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The not-so-simple story of Barack Obama's youth

Shaped by different worlds, an outsider found ways to fit in

March 25, 2007 | By Kirsten Scharnberg and Kim Barker, Tribune correspondents.
Tribune staff reporter Ray Gibson contributed to this report.

HONOLULU — The life stories, when the presidential candidate tells them, have a common theme: the quest to belong.

A boy wants to find his place in a family where he is visibly different: chubby where others are thin, dark where others are light.

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A youth living in a distant land searches and finds new friends, a new language and a heartbreaking lesson about his identity in the pages of an American magazine.

A young black man struggles for acceptance at an institution of privilege, where he finds himself growing so angry and disillusioned at the world around him that he turns to alcohol and drugs.

These have been the stories told about the first two character-shaping decades of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's life, a story line largely shaped by his own best-selling memoir, political speeches and interviews.

But the reality of Obama's narrative is not that simple.

More than 40 interviews with former classmates, teachers, friends and neighbors in his childhood homes of Hawaii and Indonesia, as well as a review of public records, show the arc of Obama's personal journey took him to places and situations far removed from the experience of most Americans.

At the same time, several of his oft-recited stories may not have happened in the way he has recounted them. Some seem to make Obama look better in the retelling, others appear to exaggerate his outward struggles over issues of race, or simply skim over some of the most painful, private moments of his life.

The handful of black students who attended Punahou School in Hawaii, for instance, say they struggled mightily with issues of race and racism there. But absent from those discussions, they say, was another student then known as Barry Obama.

In his best-selling autobiography, "Dreams from My Father," Obama describes having heated conversations about racism with another black student, "Ray." The real Ray, Keith Kakugawa, is half black and half Japanese. In an interview with the Tribune on Saturday, Kakugawa said he always considered himself mixed race, like so many of his friends in Hawaii, and was not an angry young black man.

He said he does recall long, soulful talks with the young Obama and that his friend confided his longing and loneliness. But those talks, Kakugawa said, were not about race. "Not even close," he said, adding

that Obama was dealing with "some inner turmoil" in those days.

"But it wasn't a race thing," he said. "Barry's biggest struggles then were missing his parents. His biggest struggles were his feelings of abandonment. The idea that his biggest struggle was race is [bull]."

Then there's the copy of Life magazine that Obama presents as his racial awakening at age 9. In it, he wrote, was an article and two accompanying photographs of an African-American man physically and mentally scarred by his efforts to lighten his skin. In fact, the Life article and the photographs don't exist, say the magazine's own historians.

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Some of these discrepancies are typical of childhood memories -- fuzzy in specifics, warped by age, shaped by writerly license. Others almost certainly illustrate how carefully the young man guarded the secret of his loneliness from even those who knew him best. And the accounts bear out much of Obama's self-portrait as someone deeply affected by his father's abandonment yet able to thrive in greatly disparate worlds.

Still, the story of his early years highlights how politics and autobiography are similar creatures: Each is shaped to serve a purpose.

In its reissue after he gave the keynote address at the Democratic convention in 2004, "Dreams from My Father" joined a long tradition of political memoirs that candidates have used to introduce themselves to the American people.

From his earliest moments on the national political stage, Obama has presented himself as having two unique qualifications: a fresh political face and an ability to bridge the gap between Americans of different races, faiths and circumstances. Among his supporters, his likability and credibility have only been boosted by his stories of being an outsider trying to fight his way in.

As much as he may have felt like an outsider at times, Obama rarely seemed to show it. Throughout his youth, as depicted in his first book, he always found ways to meld into even the most uninviting of communities. He learned to adapt to unfamiliar territory. And he frequently made peace--even allies--with the very people who angered him most.

Yet even Obama has acknowledged the limits of memoir. In a new introduction to the reissued edition of "Dreams," he noted that the dangers of writing an autobiography included "the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer ... [and] selective lapses of memory."

He added: "I can't say that I've avoided all, or any, of these hazards successfully."

Life without a father

It was a complicated time.

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Hawaii had become a state only two years before Obama's birth, and there were plenty of native Hawaiians still deeply unhappy about it. The U.S. military was expanding on the island of Oahu, home to the new capital of Honolulu. And a young, iconoclastic white woman who had defied the social mores of the day by marrying a dashing black man from Kenya was coping with the fact that her new husband essentially had abandoned her and their young child in 1963 to study at Harvard.

