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## FASHION FOOTNOTE

### 'YOU WORE FLIP-FLOPS TO THE WHITE HOUSE?!

By Jodi S. Cohen and Maegan Carberry, Tribune staff reporters. Tribune staff reporters Michael Kilian and Christi Parsons contributed to this report

**Advertisement**

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Before visiting the White House, Kate Darmody carefully planned her outfit. She bought a sundress from Ann Taylor. She put on a strand of white pearls.

And then she slipped on flip-flops to meet the president. So did about half of her teammates from the national championship Northwestern University women's lacrosse team, invited to the White House on Tuesday after a 21-0 season.

She didn't think twice about the footwear until she got an e-mail--in all capital letters--from her brother.

"YOU WORE FLIP-FLOPS TO THE WHITE HOUSE????!!!!!" he wrote after checking out the picture on the team's Web site.

Aly Josephs' mother had the same reaction after seeing her daughter in the front row of the photo--the fifth person away from the president--wearing brown suede flip-flops with a skirt, sleeveless top and matching beaded jewelry.

"Don't even ask me about the flip-flops," her mother said when a reporter questioned her about the picture. "As somebody who is 52 years old, it mortified me. I don't go out of the house without pantyhose on."

Twenty- and 30-somethings will pair flip-flops with everything from shorts to cocktail dresses, with the footwear acceptable (at least to them) at work and at clubs, for a stroll down Michigan Avenue or even down the wedding aisle. For their moms, the shoes--best known for the flapping noise they make--are meant for places like the beach.

One of the hottest trends this summer, flip-flops are no longer a dime-store purchase, with some costing several hundred dollars. They come flat and with wedge heels. They have rhinestones and sequins and flowers. The straps are made of terry cloth and leather.

But in today's more laid-back society, is there a distinction between ratty old flip-flops and ones from Neiman Marcus? Can they be worn at the White House, arguably the most formal setting in the United States?

Shoe expert Meghan Cleary, author of "The Perfect Fit: What Your Shoes Say About You," says no. In her chapter on flip-flops, where she weighs whether "to flip-flop, or not to flip-flop" for particular occasions, she would add a White House visit to the "not" category.

"For me, flip-flops are just not for a formal occasion," Cleary said. "But meeting the president, maybe this really speaks more to the worldwide acceptance of the flip-flop."

But the Northwestern Wildcats lacrosse team members, dressed in skirts and dresses, thought nothing of it. Of the nine women in the front row with the president, four wore flip-flops. The rest wore heeled sandals.

This past season was only the fourth year that Northwestern has had a varsity lacrosse team, and the women were thrilled to join 14 other college championship teams at the White House.

"Nobody was wearing old beach flip-flops," said Josephs, 20, who wore \$16 brown, flat flip-flops with rhinestones, one of about 15 pairs in her closet.

Darmody, 22, who decided on a wedge-heel flip-flop, said: "I tried to think of something that would go well with my outfit and at the same time not be that uncomfortable. But at the same not disrespect the White House."

She said that from May to September, "that is all I have on my feet all the time."

The teammates, and their athletic director, commented several times that it was actually the University of Michigan softball team--dressed in khaki shorts, polo shirts and sneakers--that was way underdressed.

"I would have felt out of place if that was what I was wearing," said Darmody, a lacrosse midfielder.

Flip-flops also pooh-poohed

But etiquette experts generally thought the flip-flops also were out of place.

"Many people are confused nowadays about when an occasion calls for dressing more formally. I'd say meeting a world leader is one of those occasions," said Charles Purdy, who writes the San Francisco Weekly's Dear Social Grace column.

Lesley Carlin, co-author of "Things You Need to be Told," said wearing flip-flops to the White House is a "huge no-no."

"You see them a lot more, but I've heard a lot of people remarking, 'Those belong at the beach and not at the office.'"

Even Joe Guidry, a salesman at the upscale Stuart Weitzman store on Michigan Avenue, said he wouldn't advise women to wear the company's \$150 flip-flops to the White House.

"Meeting the president? I personally wouldn't wear them," he said.

Lindsey Munday, Northwestern senior and offensive player on the lacrosse team, chose to wear light blue sandals, but said the flip-flops were suitable too.

"I didn't look at any of my teammates and say that was so inappropriate. I think there is a line between certain flip-flops and others," she said.

Munday said she shopped for the White House outfit with her mother, and chose a sundress, cardigan, bag and shoes from Ann Taylor. "I think she was going more for the heel look than flip-flops," she said.

What's the dress code?

White House spokeswoman Erin Healy wouldn't comment on whether the White House has a dress code. Soon after President Bush took office, he suggested that men should wear a tie in the Oval Office, and staffers reportedly do not wear jeans in the West Wing.

Ann Stock, who was Hillary Clinton's social secretary, said that while there was no written dress code for White House guests, "people who visit the White House know they're going to a very special place and that one should dress appropriately."

Nancy Reagan's social secretary, Muffie Brandon, was aghast to discover that some female staffers routinely wore flip-flops to work in hot weather.

"We do not wear clogs at the White House," Brandon proclaimed.

Locally, state Sen. Susan Garrett (D-Lake Forest), whose tastes run toward elegant suits and heels, said people shouldn't be overly concerned about what they wear when visiting the state Capitol.

"I don't think we should be pointing fingers at their flip-flops," she said.

Josephs, a junior on the lacrosse team who scored about 45 goals last season, had planned to wear a pair of heeled orange shoes to the White House but left them at home. She said the trip to the White House was "surreal."

The team gave Bush two "GWB43" lacrosse sticks, one painted red, white and blue and the other painted purple, the school color.

The teammates then shook his hand and posed for a picture, four rows of women standing tall with the president, who was dressed in a suit, blue tie and dark dress shoes.

Everybody was doing it

Josephs' mother, Lydia, said her daughter's freshly pedicured toes were the first thing she noticed when she saw the picture.

"I called her up and screamed at the message machine, `How could you go to the White House in flip-flops,'" she recalled. "She said, `Mom, it didn't matter. Everybody was wearing flip-flops.'"

Tom Darmody, 38, also was surprised when he saw his sister in the picture.

"I was a little taken aback, to say the least," said Darmody, an attorney who admitted he might be jealous as his feet sweated in socks and leather shoes. "You are two people away from the leader of the most powerful country in the free world and you're wearing flip-flops?"

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[jscohen@tribune.com](mailto:jscohen@tribune.com)

[mcarberry@tribune.com](mailto:mcarberry@tribune.com)

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