

# BORN TO SERVE

*The Trailblazing Life of Sam Sutton:  
Valet to Three Presidents*

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ISBN 978-1-0980-7527-9 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-0980-7528-6 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-1-0980-7529-3 (digital)

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Christian Faith Publishing, Inc.  
832 Park Avenue  
Meadville, PA 16335  
[www.christianfaithpublishing.com](http://www.christianfaithpublishing.com)

Printed in the United States of America



Samuel Sutton Jr., Petty Officer Third Class, Okinawa, Japan, 1980.

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## PROLOGUE

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# Teaching Barack to Salute

On the morning after his first inauguration, President Barack Obama walked into the private residence on the second floor of the White House, a cigarette in his hand.

“Sam, where’s a good place to smoke?”

“Mr. President, I think the greenhouse would be best.”

I ran back and got an ashtray. Then I followed him into the humid room on the White House roof, crammed with lush plants and brilliant flowers. A greenhouse had been there since the mid-nineteenth century, and I had heard that it provided a favorite escape for the Lincoln family during the Civil War.

The new president lit his cigarette.

“Where did you grow up, Sam?”

“Kinston, North Carolina, sir.”

“How long have you been in the military?”

“Almost thirty years, Mr. President.”

“I need your help with something,” he said. “Can you show me the right way to salute when I’m walking to a helicopter or meeting with our military?”

The president had never served in the armed forces. Back in Navy boot camp in 1979, it had taken me a bit of practice to learn how to salute. It wasn’t as easy as it looked. I had been corrected many times before I finally got it right.

“Mr. President,” I said, “I’d be happy to help you.”

He placed his cigarette in the ashtray, and we faced one another, standing at attention. I asked him to salute. I saw that his upper arm

hung down a bit rather than being held at the horizontal. I went through the process with him, step by step.

“Sir, hold your hand like this, at about a forty-five-degree angle. When you position your hand, look at your palm from the side. That’s right, Mr. President, just like that. Tip your hand a little bit more this way. Good. Now, when you bring your hand up, put a little snap into it. That’s right—just like that.”

For the next few minutes, I demonstrated, and he followed my lead. Now and then, I reached out to adjust the president’s hand or the angle of his arm. Pretty soon, we were snapping salutes at each other like clockwork.

As a career military man, I had sworn to bear allegiance to the United States and to obey the orders of the president, no matter who that was or what party he or she belonged to. But Number 44 was something special. I had spent the last nine years serving as a valet to presidents Bill Clinton and G. W. Bush, but now I was serving the country’s first black president. Having grown up poor in Kinston, North Carolina, I was proud of his election in a way that went beyond my usual pride in serving my country. I had come up the hard way, one of eleven children raised by a father who lived paycheck to paycheck as a long-haul truck driver for thirty-five years and a mother who cooked and cleaned and scrubbed for other families when she had more than enough exhausting work waiting back home.

As President Obama and I saluted one another, I was in awe of how far I’d come. The president didn’t know that I had grown up in a house with no central heat and no hot water for baths or showers. That my family and I walked three and a half miles to church each Sunday and three and a half miles back because we didn’t have a car. That I picked tobacco for nine hot southern summers, from age ten until I joined the Navy at nineteen (and finally took the first hot shower of my life).

But the president didn’t have to know these things, nor did I have to know much about his life, in order for me to feel a special bond with him as a fellow black man.

When Obama was elected in November 2008, I had been thinking of retiring after twenty-nine years in the Navy. Then in December 2008, just before his inauguration, President Bush hosted a luncheon for the president-elect and all the living former presidents—Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. While I was ironing in the valet’s office, President Bush’s personal secretary called me into the Oval Office to meet Obama.

The president-elect walked up to me, his smile warm, hand extended in welcome. It was like meeting Dr. Martin Luther King.

“Sam, I’ve heard so much about you. I’d like you to come work for me.”

In an instant, those retirement thoughts flew out the window. It was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.

“Yes sir, Mr. President.”

Now I was teaching Barack Obama, my hero, how to salute.

I wondered what it would be like to have a black man leading our country. I had accompanied presidents Clinton and Bush on many motorcades, where entire city blocks were shut down for their arrivals. But I never saw them stop in a black neighborhood. When President Bush visited Graceland in June 2006 with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, an Elvis fan, we had to drive through the hood to get there. Lots of little black and Latino kids were lined up along both sides of the street waving like crazy, yet Bush’s motorcade just barreled through non-stop. When the presidents went through the rough neighborhoods, I hated to see little black kids standing there as the motorcade swept past. Why couldn’t our presidents stop everywhere for everyone?

As Obama and I saluted one another, the thought came to me that Clinton and Bush probably wouldn’t have stopped on the block where I grew up. But maybe, just maybe, the first black president would be different.

After a little more practice, his salutes were perfect—crisp, ram-rod straight, done with a snap. He looked good, and I felt good.

“That’s the way, Mr. President,” I said. “You’ve got it exactly right.”

SAMUEL SUTTON JR.

He thanked me, then said, "If I'm reelected, I want you to stick with me for the whole eight years."

"Mr. President, I will be proud to stick with you to the end."

We shook hands on it.

"Sam, it's a deal. Now I'm off to work."

I escorted him to the elevator, which he took down to the first floor.



Samuel Sutton Sr. (right) with cap on, age 14, with his brother and friends.

## Poor but Didn't Know It

We heard Dad coming home long before we saw him. The rumble of his eighteen-wheeler truck, like a creature too hungry to behave itself. The moment we heard it, we looked up from what we were doing. Then we ran from the family room, across the porch, down the front steps, and gathered on the sidewalk, jostling into each other with excitement. His giant truck made the wide turn into our block, downshifting, gears grinding, and now we were jumping up and down. He parked in the field across the street, and we took off running. We hadn't seen him in a week or ten days, but we also knew his truck was filled with leftover boxes of apple turnovers that he hauled up and down the east coast.

The door to the cab swung open. He sat there for a moment, too exhausted to move, wearing his baseball cap and company shirt, chewing the stub of an unlit cigar. Some of my siblings climbed up on either side of him while he gathered up his stuff.

"How you kids been doing?" He handed us a couple of boxes of turnovers, got down from the cab, and we trailed after him, the younger ones grabbing for his arms.

"Give the man some peace," Mom cried cheerfully as we crossed the porch. "Let the man watch some TV and unwind a bit before we eat."

"You kids been okay?" Dad asked, as we spilled into the house, and my siblings handed Mom the boxes of precious pies. "You been minding Mom?"

"Can we have fried apple pie tonight?" I asked.

“Junior, you sure can,” Mom said, “but not until you eat!”

