

FROM PAGE A1

Michelle Obama stumps in Kalispell

By MICHAEL JAMISON
of the Missoulian

KALISPELL – They were still singing the alphabet song – top of the lungs and somewhere right around l-m-n-o-p – when Michelle Obama walked into the room.

And they kept right on singing, didn't miss a beat. That's the way you do things when you're 4, celebrity visit or no.

"My husband, Barack Obama, have you heard of him?" she asked the kids. "He's running for president."

"This is Carver, my stuffed dog," came the response.

And so the wife of the presidential hopeful steered the conversation well clear of politics, right into the pages of Dr. Seuss' "Green Eggs and Ham."

The kids – from Kalispell's Kaleidoscope Development Childcare and the Glacier Waldorf School – settled in for the ride, and Michelle Obama even smacked her lips when Seuss' finicky character finally ate that verdant breakfast.

The lesson was simple: "Just give it a try," Obama said, and try is something she surely knows a bit about.

From the Nurturing Center, where she spent nearly an hour reading to the kids, Obama traveled cross-town to an intimate rally of supporters, where try – one last try – was the order of the hour Monday afternoon.

"My task here is simple," she told the crowd of about 100. "I wanted to say thank you."

And their task was simple, too. Pay for the chance to



MICHAEL JAMISON/Missoulian

Michelle Obama, wife of the presidential hopeful, reads Dr. Seuss' "Green Eggs and Ham" Monday afternoon to children from Kalispell's Kaleidoscope Development Childcare and the Glacier Waldorf School. The lesson was simple: "Just give it a try," Obama said.

meet Obama by taking up the phones or hitting the streets with an 11-hour plea for votes.

Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton have for months been locked in a hotly contested race for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Tuesday marks the end of the campaign trail with the nation's last primary election right here in Montana.

"You guys get to close it out," Michelle Obama told the crowd, adding that it's been an "interesting" campaign since

her husband's early win at the Iowa caucuses.

The focus then, as now, was on individuals, Obama said, on connecting at the local level and generating energy from the bottom up.

"Barack Obama," she said, "was not supposed to be in this position."

Pundits announced early on he didn't have the clout to raise money for an extended primary fight. They announced he couldn't woo the big donors. They announced he didn't have the organizational backing to support a nationwide campaign.

The political landscape changed in America "when regular folks said 'I'm going to invest,'" she said.

The plan was simple – "go into communities and develop relationships. Go in and listen, and learn, and develop trust, and learn some more."

They left the campaign in large part to local organizers, she said, people who knew the particular politics of place.

"And we built amazing momentum, coming out of Iowa, and it just grew and grew and grew, and it's hard to stop."

Obama talked a bit of politics. She talked health care and education and jobs and wages, the environment and energy and even the Supreme Court.

"All of that's at stake in the next four or eight years," she said.

But mostly she talked about the candidate the way a wife talks about a husband. She talked about her misgivings at the start, about how fear slowly evolved into an opportunity to "embrace the possibility," about the pressure such a race places upon an American family.

Throughout it all, she said, her husband "maintained himself."

By which she means he has remained, in her words, gracious and dignified and respectful and, of course, driven.

"I can't tell you how amazed I am at the man he is," Obama said. "He has been phenomenal, and that's the kind of president he's going to be."

She's crisscrossed the country with her candidate-husband, Obama said, and everywhere they've met warmth and kindness, as well as hunger for change.

"People want us to be in a better place," she said. "They want it desperately."

They want fairness and hope and a finer world for their kids, and "they just want to know, 'Can I trust you? Will you take us to a place that is safer?'"

All across the nation, she said, "people are ready to put away fear and cynicism."

Which took her straight back to those kids, who weren't ready to stop singing just because somebody "important" walked into their room.

"When I think about what's at stake," she said, "I think about these kids."

Because in childhood, time is compressed, and every moment counts. Kids who went off to college in a country at war now are graduating into a country still at war, she said, "and we can't pass our problems on to them. That's what keeps me going."

At least for a few more hours anyway, until the last of the polls close in Montana and Democrats begin the final work of choosing their candidate.

"At 8 p.m. Tuesday, this chapter will be closed," Obama said, "so let's close it really well."

Just as she did that last chapter at the Nurturing Center, where Seuss' fearful character finally learned to simply give it a try. And he liked it.