

TO SHOWCASE NATION'S ARTS, FIRST LADY ISN'T AFRAID TO SPOTLIGHT THE UNEXPECTED

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In a White House where first lady Michelle Obama's relationship to the arts strives to be both rarefied and common, cerebral and pragmatic, the cultural program is dictated by tradition, personal life story . . . and an unabashed desire to shake things up.

Information does not always come through the tried-and-true institutional channels. And many of the honored guests invited to gilded East Room soirees are not even old enough to vote.

On Monday evening, the president and first lady hosted the sixth installment in the White House Music Series: Broadway. As usual, there was an afternoon youth workshop. Dozens of students from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts gathered for a dance lesson from Jerry Mitchell, the award-winning choreographer of "Hairspray." They had only about six hours of rehearsal at the Joy of Motion Dance Center in Northeast Washington before they took the stage at the White House. Their dress rehearsal, in the East Room, was in front of a daunting audience: the first lady, dressed in a chartreuse pantsuit, as well as parents and teachers.

"I didn't make the steps easier for them. They're doing the exact same steps they're doing on Broadway," said Mitchell, tall and lean and wearing a pair of low-tech sneakers. "Why else am I here if not to challenge them and let them know what it might take to do this" professionally?

As a small band cranked out "You Can't Stop the Beat," the students -- in a rainbow of T-shirts and black pants -- sang, leapt and put on big Broadway smiles.

"No feet on the ground," encouraged Mitchell as the students jumped high with the beat. "Wait, wait, wait, wait. Stop, stop, stop, stop. Good!"

The first lady, arms in the air, cheered from her front-row seat. "Oh, my goodness, I'm out of breath just watching you all," she said as she took the stage to applaud their effort. "This is exactly what we envisioned happening when we started this music series."

Bridging the disconnect

After a year and a half of an Obama White House, which has included more than 50 cultural events, this student workshop epitomizes the first lady's approach to the arts. Her philosophy is defined by an emphasis on education and access for those who are often locked out.

With that goal always in mind, she has also pointed out the financial impact of the arts on the economy and their ability to strengthen and build communities. And finally, she has made clear that her relationship to the creative community is personal, born out of family history and personal curiosity.

"My life is an anecdotal representation of the importance of music and culture. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago where you had me and my brother and a set of kids who happened to have parents that were a little more enlightened," she said during an interview about her arts interests and advocacy. "We got to go to the symphony and we got to experience opera and we got to see and go to the museums when we were young. But we were also hanging out with kids who didn't know these museums existed in the city they grew up in. We grew up with kids who had never seen the lake because they lived on the west side."

She paused, and her silence underscored her disbelief. "Their disconnect from the heart of the city of Chicago was so deep," she said, "that they had never seen the lake."

"There's a difference between where I am and where many of them are and that's when I say, 'There but for the grace of God go I,' because these kids were smart, engaged," she said. "They were missing that opportunity, and many times that opportunity came in the form of arts and culture."

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