Dad always ate first when he got back from one of his trips, a steak with gravy and onions. Only after he was served did we kids get our food—beans and franks with homemade biscuits, our favorite meal. We never could get enough of Mom’s biscuits.

Dad asked Mom, “Esther, how’ve they been?”

In his absence, she had been compiling her list. “Well, Sam, Tyrone didn’t do the dishes, and Samantha refused to take out the trash. And both talked back some.”

Dad wasn’t in any rush. He took his time eating. We always used the same plate at dinner, from the main meal to dessert. With eleven kids, Mom didn’t want to wash too many dishes. That night, we ate the fried apple turnovers with ice cream off the same plate that held the beans and franks. When the meal was over, Mom turned to Tyrone and Samantha.

“Go outside and pick a switch off the tree.”

When they came back with flimsy branches with lots of leaves, we tried not to smile at one another.

Mom said, “You go right back out and get the stiff ones.”

We listened to the smack of the switch and the howls of protest, thankful it wasn’t our turn.

Justice having been done, we relaxed in the family room, Mom in her wing-backed chair, us kids sprawled on the floor. Dad sat in his chair, the one we never dared to sit in unless he wasn’t around. Now he smoked his cigar, the only one in the family who used tobacco, his habit whenever he returned from the road. We had only three channels on our black and white TV but didn’t lack for entertainment. We watched the movies together while Dad cracked his jokes. His biting wit always reminded me of Redd Foxx. Stories about accidents on the road. About crazy truckers he met along the way. About outlandish conversations overhead at truck stop lunch counters. He put himself completely into every story, dramatically playing the parts.

As night fell and the TV glowed on our faces, we fell into each other’s shoulders on the couch. Even Tyrone and Samantha were happy. We were all back together again.

**M**om and Dad were married in 1952 in his family’s house. The preacher who “gave them away,” as we say in the south, was my dad’s uncle, Rev. C. L. Sutton. Both my parents came from large families—my father was one of ten kids, and my mother had thirteen brothers and sisters.

Dad was the main breadwinner; Mom was a teacher’s aide for a couple of years and then cleaned and cooked for families. But even with two parents working, there were lots of kids and lots of bills to pay. There were eleven of us, born from 1950 to 1972—Larry (my half-brother), Patricia, Peggy, Wesley, Janice, Me (born June 9, 1960, right in the middle), Tyrone, Beachey, Dalton, Samantha, and Sabrina. Mom could stretch a dime like no one else, but sometimes toward the end of the month, we ate white bread with sugar or mayo until Dad got home with money from his latest trucking haul.

We didn’t think we were poor at the time, although we certainly were, looking back. Maybe we’d get five dollars on our birthdays, but we never had a party because Dad lived paycheck to paycheck. When he passed away years later, we had to pay for his funeral because he had been borrowing against his burial fund to make ends meet. We didn’t have a car growing up, so we either had to get rides to school and church or walk.

Or rather, should I say, we didn’t have a *reliable* car. Dad owned a ’65 Cadillac with big pointy fins that Mom had paid for. No one else could drive it, so it sat at the curb while he was away. Which was probably a good thing. Quite often, he sailed through stop signs when the brakes didn’t work.

Sometimes we needed to borrow more than one ride from neighbors or friends since there were thirteen of us that had to get somewhere.

My sister Pat had asthma real bad. We always felt sorry for her; sometimes she had so much trouble breathing, we had to fan her. One night, when she was around fourteen, she was suffering so much that Dad had to borrow a car to drive her to the hospital, but it broke down on the way. In those days, you had to pay the ambulance to take you to the hospital, so Dad carried Pat in his arms for about a mile and a half to the emergency room.

We had a refrigerator but no ice maker. In the summer, we went to the convenience store behind Mr. Taylor's house for a twenty-five-cent bag of crushed ice, but we never made it home with the whole bag. Being kids, we took our time and half of it melted. There was usually just enough left for my dad's sweet iced tea.

Our two-story house on East Grainger had no central heat and no hot water the entire time I lived there. There was a single gas heater downstairs in the family room. It was a rough deal in the winter. Turning on the kitchen oven helped some.

We had a shower, but Dad couldn't afford a water heater. So we took bird baths—we'd put a pan of water on the heater to warm it and cleaned ourselves with a washcloth. Or we laid a wet rag on the heater in the morning so we could wash up before school. I didn't have my first hot shower until I joined the Navy at nineteen.

We didn't have AC either. Most of the white families, even the poorer ones, had both central heat and AC, but not us. My brother's house today still has one gas heater and no hot water.

All of us kids shared bedrooms, and I shared a bed with Tyrone. In the winter, we took turns getting in first to heat it up for the other one. My oldest brother, Wesley, was the only one with his own room.

And there were roaches all over the place. If you found one on your food, you'd pick it off and keep eating. When people came over to the house to visit, we'd sometimes see a roach crawling up the wall behind them. We kids tried not to laugh, hoping our guests wouldn't see it.

Our small house hadn't been an expensive one, but my parents got gouged on the 20 percent interest rate. One of my brothers is still paying off his house today. No car, no phone, no hot water, no central heat, and predatory interest rates—that's the way it was for most black folks back in Kinston, North Carolina.

Our neighborhoods were segregated. We lived in the black part of town and had to walk through the white section to get to the mall.

But coming up, I never experienced racism face-to-face from white people. They treated us well, and everyone knew our family. We generally got along, and I never got into any fights.

We didn't have a lot of friends and didn't need them. We weren't kids who ran the streets and got into trouble. We were a tight, church-going family.

And we didn't need a lot to keep us entertained. We used to sit on the front porch and play a game: the first car that drove by was my car, and the next one was my brother's, and so on down the line. If my car was a Cadillac and Dalton's was a battered pickup truck, we'd all goof on him.

Another game was cutting pictures out of the *Sears* magazine. I'd paste a living room set on white paper. "This is my house," I'd tell my siblings.

"Oh yeah?" my brother would say. "Well, take a look at my front porch."

Mom and Dad didn't like us cutting up their magazines. I always doodled on them, putting mustaches on people. It annoyed the heck out of my father.

"Junior, let me at least read the newspaper before you do that," he'd say. He couldn't read but was always trying to figure out what was happening in the world.

Although we didn't have much, we celebrated Christmas in style. Mom and Dad hid gifts in the closet; when I peeked inside, I hoped the cap gun or the sketch pad was mine. We had candy, oranges, and apples on Christmas Day, simple but treasured treats that you don't see anymore. Mom was up cooking until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. the night before—candied yams, fried chicken, and a dozen sweet potato pies. And we always had barbecue. Either someone cooked a pig for us or we bought ten pounds of takeout from King's Barbecue in Kinston.