Oblivious to all of this was a perpetually smiling toddler the entire family called Barry. In snapshots, the boy is a portrait of childhood bliss. He played on the beach. He posed in lifeguard stands. He rode a bright blue tricycle with red, white and blue streamers dangling from the handlebars.

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In the six weeks since Obama announced his intention to run for the White House, he routinely has suggested that his diverse background--raised for a time in the Third World, schooled at elite institutions and active in urban politics--makes him the best-suited candidate to speak to rich and poor, black and white, mainstream voters and those utterly disenchanted with the political system.

Not as well known is the fact that the many people who raised him were nearly as diverse as the places where he grew up. There was his mother, Ann, a brilliant but impulsive woman; his grandmother Madelyn, a deeply private and stoically pragmatic Midwesterner; his grandfather Stanley, a loving soul inclined toward tall tales and unrealistic dreams.

"Looking back now, I'd say he really is kind of the perfect combination of all of them," said his half sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng. "All of them were imperfect but all of them loved him fiercely, and I believe he took the best qualities from each of them."

During her son's earliest years, Obama's mother, whose full name was Stanley Ann Dunham because her father desperately had wished for a boy, attended college at the University of Hawaii. Known as Ann throughout her adult life, she kept to herself. She became estranged from her husband, Barack Obama Sr., after his departure for Harvard and rarely saw the group of friends that they had made at the University of Hawaii.

One of those friends, Neil Abercrombie, then a graduate student in the sociology department, frequently would see young Obama around town with his grandfather Stanley, whom Obama called "Gramps."

"Stanley loved that little boy," said Abercrombie, now a Democratic congressman from Hawaii. "In the absence of his father, there was not a kinder, more understanding man than Stanley Dunham. He was loving and generous."

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A close friend of Obama's from their teenage years, Greg Orme, spent so much time with Dunham that he, too, called him "Gramps." Orme recalled that years later, at Obama's wedding reception in Chicago, Obama brought the crowd to tears when he spoke of his recently deceased maternal grandfather and how he made a little boy with an absent father feel as though he was never alone.

Madelyn Dunham, a rising executive at the Bank of Hawaii during Obama's Punahou days, was more reserved but seemed to love having her grandson's friends over to play and hang out.

"Those were robust years full of energy and cacophony, and she loved all of it," Soetoro-Ng said of her grandmother, who has lived alone since her husband died in 1992.

Ann and the boy lived with the Dunhams in Honolulu until Obama was 6. Then his young mother, now divorced, met and married an Indonesian student studying at the University of Hawaii.

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In one family photo before the mother and son moved to Indonesia, Obama walks barefoot on Waikiki Beach, arms outstretched as though embracing the entire beautiful life around him. The sailboat the Manu Kai (bird of the sea, in English) is about to set sail behind him.

Obama, too, was about to journey far from these familiar shores.

Memories of a racial awakening?

Obama has told the story--one of the watershed moments of his racial awareness--time and again, in remarkable detail.

He is 9 years old, living in Indonesia, where he and his mother moved with her new husband, Lolo Soetoro, a few years earlier. One day while visiting his mother, who was working at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Obama passed time by looking through several issues of Life magazine. He came across an article that he later would describe as feeling like an "ambush attack."

The article included photos of a black man who had destroyed his skin with powerful chemical lighteners that promised to make him white. Instead, the chemicals had peeled off much of his skin, leaving him sad and scarred, Obama recalled.

"I imagine other black children, then and now, undergoing similar moments of revelation," Obama wrote of the magazine photos in "Dreams."

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Yet no such Life issue exists, according to historians at the magazine. No such photos, no such article. When asked about the discrepancy, Obama said in a recent interview, "It might have been an *Ebony* or it might have been ... who knows what it was?" (At the request of the Tribune, archivists at *Ebony* searched their catalogue of past articles, none of which matched what Obama recalled.)

In fact, it is surprising, based on interviews with more than two dozen people who knew Obama during his nearly four years in Indonesia, that it would take a photograph in a magazine to make him conscious of the fact that some people might treat him differently in part because of the color of his skin.

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Obama, who has talked and written so much about struggling to find a sense of belonging due to his mixed race, brushes over this time of his life in "Dreams." He describes making friends easily, becoming fluent in Indonesian in just six months and melding quite easily into the very foreign fabric of Jakarta.

