

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Occidental recalls 'Barry' Obama

The Eagle Rock liberal arts college is quick to claim the Illinois Democrat as an alum. He says he has 'fond memories' of the school.

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Memories of 1980 at Occidental College's Haines Hall have the standard fragments of the era: stereos blasting the B-52's through the dorm, pot-fueled bull sessions about the revival of draft registration, late-night cramming for economics exams.

That otherwise private nostalgia took on public significance this month when a former Haines Hall resident from Hawaii known at the time as Barry announced that he was forming an exploratory committee to run for president of the United States.

U.S. Sen. Barack Obama is usually described as an alumnus of Columbia University, where he earned his bachelor's degree, and of Harvard Law School.

But the Illinois Democrat began his undergraduate education at Occidental, and the 1,825-student liberal arts college in the Eagle Rock neighborhood of Los Angeles isn't shy about claiming him as an alumnus for his two years there (1979-81) on full scholarship. Perhaps, some think, it's where his political and oratory skills were nurtured.

Despite the somewhat awkward facts that Obama transferred from Occidental and that his official website biography doesn't even mention the campus, old friends and former teachers at the well-regarded 120-year-old school proudly described him as a serious scholar and a good athlete who helped the JV Tigers basketball team to an undefeated season.

Though some express surprise at his current prominence, classmates recall a slim, good-looking teen with a moderate Afro, a taste for Casa Bianca's Hawaiian-style pizza (pineapple and ham) and a role in protesting college investments in firms doing business in South Africa during the apartheid era.

In his 1995 autobiography, "Dreams From My Father," Obama recounted how he was accepted into "several respectable" colleges but chose Occidental "mainly because I'd met a girl from Brentwood while she was vacationing in Hawaii."

On Friday, in an e-mailed response to questions from The Times, Obama said he had "fond memories" of Occidental. "It's a wonderful, small liberal arts college. The professors were diverse and inspiring. I ended up making some lifelong friendships there, and those first two years really helped me grow up."

Roger Boesche, a professor of politics who's cited as Obama's intellectual mentor at Occidental, said the young man from Honolulu was "a very thoughtful student and a very curious student."

Obama enrolled in two of Boesche's courses: a survey of American government and political thought from the Revolution through the civil rights movement and an advanced look at modern European political thought, which tackled such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber.

"You didn't take my European Modern class without wanting to think about deep ideas," said Boesche. Teacher and student later lost touch until Obama, then an Illinois state senator, ran for the U.S. Senate in 2004 and Boesche launched a warm e-mail correspondence.

Eric Newhall, a professor of American studies and American literature at Occidental, said Obama played with flair as a fiercely competitive guard in faculty-student pickup basketball games.

"I remember him clearly as better as an offensive player than a defense player," he said. Now Newhall likes to lightheartedly brag that he "scored a good number of baskets against the senator of Illinois. I would love to say I scored against the president."

On a more serious note, Newhall said Obama already showed glimpses of social conscience and what his supporters describe as his charisma. "Clearly the guy had a presence," he said.

"He came off as a serious, articulate, intelligent young guy," Newhall recalled. "I didn't say, 'Here is presidential timber,' but I said to myself, 'I like our student body because they are going out to do interesting things.'"

He and others recall a strong speech Obama made at a campus rally urging South Africa divestment. Obama, in his book, considered that a big moment: "I figured I was ready, and could reach people where it counted," he wrote. "I thought my voice wouldn't fail me." Still, Obama initially thought he had flopped.

Dorm neighbor Ken Sulzer, now a lawyer in Century City, remembers Haines Hall's loud soundtrack of New Wave bands like the Flying Lizards. Hallway debates tackled the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and President Carter's subsequent revival of draft registration.

Obama "did not impose his personality but certainly was well-respected among his peers and always had that great voice, even when he was 17, 18," Sulzer said.

In Boesche's European politics class, Sulzer said he was impressed at how few notes Obama took. "Where I had five pages, Barry had probably a paragraph of the pithiest, tightest prose you'd ever see.... It was very short, very sweet. Obviously somebody almost Clintonesque in being able to sum a whole lot of concepts and place them into a succinct written style."

John Boyer, a skin cancer surgeon in Honolulu, fondly recalled evenings driving around L.A. and sharing pizza near campus. Boyer described himself as

conservative politically and opposed to some of Obama's positions, but added, "What I admired about him then and now is that he is a very principled person in how he formulated his views."

A woman who knew Obama at Occidental but did not want to be identified said she remains surprised that "Barry" might run for president. "It was just different times then. People sat around and smoked dope and talked about how they would reform the world. But you never thought they would," she said.

Although college friends would not discuss his drug use, Obama has publicly said he smoked marijuana and tried cocaine in high school and college.

Obama, now 45, came to Occidental's lushly landscaped campus after graduating from the Punahou School, a prestigious private academy in Hawaii. The son of a white American woman and a black Kenyan father who had been an exchange student at the University of Hawaii, he spent some of his childhood in Indonesia, where a stepfather lived.

Obama wrote about his search for a racial identity and said he often hung out with other black students at Occidental but also "the foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets ... When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting bourgeois society's stifling constraints."

Today, blacks and Latinos comprise about 22% of the student body, more than double what it was in Obama's time.

Anne Howells, a retired English professor, said she wrote Obama a recommendation for his Columbia transfer -- even though he sometimes turned in assignments late.

"He wanted a bigger school and the experience of Manhattan," she said. "I thought it was a good move for him."

In his e-mail, Obama confirmed that he transferred partly "because Occidental was so small, I felt that I had gotten what I needed out of it and the idea of being in New York was very appealing." But another reason was that he had many older friends who were graduating. College spokesman Jim Tranquada said privacy rules forbid releasing grades, but that Obama left in good standing.

So can Occidental legitimately claim him as an alumnus? "By all means," said Jim Jacobs, alumni relations director. "Who wouldn't want to claim him as an alum?" Many colleges list anyone who has studied on campus for at least a year, he said.

Obama, in his e-mail, said he is "happy to be an honorary alumnus, though my loyalties are obviously divided with Columbia, where I had a wonderful time as well."

Occidental already is linked to presidential politics through Jack Kemp, class of 1957. The former pro quarterback and Republican congressman ran for president in 1988 and was a vice presidential candidate in 1996.

Current students are aware that Obama once was one of them, said senior Rachel Kay, a coordinator of Haines Hall, where he lived as a freshman.

"I don't think they are more in favor of him because he went here," Kay said. "But to have some connection is cool."

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