We were never invited by our relatives to holiday dinners. Although we were well-behaved, they didn't want all us kids around. They looked down on my mom, judging her as having too many children. Being treated that way by our own family still hangs over my head today.

Dad gave us twenty dollars or thirty dollars each at Christmas. That was a lot of money for a truck driver making a hundred dollars a week. He warned us that he would take it back if we fought or broke our new toys. Sure enough, by the end of Christmas Day, all the money was gone, along with our elaborate plans for spending it.

We didn't drink or smoke, we didn't run in the streets, and we didn't have wild parties. Dad kept our hair cut close.

Every Sunday, we walked three and a half miles to the First Baptist Church on Rouse Road and sat on the left side, the same row of seats I sit in whenever I'm back home. Reverend Rainer was a true southern preacher—you really got the message from him. He's ninety-seven now and still preaching. I believed in God even as a young child, prayed to him three or four times a day, trusting in him to meet my needs, not my wants.

That's what Mom and Dad had taught us. Whenever we wanted something, they asked us: "Do you need it? Because we won't get it for you unless you do."

All of us wanted a bicycle growing up, but Dad couldn't afford more than one. We had a hard time with that—eleven kids, one bike.

"Hey, you've been on that thing for twenty minutes! It's my turn!"

"Give it back, I ain't done!"

"If you want this," Dad said, "you need to take turns."

I carried that attitude into adulthood. If I wanted something but didn't really need it, I used my money for better things.

I was baptized at thirteen by Reverend Rainer, the last of my brothers and sisters to do so since I couldn't swim a lick and even an inch of water scared me. I was highly nervous when I got to the head of the line in the front of the church, wearing my white gown. Reverend Rainer dunked me in the big tub, and I survived. My son Sam got baptized at eleven in the same church.

Mom started cooking on Sunday mornings before we left for church, and when we got back, we ate good old southern food—fried chicken, mac and cheese, pig's feet, and pig's tail. And plenty of Mom's homemade biscuits with molasses. Sometimes I'd eat as many as six at a meal.

When Dad wasn't out on the road, his hobby was promoting gospel shows twice a month in Kinston, as well as in the nearby towns of Greenville, New Bern, and Goldsboro. He staged the weekend events at public schools, community colleges, and churches, featur-

ing such well-known performers as Aretha Franklin, Shirley Caesar, Rev. James Cleveland, the Clark Sisters, the Staple Singers, the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the list goes on and on. There were even two black ladies, Siamese twins joined at the head, who sang gospel. They scared me a bit when they walked out on stage, but once they started singing, I forgot all about it. Mom often invited the singers to the house for dinner.

I was six years old when I saw Aretha sing for the first time. When she became big, she didn't come down south as much. The male gospel singers always had female company at their hotels. Left lots of pregnant girls behind in every town they went to.

Since we didn't have a telephone, Dad had to walk over to the pay phone by the Kinston post office to arrange his shows. He'd make a short collect call to the singers and ask them to call him back.

Tickets were five dollars in advance or ten dollars at the door, but Dad didn't get rich. He'd have four or five groups singing for two or three hours, but sometimes there were only fifty people in the audience. Back in those days, gospel singers didn't care about the money—they were there to sing gospel. My father often paid them out of his own pocket, but it remained his hobby of love for twenty-five years, until he died of colon cancer at age fifty-five.

My sisters Pat and Peggy performed as The Supremes in talent shows back in the 1960s. It was two dollars to get in, and the crowd went wild when they came out lip-synching as Nancy Wilson and Florence Ballard (someone else always played Diana Ross). Me and my brothers lip-synched as gospel singers back home, using a broom as a guitar while a record played in the background. Dad got a real kick out of it.

If he made any money after one of his shows, he'd bring home fifty-cent barbecue sandwiches from King's Barbecue. Two big bags shining with grease. Good old North Carolina barbecue made with vinegar, not sauce. Every time I go back home and have a barbecue sandwich with hush puppies and coleslaw on the side, I think about my dad.

**M**y maternal grandma, Annie Jones, lived out in the country about twenty miles from Kinston. When we visited on weekends, we all slept on the floor of her small two-bedroom house. Chickens ran in the yard, and birds sang loudly in the morning. I sang back to them as I lay on the floor, and when the birds finished whistling in return, I knew it was time to get up.

My grandma washed clothes for the white people who owned the land. Her rented house seemed almost like slave quarters. Two bedrooms, a living room, and a small kitchen, heated by a space heater. Surrounded by cornfields, which she walked through to get to the big old mansion where she worked. She still had an outhouse in the 1960s. How much I hated to use it in the middle of the night.

Whenever I crossed Grandma's porch, I often thought of my mom's sister Merle, who was killed by her boyfriend in 1968 when she was in her twenties. They were at a club, and the boyfriend stabbed Merle while they were in his car. He drove to my grandma's house and put Merle's body on the porch, where she died. She left behind two children who were raised by my mother's older sister, Aunt Rose. Mom was devastated; she had lost her baby sister. The boyfriend served ten years.

My father's father was C. L. Braxton, a white man from Greenville, North Carolina, a fact which I only learned after Dad's death. Then I understood why I had sisters and brothers who were lighter than I was.

My sister Samantha found this out only in 1997 when she was working at DuPont. A coworker heard her speaking about our father, and it turned out the coworker was Braxton's grandson. He asked his relatives about the story, and it turned out to be so. Braxton's grandson met my mom. Maybe someday we'll all get together to explore our common family history.

One of the only two photos I have of my dad is of him and his half-brothers playing baseball with his white father. I have no photos of me taken before the fourth or fifth grade and only three or four photos of myself as a child, at most.

My father was raised and later adopted by a black man named Wes Sutton. His mom was Rosebell King. Mom's dad, Erzel Jones,

was part Native American, although I'm not sure what tribe (who knows—maybe my family has ties to a casino somewhere down south). He was a mean guy, Mom told us. Her mother was Annie Newkirk. Mom said she lost a lot of siblings who died in childbirth.

My parents always cared for people. Although they had a hard time making ends meet, Mom helped our neighbors furnish their homes. She bought furniture at yard sales and put it in storage in a shed out back. If she heard a neighbor needed something, she'd give it away. My sister told me she helped three families furnish their homes that way. Dad frequently gave away his last dollar, even if the person took that dollar to the liquor house. If the neighbor across the street, Ray Brown, needed two or three bucks, my father always had it for him, even if it was all he had left.

He was an easygoing man, unless you did something he thought was wrong.

One Friday night, when I was around ten years old, I stayed at my maternal grandma's apartment in the projects without telling him. She had moved there after living on the farm became too much to manage. When I got home on Saturday morning, he whipped my hide off with his belt buckle, the whippin' of my life.

But like he always did, he apologized after it was over.

