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Obama embraces a lifelong cause: Helping minority boys succeed

By **Liz Goodwin and Garance Franke-Ruta**
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Yahoo News

President Barack Obama greets Father's Day luncheon guests including members of Youth Gui…

On Father's Day last June, President Barack Obama welcomed 14 teenagers sporting black-and-white T-shirts that read "BAM" into the Oval Office.

The letters stood not for the nickname occasionally slapped on the president by big-city tabloids, but for "Becoming a Man," a program run by a Chicago nonprofit working with at-risk youth in the public schools. The president had met the group of young black men once before, when he dropped by one of BAM's hourlong group discussion sessions at Hyde Park Academy High School last February. He'd pulled up a chair and sat in the boys' circle that day, talking with them so long about their lives his aides worried he would blow up his carefully planned schedule during his visit to the city.

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Now they were meeting again, teenagers from the South Side of Chicago and the president who began his organizing career not far from where they lived. It had already been an emotionally powerful trip for the boys, only two of whom had ever been on a plane before. Now here they were visiting with the most powerful man in the world in the inner sanctum of the Oval Office.

As the teens gathered around the president, one handed him a green and gold Father's Day card, which all the boys had signed. They had gone out and pur-

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president opened the card. "I've never signed a Father's Day card, either," Obama replied, according to an aide, improbably closing the distance between the Chicago teens and the American president. It was an intimate, private moment that moved him.

On Thursday afternoon, Obama will be addressing the same set of issues in a far more public way. Three of the BAM teens will return to the White House for Obama's unveiling of a new initiative partly inspired by the Chicago program. As part of "My Brother's Keeper," as the new campaign is known, the White House will bring together nonprofits, foundations and private businesses to endorse and test out programs designed to help young minority men graduate from high school, stay out of juvenile detention centers and prisons, and train for and get good jobs.

The Obama administration's most ambitious and high profile effort to tackle the systemic problems facing young men of color is rooted in a series of White House conversations led by Obama in the wake of the Trayvon Martin shooting two years ago. They continued and gathered momentum — including with first lady Michelle Obama — after the random shooting of another teen who lived just a mile from the Obamas' Chicago home. After his re-election, those discussions began to shape a more serious policy debate as Obama quietly began to bond with the Chicago youngsters.

But what started as a second-term presidential bid to confront a vexing social crisis may be turning into a lifelong cause. Senior White House aides confirm to Yahoo News that a major focus of Obama's post-presidency will be a broad-based, lifelong effort to lift up a demographic that feels perennially written off and left behind. Obama, who wrote a best-selling memoir probing questions of race, identity and his own fatherlessness, is plotting a return to the issues that have been central to his own life and will continue to shape generations of young black men after he leaves the White House.

"I think it's something that's deeply personal to the president and first lady," said Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to the president and the Obamas' closest friend from Chicago. "I'm sure their commitment to this initiative will be a lifelong commitment. This is not something they simply want to do while he's in office — it will continue."

Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who once ran the Chicago public schools, echoed Jarrett, telling Yahoo News in an interview that he believes the Obamas will be dedicated to the issue for decades. "This is core to who they are individually and core to who they are together."

In a sense, the struggle of young minority men has always been a central part of Barack Obama's life's work. Indeed, My Brother's Keeper takes him back to where he started as a community organizer on the streets and in the churches of South Chicago. Later, during his political campaigns, he often told a story about how nobody showed up at one of his first meetings as an organizer. A young and idealistic Obama felt discouraged until he saw some kids playing outside, seemingly oblivious to the rough neighborhood around them.

"If we don't keep going, what happens to these kids," Obama asked," according to an aide who relayed the story. "Who looks after these kids? Who is going to help these kids?"

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U.S. President Barack Obama speaks about the Trayvon Martin case in the press briefing room at the White House ...

No president has been as uniquely able to empathize with the plight of young men of color as Obama. As he wrote in “Dreams from My Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance,” Obama experienced a sense of rootlessness, alienation and abandonment. He felt the searing pain of racism and for a time turned to drugs as a form of escapism. His struggle to find his place in the world led him to Chicago, whose African-American community embraced him. That identity quest became an iconic American narrative that eventually helped propel him into the presidency.