The reality was less tidy.

Obama and his mother joined her new husband, a kind man who later would become a detached heavy drinker and womanizer, family members in Indonesia say. Their Jakarta neighborhood resembled a village more than the bustling metropolis the city is today. Electricity had arrived only a couple of years earlier. Half the homes were old bamboo huts; half, including the Soetoro house, were nicer, with brick or concrete and red-tiled roofs.

Former playmates remember Obama as "Barry Soetoro," or simply "Barry," a chubby little boy very different from the gangly Obama people know today. All say he was teased more than any other kid in the neighborhood--primarily because he was bigger and had black features.

He was the only foreign child in the neighborhood. He also was one of the only neighborhood children whose parents enrolled him in a new Catholic school in an area populated almost entirely by Betawis, the old tribal landowning Jakarta natives who were very traditional Muslims. Some of the Betawi children threw rocks at the open Catholic classrooms, remembered Cecilia Sugini Hananto, who taught Obama in 2nd grade.

Teachers, former playmates and friends recall a boy who never fully grasped their language and who was very quiet as a result. But one word Obama learned quickly in his new home was curang, which means "cheater."

When kids teased him, Obama yelled back, "Curang, curang!" When a friend gave him shrimp paste

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instead of chocolate, he yelled, "Curang, curang!"

Zulfan Adi was one of the neighborhood kids who teased Obama most mercilessly. He remembers one day when young Obama, a hopelessly upbeat boy who seemed oblivious to the fact that the older kids didn't want him tagging along, followed a group of Adi's friends to a nearby swamp.

"They held his hands and feet and said, 'One, two, three,' and threw him in the swamp," recalled Adi, who still lives in the same house where he grew up. "Luckily he could swim. They only did it to Barry."

The other kids would scrap with him sometimes, but because Obama was bigger and better-fed than many of them, he was hard to defeat.

"He was built like a bull. So we'd get three kids together to fight him," recalled Yunaldi Askar, 45, a former neighborhood friend. "But it was only playing."

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Obama has claimed on numerous occasions to have become fluent in Indonesian in six months. Yet those who knew him disputed that during recent interviews.

Israella Pareira Darmawan, Obama's 1st-grade teacher, said she attempted to help him learn the Indonesian language by going over pronunciation and vowel sounds. He struggled greatly with the foreign language, she said, and with his studies as a result.

The teacher, who still lives in Obama's old neighborhood, remembers that he always sat in the back corner of her classroom. "His friends called him 'Negro,'" Darmawan said. The term wasn't considered a slur at the time in Indonesia.

Still, all of his teachers at the Catholic school recognized leadership qualities in him. "He would be very helpful with friends. He'd pick them up if they fell down," Darmawan recalled. "He would protect the smaller ones."

Third-grade teacher Fermina Katarina Sinaga, now 67, has perhaps the most telling story. In an essay about what he wanted to be when he grew up, Obama "wrote he wanted to be president," Sinaga recalled. "He didn't say what country he wanted to be president of. But he wanted to make everybody happy."

When Obama was in 4th grade, the Soetoro family moved. Their new neighborhood was only 3 miles to the west, but a world away. Elite Dutch colonists once lived there; the Japanese moved in during their occupation of Indonesia in World War II. In the early 1970s, diplomats and Indonesian businessmen lived there in fancy gated houses with wide paved roads and sculpted bushes.

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Obama never became terribly close with the children of the new school--this time a predominantly Muslim one--where he was enrolled. As he had at the old school, Obama sat in a back corner. He sketched decidedly American cartoon characters during class.

"He liked drawing Spider-Man and Batman," said another friend, Widiyanto Hendro Cahyono, 46. "Barry liked to draw heroes."

Then, one day about a year after he had arrived, Obama was gone.

"Suddenly we asked, 'Where's Barry?'" remembered Ati Kisjanto, 45. "And we were told he had already moved away."

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Not one of 'the brothers'

As much as young Obama stood out physically in the classrooms of Indonesia, so, too, did he at Punahou School, the elite private prep academy his mother moved him back to Hawaii to attend.

Obama, his mother and new baby sister, Maya, moved into a small apartment near the school's sprawling, lush campus. And from the first day of 5th grade right up until his graduation in 1979, the young man was one of only a small number of black students at a school heavily populated by the children of Hawaii's wealthy, most of them white and Asian.

