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**[Michelle Obama's new chief of staff 'energetic' and 'driven'](#)**

**Chicago attorney Tina Tchen shifts from West Wing to East**

By Katherine Skiba, Tribune reporter

9:00 AM CST, January 6, 2011

WASHINGTON —

Tina Tchen has plenty of qualities that made her a logical choice as Michelle Obama's top aide, but here's a key attribute:

Tchen sleeps only four hours a night.

Appointed Wednesday as chief of staff to the first lady, Tchen cited a "biological-clock thing" in explaining why she sleeps only from 2 a.m. to 6. "I have the good fortune to not need a lot of sleep," she said. "That's been a great gift."

The other 20 hours a day, Tchen earns a reputation as "driven" and "indefatigable" and "phenomenally brilliant," according to friends and colleagues.

Tchen, 54, the daughter of a psychiatrist born in China, will succeed chief of staff Susan Sher, who is also a Chicago attorney, as is the first lady. All three are longtime friends.

An Ohio native, Tchen lived in Chicago for 30 years before President Barack Obama tapped her to direct the White House Office of Public Engagement.

A longtime Democratic activist, Tchen was as a partner in corporate litigation in the Chicago office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

The multitasker also served on the boards of organizations including the University of Chicago Medical Center and Chicago Public Library, and did pro bono legal work.

She was a Barack Obama supporter and fundraiser dating to the 2004 Senate race that catapulted him to the national stage.

Tchen, addressing Knox College graduates in June, called it "serendipitous" that years ago she ran into a "tall guy, with big ears and a funny sounding name ... long before others knew who he was."

Her job has seen her serving as the "front door of the White House." A highlight, she said, was assembling supporters Dec. 22 when Obama signed the measure to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military.

"It was special," she said, citing a crusade with men and women who had been discharged from the military for their sexual orientation.

In her move from the West Wing to the East, Tchen will oversee 23 staffers, and her salary will rise from \$153,500 to \$172,200 a year.

Tchen also is executive director of the White House Council on Women and Girls, a post she will keep.

Tchen will help advance the first lady's signature causes — fighting childhood obesity, supporting military families and showcasing the arts — while assisting her in high-profile social events.

Next Monday, for example, when French President Nicolas Sarkozy has a working visit with President Obama, Mrs. Obama plans a private lunch at the White House with his wife, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy. Nine days later, the Obamas host Hu Jintao, president of the People's Republic of China, for a state visit, including the third state dinner of the Obama administration.

That will be a banner day for Tchen, a "proud Chinese-American" whose late parents hailed from Shanghai, fleeing communists there in 1949 and settling in Ohio.

A native of Columbus, Tchen graduated from Radcliffe College of Harvard University in 1978 and from Northwestern University's School of Law in 1984. Married briefly with a young son, then divorced, her ex-husband, Larry Pressl, died in 2000 of a heart attack. He was 44.

Their son, Patrick, is 22, and Tchen's daughter, Emma, adopted in China, is 14.

"Tchen really excelled at everything she ever touched and through very difficult circumstances," said a friend, Chicago public relations executive Marilyn Katz.

House Democrat Jan Schakowsky of Evanston has known Tchen for 20-plus years; they celebrated New Year's Eve together with mutual friends in Chicago.

"Tina is smart, she is strategic, she is positive and she is energetic," the lawmaker said. "If you give her a job to do, she will get it done fast and perfectly and with a smile on her face."

Rita Winters, Tchen's neighbor in Chicago's Lakewood-Balmoral neighborhood, last saw her

over Christmas. "I thought with the tremendous pressure, she would seem stressed, but I have never seen her so relaxed and happy and in her element," Winters said. "She genuinely enjoys what she's doing."

But what she's doing, she's doing on "Tina Time."

Winters said several friends brought over pizza and helped Tchen pack up two years ago when she was about to depart for Washington.

They loaded up her things, they taped boxes and they reminisced for so long that Winters fretted over how much work remained. "Tina, you'll be up all night," she told her.

"She was completely unruffled," Winters recalled. "She wasn't going to miss out on saying goodbye to her friends."

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