And yet once in office Obama tiptoed on issues of race, hyperaware of how easily even the slightest misstep could fuel distracting controversies. He was criticized by some civil rights leaders for shying away from race-based initiatives and programs during his first term. So Obama’s high-profile embrace of this cause at this time, in his sixth year in office, raises the question: Why now?

The answer is complicated. For one thing, the president had to deal with an economy in freefall and trying to get health care reform passed in a hugely crowded first term. As the nation’s first African-American president, he also had a fine line to walk: If he avoided confronting racial issues he’d be accused of betraying his roots on behalf of political expediency, but if he confronted them too head-on, he’d be accused of divisiveness.

Even so, he has confronted race directly, both as a candidate and in his first term, starting with his major speech on the issue during the 2008 Democratic primaries. Aides say he preferred to get to work on tackling poverty and other issues that disproportionately impact minorities instead of making speeches.

There was also the very real risk of lighting politically damaging firestorms that would undermine his broader agenda for a nation in crisis. As it turned out, Obama’s presence in the racial conversation as the first black president sometimes made the issue more combustible rather than less. When Obama spontaneously decided to defend his friend Henry Louis Gates after he was arrested trying to get into his own locked home in 2009, he was forced to call an awkward “beer summit” at the White House for the offended police officer in question. (Obama said the police officer, who was white, had “acted stupidly” in arresting the black Harvard professor.)

The president’s team also had to think about his legacy. A former aide, who

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dozens of other competing issues. But the president and advisers felt that his primary duty as the nation's first black president was to do his job well — which meant focusing on the big picture.

"The only thing that could happen to the legacy frankly is it could be diminished by us not doing the best job we could while we had the opportunity to be there," the aide said. That meant prioritizing the economy, health care reform and national security issues over embracing race-specific domestic initiatives. "The question is: How did he do as president? It's obviously a bigger job than servicing one particular community."

But toward the end of Obama's first term, perhaps with posterity on his mind, Obama began to shift toward a more values-based approach. In "Double Down," a book published last year about the 2012 presidential election, authors Mark Halperin and John Heilemann reported that Obama believed he hadn't leaned in sufficiently on a number of issues that reflected his core convictions. He came up with a list of things he wanted to do in a second term. Among them, tackling the issue of poverty among African-Americans, Hispanics and whites from Appalachia.

Meanwhile Obama was feeling stymied by the culture of paralysis in Washington, obstructed by a Republican opposition that would give no ground. Realizing that sweeping legislation wasn't in the cards and that the Republican fever of opposition showed no signs of breaking, he started to re-evaluate his governing strategy. To have a successful presidency in an era of extreme partisanship and congressional stasis, he needed to rummage around the toolbox of the presidency for other implements to work with.

Obama increasingly relied on the unilateral powers of his office, as well as a more robust use of the presidential bully pulpit. And in what would eventually become a model for His Brother's Keeper, he turned to Michelle Obama's Let's Move anti-obesity program as a template for addressing a complex problem through public persuasion, partnerships and the mobilization of goodwill. The president regularly speaks of his " convening power" to concentrate attention and bring together foundations, businesses and nonprofits to address complex issues — in this case, the array of forces that make it hard for young black men to succeed.

Cleopatra Cowley-Pendleton is comforted near a neighborhood park where her daughter Hadiya was killed on January …

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one of a president reassessing the mechanics of his governing strategy. It began with the shooting of a 17-year-old black teenager named Trayvon in a middle class Orlando suburb — an event that touched off a ritual and emotional debate on race, justice and fairness in America.

Several aides and advisers said that after the shooting, the president began asking what the White House could do to give young men of color a better chance at life. Martin, who was unarmed, was shot by a self-appointed neighborhood watchman while walking home from a convenience store. The watchman, George Zimmerman, claimed that Martin was acting suspiciously and that after he got out of his car to question him, Martin attacked him. Police believed Zimmerman's self defense argument and did not arrest him until weeks after the shooting, when civil rights leaders publicized the case. He was eventually acquitted on self-defense grounds.