Then and now, Punahou and Hawaii liked to see themselves as more diverse and colorblind than the rest of the nation. But the reality felt far different for the handful of African-Americans attending classes there.

Rik Smith, a black Punahou student two years older than Obama, remembers a Halloween when white students would dress as slaves, coming to school in tattered clothes with their faces painted black with shoe polish. "Like being black was a funny costume in and of itself," recalled Smith, now a doctor who specializes in geriatrics in California.

"Punahou was an amazing school," Smith said. "But it could be a lonely place. ... Those of us who were black did feel isolated--there's no question about that."

As a result, the handful of black students at Punahou informally banded together. "The brothers," as Lewis Anthony Jr., an African-American in the class of 1977 put it, hung out together, often talking about issues involving race and civil rights. They sought out parties, especially at the military bases on the island, where African-Americans would be in attendance.

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Obama, however, was not a part of that group, according to Anthony and Smith. Both of them seemed surprised to hear that in "Dreams"--which neither of them had read--Obama writes about routinely going to parties at Schofield Barracks and other military bases in order to hang out with "Ray," who like Anthony and Smith was two years ahead of him in school.

"We'd all do things together, but Obama was never there," Smith said, adding that they often brought along the few other black underclassmen. "I went to those parties up at Schofield but never saw him at any of them."

Obama devotes many words in his book to exploring his outsider status at Punahou. But any struggles he was experiencing were obscured by the fact that he had a racially diverse group of friends--many of whom often would crowd into his grandparents' apartment, near Punahou, after school let out.

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One of those kids was Orme, a smart, respectful teenager from a white, middle-class family. Though Orme spent most afternoons with Obama and considered him one of his closest friends, he said Obama never brought up issues of race, never talked about feeling out of place at Punahou.

"He never verbalized any of that," Orme said during a telephone interview from his home in Oregon. "He was a very provocative thinker. He would bring up worldly topics far beyond his years. But we never talked race."

Whatever misgivings Obama had about Punahou, attending the school was largely his decision.

When his mother, a woman said to have been born with a keen sense of wanderlust, announced she was returning to Indonesia, Obama, then a teenager, asked to stay in Hawaii, according to Soetoro-Ng, 36, who still lives in Honolulu. Once again, Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, who had been as much parents as grandparents throughout the young man's life, said he could live with them.

"I don't imagine the decision to let him stay behind was an easy one for anyone," Soetoro-Ng said. "But he wanted to remain at Punahou. He had friends there, he was comfortable there, and to a kid his age, that's all that mattered."

One place Obama has said he found a sense of community was on the basketball court. A member of the varsity squad, though not a starter, Obama and his teammates brought Punahou the state championship in 1979, his senior year.

Adept at nailing long jump shots, Obama was called "Barry O'Bomber" by teammates. Alan Lum, who later would coach the basketball team at Punahou as well as teach elementary school there, recalled Obama as always being the first to confront coaches when he felt they were not fairly allotting playing time.

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Obama wasn't shy about advocating for himself and his fellow backup players, Lum said. "He'd go right up to the coach during a game and say, 'Coach, we're killing this team. Our second string should be playing more.'"

But it was on the court in the off-season that Obama seemed to be even happier. Back then, Punahou was a completely open campus, with several basketball courts where 20-something men from Honolulu would come in the late afternoon for what often turned into flashy, highly competitive pickup sessions. Many of the men were black.

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Orme would stay for the games.

"At the time, it was about basketball," said Orme, who has remained friends with Obama over the years and who plays basketball with him almost every Christmas when the two return to Hawaii to visit family. "But looking back now I can see he was seeking more from those guys than that. He was probably studying them and learning from them. He was a younger black man looking for guidance."

Old friend disputes memoir

Every senior graduating from Punahou gets to design a quarter-page in the yearbook. They compose notes to friends and family and include photos or quotes that best represent them.

On page 271 of the 1979 Oahuan, Obama's entry reflects the crossroads he found himself at as he prepared for life beyond Hawaii. He thanked "Tut and Gramps," his nicknames for Madelyn and Stanley Dunham, but didn't mention his faraway mother.

He also thanked the "Choom Gang," a reference to "chooming," Hawaiian slang for smoking marijuana. Obama admits in "Dreams" that during high school he frequently smoked marijuana, drank alcohol, even used cocaine occasionally.