"Junior, I'm sorry, real sorry, but you know it was for your own good."

I never used my belt or hands on my son because I don't believe in it, but that's how it was when I was coming up. Teachers and neighbors used to spank kids, and everyone was okay with it. Today kids talk back at you, and if you take a hand to them they'll call 911.

**O**ne Saturday morning, when I was ten years old, my aunt came by and asked Mom if her boys wanted to work in the tobacco fields. I volunteered to do it and did so for nine summers, from the age of ten until I joined the Navy. Ralph Jones, the white tobacco farmer, came to pick us up in town. A half dozen of us black boys rode in the back of his truck.

My job was to gather the leaves that the croppers had dropped when they picked the tobacco and throw them on the back of the

trailer. I was making five dollars a day, twenty dollars a week, a lot of money back then. We started work at around 6:30 a.m. and knocked off around 4:00 p.m., so it came to about sixty cents an hour. Mr. Jones' kids—Donny, Troy, and Betty—also helped out in the fields.

We worked from June to August, and by mid-summer it was ninety degrees nearly every day.

That was how I made money for clothes and food. From that point on, nothing came out of my parents' pockets. I asked Mr. Jones to pay me at the end of the week instead of every day, to make sure I saved it. Then on Saturdays, I'd take my twenty dollars and buy clothes, shoes, and school supplies in downtown Kinston. With whatever I had left over, I bought myself candy that I kept hidden in my room from my brothers and sisters.

When I got a little older, I moved from picking up tobacco leaves to cropping. This paid a lot more—twenty dollars a day—but I didn't like the work because my hands got sticky from the leaves and I was afraid of snakes, which were plentiful in the fields. I also had a habit of taking too many leaves instead of only those that had changed to yellow green, just right for the picking.

"Junior," Mr. Jones would say from his tractor, "take only two or three leaves, not the whole stalk."

For some reason, I couldn't get it right, so they switched me to looping tobacco around a wooden stick, to be stored in the barn to cure.

Eventually, I moved on to working in the barn. Mr. Jones' son Troy would be in the loft, someone would be on the ground, and I'd be halfway between them on the ladder, passing the tobacco leaves up to Troy. It would take a week to cure about three hundred sticks of tobacco.

Betty Jones had a radio going in the fields, and it was a real treat listening to all the white singers I never heard. At around nine thirty, Troy would bring us a snack of peanut butter crackers. Mr. Jones was like a father to me, very good people. He was a white man, and we kids working for him were black, but he treated everyone fairly and with courtesy. We drank water from the same ladle, like one big family.

At lunchtime, Mr. Jones would drop us off at a store at the edge of the tobacco fields, where we bought chicken salad sandwiches, chips, cokes, and moon pies. Somehow the prices went up the moment us black kids walked in. Only if we protested would the white owner give our money back.

When I was twelve, Mr. Ralph taught me how to drive a tractor as I sat in his lap and he showed me how to shift the gears. One day, I fell off and broke a shoulder but went back to work wearing a cast because I wanted to make money. At fifteen, he taught me how to drive a pickup truck. I finally got my license in the twelfth grade after failing the test ten times (the instructor would fail you for looking at him the wrong way, and I froze up every time I saw him). When I was driving to Mr. Jones' farm one day, my brakes failed at a stoplight, but thank God there was a gas station on the other side of the intersection, and I rolled right in. God was watching over us.

It was hard work in the tobacco fields, but I was counting the money on Friday afternoon. By the time I went into the Navy at nineteen, I was making about \$120, \$150 a week.

I always had a job as a kid. During the school year, I cut grass and raked leaves for people and did other odd jobs. I always had a little job somewhere. My brothers and sisters worked in the summer, but I had one or two jobs all year round.

There was a black blind man living on Chestnut Street around the block from us. When I was around seven or eight years old, he'd stand on the sidewalk and call to us on the porch, "Can you ask Esther to have Junior take me to the store so I can cash my check?"

I would walk with him the two or three blocks. While he cashed his check, I watched the cashier carefully (she was the white owner's daughter) because she would hand him a dollar bill and say it was a five.

"No, ma'am," I'd say, "that's a one."

"Oh, so it is, my mistake."

She stopped after I caught her a second time. Then I did a little grocery shopping with him.

"Junior, can you get me some grits and some eggs? Thanks, young fella."

Mr. Taylor owned Kinston Wholesale down the street from us. He had asthma and paid me to help him on his boat, which he kept docked in Morehead City. I couldn't swim a lick but was game about helping out. When I untied the line, he took off from the pier with me sitting on the front end, scaring me half to death. Still, I loved the ocean. Sometimes we stayed out for six or eight hours at a time, and on occasion, he let me drive the boat. I went out fishing with Mr. Taylor every weekend in the summer, after working half a day on Saturdays in the tobacco fields.

**I**n seventh grade, I had a crush on my white math teacher, Ms. Rice. Her husband owned a Chrysler dealership in Greenville, about thirty minutes from Kinston. She was the sweetest teacher I ever had, not a mean bone in her body. She helped each student in a personal way.

I always sat in the back of the class because I didn't want anyone calling on me. I was self-conscious about the way I spoke, rushing my words. I was a tall, skinny kid with pimples and thick eyeglasses, so much taller than the other kids that they assumed I had been left back. They called me "Sammy," which I hated. Terribly shy, I didn't like to talk to anyone and certainly not to girls. Even when I was working for presidents, I was very nervous when I had to set a glass of water on a podium in front of a packed stadium.

I could never get up in front of the class, but Ms. Rice took me under her wing. I became an A student and came out of my shell.

Back then, algebra was a class I stayed away from. I figured all I would need in life was basic math. My dad couldn't read, and I may have gotten my fear of school from him. But Ms. Rice helped me to learn math and not be afraid of it.

But I was still introverted and preferred hanging out in my room and doing my homework. I was always working a job and didn't have a car to drive around in. I played with my brothers in the park and street, but I was never any good at sports. Picked last, I often ended up on the losing team (or, shall I say, I didn't help the team win).

Ms. Murphy, my English teacher, used to date my dad back when he was a teenager (maybe that was the reason I passed). He married my mom at seventeen, so I guess Dad was a bit of a rolling stone. I

found out only recently that he had a daughter with another woman, so I have a half-sister I never met somewhere in North Carolina.

I got interested in art in the ninth grade through a teacher named Mr. Cardelli, a short Italian guy. I did a lot of pencil drawing and sketching and always carried a pen in my pocket to write things down and do puzzles. I liked to draw buildings from photographs, like the Empire State Building. That's when I decided I wanted to be an architect. My high school named me Artist of the Year in 1979. There were five or six kids who I thought were a lot better than me, so it was a surprise. I still have the trophy and newspaper clipping.