"What we see is that opportunity remains elusive for all too many men of color," said Thomas Perez, secretary of the Labor Department. Perez and Education Secretary Duncan began meeting with Obama beginning last July to help craft a plan. Perez had looked into the Martin case when he headed the Justice Department's civil rights division before taking the Cabinet job. "The Trayvon Martin issue brought the matter to the fore in a very conspicuous way."

Obama was deeply affected by Martin's shooting, though he did not address it publicly until a month after it happened. When he did, Obama openly and powerfully identified with the anguish of Martin's parents. "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon," Obama unexpectedly said in the Rose Garden after announcing his pick for the World Bank.

The case got some of Obama's closest friends and advisers, many of whom are black, talking about how no matter how much they thought they had "made it," they still had to warn their sons about how not to arouse the ire of police officers, who might assume based solely on the color of their skin that they were up to no good.

"No matter who you are, no matter where you live, no matter how much money you have — if you have a black or Hispanic boy you have to have a conversation with them about how they behave, how they look, how they carry themselves," said a former White House aide involved in planning the initiative. "I think one of the things that the Trayvon Martin [case] revealed is not everybody has to have that conversation with their boys."

Attorney General Eric Holder talked openly about his own brushes with racial profiling — like when as a young Justice Department lawyer he was stopped by police while dashing to catch a movie in Georgetown. They shined a floodlight on him and asked him why he was running. (Holder was already contemplating a major initiative to reform the many racial inequities in the nation's criminal-justice system, including sentencing disparities between black and white offenders and the disproportionate arrest of African-Americans for minor drug crimes.)

Last July, Obama casually entered the White House briefing room, unannounced, and spoke for 18 minutes about the Zimmerman not-guilty verdict, declaring that he wanted to "help more young men of color facing tough odds stay on track and reach their full potential." The remarks were the most exten-

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said, recalling how he would hear car doors locking as he walked down the streets. “We need to spend some time in thinking about how do we bolster and reinforce our African-American boys.”

After his comments, the president gathered his senior advisers and told them to really think about how best to accomplish the task. The “My Brother’s Keeper” program came out of the next six months of work.

And Obama began thinking of his initiative to lift up minority men as part and parcel of his overarching goal of narrowing income inequality in America and promoting social mobility. In 2012, less than 50 percent of young black men were employed, compared with 68 percent of young white men. If African-Americans and Hispanics had the same unemployment rate as whites, the U.S. unemployment rate would be even lower than its present6.6 percent. Unemployment among African-Americans remains stubbornly high, at 12.1 percent, while it has declined to 5.7 for whites.

“There’s broad recognition that these problems are not black problems or Hispanic problems, these are American problems,” said Danielle Gray, a former senior adviser to the president who helped plan the initiative. When “so much talent and potential” remains untapped, the economic and social fallout affects everyone. And with the nation’s demographics changing, there is an urgency to uplifting the prospects of groups who will one day be in the majority, if America is to remain a continued power.

The Martin shooting was not the only tragic event that served as a catalyst for My Brother’s Keeper. Just a few weeks into his second term, a majorette who had performed with her high school band at Obama’s Inauguration was gunned down less than a mile from the Obamas’ Chicago home. In early February, Michelle Obama attended Hadiya Pendleton’s funeral: The 15-year-old was mistaken for a member of a rival gang by two teenagers. For the first lady, the girl’s funeral was “devastating,” according to a senior adviser to the president. She stayed in touch with the Pendleton family, inviting Hadiya’s mother to sit next to her at the State of the Union address in 2013.

Education Secretary Duncan said the first lady frequently compared herself to Pendleton, who was also “a young African-American girl from a great family going to a Chicago public school” and doing well.

“One is the first lady of the United States and one is dead at 15,” Duncan said. “That funeral was very impactful for her.”

Duncan said he and the first lady talked “all the time” about how best to give Chicago kids and other minority children facing impossible odds a better shot at life. Aides say Michelle Obama will be very involved with My Brother’s Keeper.

A few weeks after Pendleton’s funeral, the president met the “Becoming a Man” group for the first time. He told his advisers that if he had grown up in Chicago, instead of Hawaii, like those boys, he doesn’t know if he would have made it. The president got into trouble and tried drugs as a young man, but the environment he grew up in was much more forgiving.

“It was this realization that they really weren’t that different,” an adviser said of the meeting.

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