"Junkie. Pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man," Obama wrote in "Dreams."

In the book, Obama discusses race and racism at his high school with one other Punahou student, "Ray," the young black man described in detail in "Dreams" as perpetually angry at the white world around him. "It's their world, all right," Ray supposedly shouts at Obama. "They own it and we in it. So just get the f--- outta my face."

But Kakugawa, in the interview Saturday, said Obama's recollection of that conversation was mistaken. "I did say we were playing in their world," he explained, "but that had nothing to do with race. He knew that."

Kakugawa explained that he had meant they were playing in the world of the elite people who populated and ran Punahou--famous Hawaiian families like the Doles, owners of the pineapple fortune, or the original developers of Waikiki, the tourist mecca. "It just wasn't a race thing," he reiterated again and again.

Obama confirmed in an interview earlier this month that the Ray character in "Dreams" actually is Kakugawa.

In another passage from the book, Ray complains that white Punahou girls don't want to date black guys and that he and Obama don't get enough playing time as athletes, speculating that they'd be "treated different if we was white. Or Japanese. Or Hawaiian. Or f----- Eskimo."

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But Kakugawa, a convicted drug felon, said Saturday that he had never been the "prototypical angry black guy" that Obama portrays. Because of his biracial heritage, he said, he was "like everyone in Hawaii, a mix of a lot of things."

A close friend and track teammate of Kakugawa, John Hagar, also said he was surprised by Obama's description of the character representing Kakugawa as an angry young black man. "I never picked up on that," Hagar said. "He was just one of those perfect [ethnic] mixes of everything you see in Hawaii."

Asked Saturday about Kakugawa's recollections, the Obama campaign declined to make the senator available. But spokesman Bill Burton said Obama "stands by his recollections of these events as related in his book."

"There's no doubt that Keith's story is tragic and sad," Burton added.

While Obama rocketed to political prominence, his friend headed down the troubled road Obama had feared he was following. Since 1995, Kakugawa has spent more than 7 years in California prisons and months in Los Angeles County Jail on cocaine and auto theft charges.

Another story put forth in "Dreams" as one of Obama's pivotal moments of racial awakening checks out essentially as he wrote it. Obama recounts taking two white friends, including Orme, to a party attended almost entirely by African-Americans.

According to the book, the characters representing Orme and the other friend asked to leave the party after just an hour, saying they felt out of place. The night, Obama later wrote, made him furious as he realized that whites held a "fundamental power" over blacks.

"One of us said that being the different guys in the room had awakened a little bit of empathy to what he must feel all the time at school. And he clearly didn't appreciate that," Orme said. "I never knew, until reading the book later, how much that night had upset him."

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The not-so-simple story of Barack Obama's youth

Shaped by different worlds, an outsider found ways to fit in

March 25, 2007 | By Kirsten Scharnberg and Kim Barker, Tribune correspondents. Tribune staff reporter Ray Gibson contributed to this report.

As Obama's senior year drew to a close, his mother sent him letters from afar, about life in Indonesia and her work there with non-profit groups doing economic development. She also sent advice about his future. [College](#) would be his next stop. She mixed encouragement to keep up his grades with laments about American politics.

"It is a shame we have to worry so much about [grade point], but you know what the college entrance competition is these days," she wrote. "Did you know that in Thomas Jefferson's day, and right up through the 1930s, anybody who had the price of tuition could go to Harvard? ... I don't see that we are producing many Thomas Jeffersons nowadays. Instead we are producing Richard Nixons."

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In the spring of 1979, Obama's mother and Maya, Barack's younger half sister by almost nine years, flew to Hawaii for his high [school](#) graduation. If young Obama had struggled to find a place at Punahou, it was well hidden on this day as well. He laughed and posed for photos with friends.

With a trimmed Afro, Hawaiian flower leis around his neck, Obama was surrounded by the disparate people who shaped him. In one photo he hugs his beaming sister.

In a striking snapshot with his grandparents, Stanley smiles proudly while Madelyn hugs him fiercely, as though she doesn't want to let him go forth into a world far from the remote island that for so long had been his home.

Kirsten Scharnberg reported from Honolulu and Kim Barker from Jakarta, [Indonesia](#); Tribune staff reporter Ray Gibson contributed to this report.

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