**W**e may have been poor without noticing it, but when I was a teenager, I began to realize just how short our end of the stick really was. I understood that Dad wore his trucker's uniform around the house because it was the only clothes he had. Everything we kids wore was handed down from our older siblings. Mom went to yard sales every weekend. I hated hearing her say, "Hey, Junior, try this shirt on." I'd go to school with holes in my pants or socks. Sometimes I stuck paper into the bottoms of my shoes so my feet wouldn't get wet in the rain. I never liked hand-me-downs, the same way I don't like leftover food. To this day, I eat it all at once, leaving nothing for the next time.

Kinston had two movie theaters downtown, one for blacks and one for whites. Although segregation was no longer legal, it was a fact of life. I'd go to the black theater with my siblings, and we'd watch the movie twice, hiding under the seats after the first audience emptied out.

Blacks and whites sat on different sides of Lovick's Café on Heritage Street, where we ate dough burgers—a deep-fried lump of dough with a little bit of beef inside. We drove past other restaurants that we knew were for white people only.

We lived on one side of the tracks, separated from the white people and the more well-to-do blacks. We'd see them and wish we were like them—the children of lawyers and teachers who wore nice clothes while we were barely getting by.

That's how the town of Kinston was set up. The baseball field was in a mixed neighborhood, but the elementary school was 99

percent black. There was only one white kid in the school. And there was only one black kid in the white elementary school, a kid name Kevin who I played with. His middle-class family lived in a white neighborhood.

Middle school and high school were more mixed. I had my first white friend, Randy, when I was in high school, but as close as we were, we never visited each other's homes.

That's when I realized how separated we were.

When I was a teenager, my mother started working for white families to bring in extra money, washing their clothes and cleaning their houses. It deeply pained me to see that. Not because of race, not because of a black and white thing, but because my mother was an older person doing all the toughest jobs for another family when her children needed her at home. But I kept those feelings bottled up inside.

To this day, I don't like having my son being taken care of by others. I vowed to spend every moment I could with him, and that's what I've tried to do.

I left the south when I was nineteen, but I've never lost my southern accent. Nor have I lost my southern ways. We talk to people. We help people out. People in New York walk past each other without saying a word, but in the south, we say hello to one another. Kids say "yes, ma'am" and "no, ma'am." We open doors. We thank each other. I've never lost those manners. I respect and care for everyone.

I recently took in an adopted teenager who lives around the corner. His parents had thrown him out, and my nephew Dylan saw him wearing the same clothes every day and sneaking in the school library or gym to sleep. Like a southern person would do, I let him live in my house, trusting him to cook and clean up after himself, and helped him get a job.

Growing up, we trusted each other. If you had my back, I had yours.

But when I go back south today, I feel a sense of sorrow. The houses are still rundown. Drugs and gangs have taken root. No one seems to care about "small-town America."

People keep their doors locked. Trust is gone. People fear one another, whether it's a white guy with tattoos or a black guy with baggy pants. A rough crowd now hangs out on the street where I grew up. There are bars on windows, which I never saw until I visited New York in the eleventh grade.

Gazing up at the high rises, I asked, "What are those things?"

"Bars, to keep people from breaking in."

"For real?"

I had never seen that down south, not when I was coming up. We left the doors and windows open at night. Neighbors came by to visit and to help us out. Back then, everyone watched out for other people's kids: "When your mama gets home, I'm gonna tell her what you've done."

I still miss those good old days.

When I graduated from high school, I had dreams of going to college and becoming an architect, but Mom and Dad were clear that it wasn't going to happen: "There are four kids ahead of you, and we don't have the money."

Luckily, I had a backup plan. My cousin June was a master chief in the Navy, stationed in Norfolk, Virginia. He used to talk to me about joining up when we'd sit on the front porch, how I could see the world and have career opportunities. He said I could learn to be a draftsman in the Navy, which was a lot closer to becoming an architect than working in the tobacco fields. I figured I'd join up for four years, get out, and then pursue my dream.

In 1979, I joined up under the delayed entry program, which meant I had a few months back home before shipping off to boot camp. I thought I'd work one more summer in the fields to pick up some extra money, but I didn't last two days. I could no longer stand the heat, the dirt, the backbreaking work of bending over for hours to pick the sticky leaves.

If I had any last doubts about leaving my old life behind, they disappeared for good under that relentless southern sun.

We had come a long way from him not wanting a valet.

There's a very fast turnaround on inauguration day. The departing president is fully packed the night before and the incoming president must be unpacked as quickly as possible. The transition has to be fast and seamless. I was up until six o'clock in the morning packing President Bush's luggage and clothes.

At around 10:00 or 11:00 a.m., the movers arrived with the new First Family's possessions. I worked throughout the day and into the evening unpacking things, washing clothes, shining shoes, and touching up the new president's ties and suits. On and off, I caught a glance of the inauguration and parade on TV. I always had tickets but never could go because of my duties.

Around 9:00 p.m., the Obamas' Chicago friends began arriving at the White House. I met the president's cousins and friends, and Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Obama's mom. I also met Malia and Sasha, who were adorable but quite shy.

The family and friends were impressed with the residence and particularly with the president's dressing room, where everything was highly organized. His suits and shirts were lined up in color order.

Around midnight, President Obama came upstairs.

"Hey, Sam, good to see you again."

"Same here, Mr. President."

His friends said to him, "You've got to see your dressing room."

Obama was equally impressed with the way everything was laid out. His closets had glass doors so he could peek at his entire wardrobe.

Every outgoing president writes a letter to the incoming president and leaves it in the bathroom on inauguration day. Why there? It's the only place it wouldn't get lost with everything getting moved in and out. Bush gave me the letter for Obama, and I placed it on the countertop.

There's an elevator in the White House on the staff side that has been signed by all of the presidents' children, a tradition that began with Amy Carter. I watched as Malia and Sasha Obama continued the tradition.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The First Black President

A lot of people called Bill Clinton the first black president. He loved black folks and black people loved him. My mom adored him. I brought her, my sister, and a couple of friends to the White House Christmas party in 1999. It was a beautiful party for the press, Secret Service, and residence staff. My mom fell in love with Clinton, with how handsome he looked. In the photo we took, she was holding him real tight.

But Barack Obama was the first black president, and it was my great honor to serve him.

I felt I was a part of history.

A few months before Obama's inauguration, President and Mrs. Bush asked if I would come work for them in Texas. I told them the salary I wanted, and they haggled with me in a joking way.

"Sam, the cost of living is a lot cheaper down there."

It was tough to turn them down because I really liked them, but it wasn't really a question of money. At the time, I was leaning toward retirement—that is, until Obama directly asked me to stay on, and I was happy to change my plans.

