she said. "Mentoring for their careers, gosh, that's a big commitment."

Participants "are going to have to put their heart and spirit and soul to it," she said.

The latest effort comes after Obama has tried to set an example for young people, promoted healthy eating and exercise, lent support to military families and hosted high-profile musical events.

"She's really gone in many directions," Baldrige said, "and I think it's fantastic that she has the energy."

Carl Anthony, a historian for the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio, agreed that the mentoring program was a first. He observed that the cause built on her leadership at Public Allies Chicago, which aims to groom a new generation of leaders.

He predicted it could grow much bigger, noting that Lady Bird Johnson began a committee to beautify the nation's capital, triggering a nationwide effort to plant wildflowers, beautify highways, spruce up parks and enact clean air and land initiatives.