On the day of Obama's inauguration, President Bush sent me a handwritten note.

Laura and I will miss you. You worked very hard to help us for eight years. You did so with a smile on your face. You are a very good man and a dear friend.

After working all day long, I left the White House at midnight. The new president said, "See you tomorrow, Sam, bright and early."

I soon fell into the routine of serving my third President and First Family. I was now the senior valet, working with a junior valet who I'll call Victor.

I didn't have a say in picking him. A colleague I worked with in the residence said to me, "Sam, you need to find someone you can trust, who's not out to get your position." Victor was black, and I thought it might be better to have someone of a different race on the job rather than two black men taking care of the first black president.

Other than that, I was fine with the choice. I knew he was a White House mess guy and a yes-man. I still had to watch my back, but I also knew they needed me on the job because there was a new president to take care of, and I had thirty years of experience under my belt.

Performing the duties of a valet is an underappreciated art. It's not something you can master in a month or two. You have to be aware of a person's tastes, moods, inclinations, daily rhythms, likes, and dislikes. It's not a haphazard job. It's not casual or shoot from the hip.

It requires that you learn someone's habits and preferences intimately, and that you become alert and proactive in accommodating those habits and preferences. A good valet is like a good waiter: not intrusive, but not absent either. A good waiter is always aware of what his tables need. After you've eaten for a while, you're asked about the food. Water glasses and bread baskets are quickly refilled. If something is spilled, the waiter responds immediately. If you need something, the waiter is there, having anticipated the need.

A good valet operates in the same way.

From working for flag officers in the Navy all the way up to the president of the United States, I studied the person I was working for, from the first thing they did in the morning to the last things they did at night. What is his routine when he wakes up? How does he get dressed? What clothes does he like? How does he do his hair?

When he steps out of the shower, what should be laid out for him and where?

I picked up President Obama's routines pretty quickly so I could stay a step ahead of him. I knew his every move. After he showered and dressed, he always went to the family room to sit in a wingback chair and put his shoes on. I made sure that his socks and shoes were sitting alongside his chair. When travelling with him, I made sure to have his bottled water, reading material, and books at bedside because he read a lot.

Obama worked out every morning before he went to work. Mrs. Obama came in about twenty minutes later, and they worked out together with a personal trainer for a good two hours. After the president got cleaned up and dressed, he had his cigarette in the greenhouse.

For breakfast, he loved his eggs and bacon, while Mrs. Obama preferred oatmeal. They had dinner together every night at six o'clock. Mrs. Robinson was a private person who took care of the girls and dropped them off at school while the President and First Lady were traveling. She loved casinos and would occasionally sneak out to Vegas to play the slots.

Mrs. Obama made sure that Malia and Sasha read at least an hour a day. They were great kids, very respectful.

In addition to working out, Obama played pool to unwind. Buddy Carter, the chief butler, showed me how to make his favorite martini, and the president liked to relax with one or two on Friday and Saturday nights.

About a month after Obama's inauguration, the president was walking back into the residence from the Oval Office, and I was escorting him to his bedroom to help with his jacket. When we walked into the private sitting room, we saw Mrs. Obama sitting on the couch with her head down, crying.

"Sam, can you excuse us for a moment?" The president closed the door to the sitting room.

I knew the pressure they were under, the burning glare of the spotlight. Normal lives and privacy were gone. President Bush and

his wife came from a political family and were used to the limelight, but the White House was a vast change for the Obamas.

And it wasn't the usual spotlight, by far. They were the first black First Family, and the stress was enormous. I knew Obama had been treated in a racist manner, and I knew lots of black people who were outraged about that. It wasn't my role or prerogative to voice my personal opinions or to offer sympathies to the president of the United States. Yet I felt deep in my bones what they were going through.

After he was elected, whenever I was visiting my family down in North Carolina, I overheard white people saying, "We don't need him because he don't know what the hell he's doing." Mom would say, "My son works for the president." And some white person would respond, "We need a better president than *that*."

And not just down south. I heard the same comments from military officers when I was on the road with the president. These weren't civilians mouthing off. I'm talking about military officers who had sworn allegiance to the president of the United States.

Had I heard lots of negative remarks about Clinton and Bush from people who worked for them? Yes, indeed. A lot of White House people were grumbling when Bush beat Gore.

But the level of animosity toward the new president was of a different order. No one questioned where Clinton and Bush were born. No one claimed they were Muslims or said they hung out with terrorists or raised doubts about whether they had earned their college degrees.

Same old, same old: a black man has to work twice as hard to get half the credit a white person gets.

I overheard uniformed Secret Service officers, who were sworn to protect the president, saying, "I'm not going to serve him." Someone on the White House communications staff transferred out, saying, "I'm not going to work for this guy." The staff member was white.

Was it racism? Or was it politics?

None of the presidents ever confided in me about the problems they were having. If they brought the job home in any kind of way, they took it to the First Lady, not me.

But when I was with Obama, one afternoon in his dressing room, six months into his term, he opened up just a bit. I was helping him with his suit jacket at the end of the day.

"Sir, can I get you a martini?"

"Yes," he said. As if to say: *I could use one*. "I'm having a hard time with the Congress."

I knew right away he had a rough day, and I couldn't help saying something, although it wasn't much: "Mr. President, you can't please everyone because it's not reality. It's just part of the job."

He smiled and said, "Sam, you're right about that."

I felt for him. When people talked badly about the president, I felt they were talking badly about me.

The Obamas had a lot of loyal, longtime friends working for them, like his special assistant Reggie Love and senior advisor Valerie Jarrett, which created a very casual atmosphere among the staff. Not chaotic like the Clinton White House but less formal at times. Some of that informality I liked. I usually wore a business suit as valet, but President Obama said to me, "Sam, on weekends you can wear a polo shirt and khaki pants if you like."

Other aspects of the informality were inappropriate. Some of the senior and even junior staff called the President and First Lady by their first names, a lack of respect compared with other administrations I worked in.

It bothered me because I knew what it felt like. Some of the White House staff talked down to me. I was a master chief petty officer, but some guys didn't address me by my rank.

I didn't mind being called Sam by the President, the First Lady, and coworkers who were close to me. President Clinton asked me, "How should I address you?" I told him my first name was fine. Same thing with Bush and Obama. They asked me and didn't assume anything.

But being disrespected by military people, both junior and senior, was a different story. Another master chief was addressed by his rank whenever he walked into the White House mess, but

I was always “Hey, Sam” to them. Why wasn’t my record of service respected?

Did I say anything to them? No. I learned to live with it.

One morning, Mrs. Obama was sitting at the dining room table having her lunch. I passed by, carrying some laundry.

“Good morning, Mrs. Obama.”

“Good morning, Sam.” She was eating her lunch quickly. “I have a busy schedule today. Have to be out of here in five minutes. We always have people telling us where we have to be and where we need to go. I’ve got to keep moving.”

“This job is going to keep you guys busy.”

“I just have to get used to it,” she said, smiling.

“You will,” I told her. “Mrs. Obama, can I say something?” I felt protective of her, like I was speaking to my sister. “Your personal staff is calling you Michelle. You’ve come a long way. You’re a role model. You’ve earned your title as First Lady. I think you should speak to your staff about that.”

“Sam, I’ve noticed that, and you’re right.” She said she would hold a staff meeting to address the issue and thanked me for bringing it up.

Within about two or three weeks, I noticed a difference in how she was addressed.

I could be guilty of the same informality because the Obamas were so down-to-earth. I was helping the president with his suit jacket around lunchtime in the hallway of the private residence when I realized that I was standing in front of him with my arms crossed. I kept saying to myself, *He’s the commander-in-chief—why are your arms folded?*

And yet I couldn’t release them and stand at attention. Why, I don’t know. It felt real awkward, like I didn’t have respect for him, treating him more like a friend than the president.

I never did it again.

But young kids couldn’t help calling him Barack.

When I brought my sister Peggy, her granddaughter, and my friend Melvin and his three young sons to meet the president, the

kids were saying, “We’re going to meet Barack! We’re going to meet Barack!”

“It’s President Obama,” I said to them outside his office, “or Mr. President.”

“No, we’re going to call him Barack!”

And that’s what they called him, but the president didn’t seem to mind.

Peggy told me she wasn’t going to cry, but the moment she stepped into the Oval Office she broke her promise.

**P**resident Obama’s routine was to smoke two to three Marlboros a day. In the morning, he would shower, get dressed, and head to the greenhouse on top of the White House. Leaving the Oval Office for a break during the day, he gave me a heads up by nodding and pointing upstairs.

He had told me in the greenhouse on the first day of his presidency, “Sam, I don’t want to smoke too much. In fact, I’m trying to stop. You hold on to them and just give me one when I need it.”

I would pass him a cigarette on the way to the greenhouse. When he left, he stopped in the staff bathroom to brush his teeth before heading to the Oval Office. Then, after dinner, I cleared a path for him to sneak out to the greenhouse again.

On weekends, he smoked a little more. He never smoked in front of people, and some of his staff weren’t aware of the habit.

When he went on trips, I had to ensure that he had a room where he could stand outside to have a cigarette. When he golfed, he took a “bathroom break” after the fourth or fifth hole, and I passed him a cigarette. Then I cleaned up the bathroom.

It was my job to slip out under the radar to buy his Marlboros. A carton lasted him three weeks.

The First Lady was understandably concerned. A couple of years into his term, when he was about to turn fifty, she said to me, “Sam, I want you to help him quit.”

She left it up to us to come up with a plan. The president and I decided that he’d get one cigarette in the morning, to smoke in the greenhouse.

Once in a while, he needed more than one.

“Sam, let me smoke half a cigarette.” I’d hand him the one I carried around for those occasions. He’d take one or two puffs and that was it.

It took him a whole year, but he finally quit around Christmas 2011.

“I appreciate what you’ve done,” the First Lady told me. “He doesn’t smell anymore.”

I often spent time with the First Family at their home on Chicago’s south side. The first time I walked into that house, I told Mrs. Obama that it reminded me of the movie *Big Momma’s House* with Martin Lawrence.

She said, “It really does.”

I cleaned that whole house, all four floors, top to bottom. A lot of house to clean, and it took about six hours. Did the same with the Clinton house in Chappaqua and the Bush house in Crawford. I was a valet, cleaner, cook, and housekeeper—I did a little bit of everything. And dog walker, which I did eight to ten times daily with Bo, the Obamas’ Portuguese water dog.

All the presidential pets slept in bed with their owners, except for Bo, who was too large to fit. He was a really sweet dog. Loved to take baths, and I could wash him with no problems.

There was a funny incident with Bo when we were staying in Chicago. President Obama was walking with the First Lady, Sasha, and Malia to a birthday party in the neighborhood, accompanied by the Secret Service in cars and on foot. The president was walking Bo, and I was carrying the birthday cake.

We passed a man cutting his grass. Obama greeted him with a hearty “good afternoon” and received a dirty look in return. *Who the hell are you?*

A moment later, Bo crapped on the man’s lawn. Luckily, the homeowner had walked away and didn’t see it. Neither had the First Lady and the two girls, who were half a block ahead.

“You got something?” the president asked.

“Yes.”

A Secret Service agent handed me a sheet of paper towel and I took care of the problem.

Bo walked on proudly, pulling his owner along.

At times, I forgot Obama was president. He was so warm and self-effacing that I looked up to him like a big brother would, and sometimes he talked to me like one.

“Sam, how tall are you?”

“About six five, Mr. President.”

“You know how to play basketball?”

“No, sir,” I said, “never much cared for the game.”

“If I was your coach back in Kinston, you’d be my center.”

“But, Mr. President, I don’t know how to play the game.”

“All you have to do is stand there.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, just stand there and jump for the ball. That’s all I need you to do.”

He was a great basketball player. In August 2010, the president celebrated his forty-ninth birthday by inviting a dream team of current and former basketball stars to play ball for wounded warriors, US troops who had been wounded in action. Reggie Love, Obama’s personal aide who played college ball at Duke, set up the visit. LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, Carmelo Anthony, Derrick Rose, and Joakim Noah came, as well as retired legends Bill Russell and Magic Johnson. College player Maya Moore of the Connecticut Huskies women’s team also played.

The game took place at a gym inside Washington’s Fort McNair, a short drive from the White House. The event wasn’t open to the public, but kids from a local high school got a chance to watch the president play and get autographs.

After the game, some of the players joined Obama and a group of his friends for a barbecue at the White House. A small tent and tables decorated with sunflowers and yellow and white tablecloths was set up on the grounds.

I travelled with the president to Las Vegas, where his suite at Caesar’s Palace must have been about ten thousand square feet.

Obama loved to play poker. He'd play a little on Air Force One with Reggie Love and some of his junior staff, and before we left for a trip, he'd give me his debit card to get a couple of hundred dollars in small bills for his games.

In Las Vegas, he said to me, "Sam, can you pay for some chips?" The general manager gave me \$200,000 worth. When I signed for them, I said to myself, *I could take these and cash them in.* That night, the president and his friends played poker until 1:00 a.m.

In general, Obama was a very light eater, but the night of that poker game, Tony Siack cooked him and Reggie Love big steaks with all the trimmings. They were so heavy that I dropped Reggie's. The president told me not to worry about it, but I'm not sure about Reggie.

As with all the presidents I worked for, we became close. We weren't personal friends, but I was more than an employee.

Passing through the private residence, I'd wish Mrs. Obama a "good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Sam."

She loved TV, especially the show *House Hunter*, where you follow people's highs and lows as they try to buy a house. One of my favorite shows also.

"Which house do you think they're going to buy today?" she'd ask me as I paused to watch.

"I say number two."

"No, Sam, it's going to be three."

I looked up to her because she carried herself as a lady and as a proud sister. She was very attractive and looked stunning in gowns. She and the president deeply loved each other.

At Camp David in 2010, they had a birthday party for the girls. I spent the weekend there helping Mrs. Obama organize it, while the president stayed behind in Washington.

Sasha and Malia invited their friends from school in DC and their cousins from Chicago. We had set up a huge moon bounce, shaped like a castle. They and their friends were having a great time with it, and the girls wanted me to join them.

"Sam, come in!"

"No way." I'm a three hundred-pound guy. I had no business jumping around in a moon bounce.

They pulled me in, so what was I supposed to do? I fell down and got caught between the wall and the floor of the moon bounce, while kids were jumping all around me like crazy. I was all twisted up and couldn't move, let alone get to my feet. Finally, I managed to crawl out, helped by Sasha and Malia. They were pretty worried.

"You okay, Sam? I hope you're not hurt because you've got to take care of our daddy!"

When I was told that Oprah would be visiting Camp David, the news caught my attention.

By now, I had worked for three presidents, met a fair number of famous world leaders, and chatted with my share of sports stars and celebrities. There weren't too many people I still wanted to meet, but Oprah was surely one of them. She held a special place in my heart. I grew up listening to her. I had always looked up to her, a black woman who had come a long way.

When Oprah and her close friend Gayle King arrived, Mrs. Obama introduced me.

"Pleased to meet you, Sam."

She requested sweet tea, a southern thing—iced tea with a lot of sugar. My parents drank it all the time. Oprah said it was the best sweet tea she ever had. The First Lady, Oprah, and Gayle sat around gabbing like old friends. Later I spent some time with Gayle by the pool while Oprah talked in the living room with Mrs. Obama.

"Where you from, Sam?"

"It's a small town in North Carolina. You might miss it passing through."

It felt natural talking to another southerner. She noted that I hadn't lost my accent.

We talked about wanting to get back home to eat real barbecue. We chatted a while about her son, who was attending Duke. Oprah once said of her, "She is the friend everybody deserves," and I felt the same way after meeting her.

I travelled with the Obamas to Hawaii for their holiday vacation. I was the point man in charge of making sure the house was clean, meals were planned in advance and served in order, with the president always served last, and that all guests were taken care of. I got up at 4:00 a.m. to help the chef prepare breakfast and to ensure the Obamas had a special holiday.

One morning, Victor, the junior valet working with me, showed up late.

“You can’t be doing this,” I told him. “We have to be on time. If the president gets up early, we have to be ready to roll.”

For the next two minutes, he cursed me like a sailor. What in the world? I didn’t speak to him for at least half a day. Later he came by and apologized.

“You have to be on time from now on,” I said. “I don’t have the time to babysit anyone.”

There had been previous tension between us. I had heard through the grapevine that he thought I was calling all the shots and not giving him any responsibility. Complaining about me to the White House mess.

I could have written up Victor for the way he spoke to me that morning, but I let it pass.

When we returned from Hawaii in January 2010, the First Lady wrote me a note.

Thank you so much for all your hard work during our family’s stay in Hawaii. The President and I know how much effort goes into a visit like this, and we want you to know that we appreciate everything you did for us over the holidays.

With our family away from home and the ever-changing nature of the President’s schedule, it was so comforting to know that all of us were in such good hands. Your flexibility and professionalism were truly impressive, and we are so grateful to have been surrounded by dedicated and skilled people like you.

We know it could not have been easy to be away from your family for the holidays, so please know that your sacrifice did not go unnoticed. Thank you again for your help, and thank you for the work you do every day. We simply cannot thank you enough.



To Sam - Aloha!  
*[Handwritten signature]*

With Pres. Obama and my friends Adrian, Kirsi, and Levi in Hawaii, Jan. 2010.  
(Photo: Pete Souza)



Sam - Thank you for the great jobs you do every day!  
*[Handwritten signature]*

In the Oval Office with family, April 2009.  
(Photo: Pete Souza)



At Hampton University with family, May 2010.  
(Photo: Pete Souza)

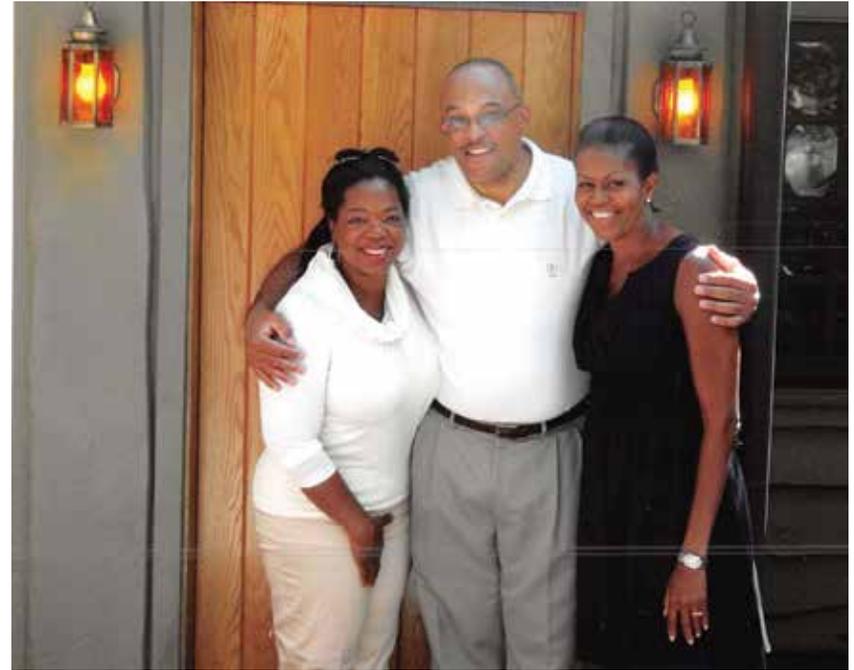


*To Sam,  
You have been a  
wonderful support to us.  
All the best!  
Michelle Obama*

A personal note from First Lady Michelle Obama, Feb. 2009.  
(Photo: Joyce Boghosian)



A note of appreciation from the president, Jan. 2009.



With Oprah Winfrey and Mrs. Obama at Camp David.