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Blogging From the Five Boroughs

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Recollections of Obama's Ex-Roommate

By ALISON LEIGH COWAN

Barack Obama with a friend, Sohale Siddiqi, in the fall of 1981. (All photos courtesy of Phil Boerner)
SUBLET AVAILABLE: Three-room railroad flat, third floor, West 109th Street. Near Columbia University. Ideal for roommates who do not need privacy, reliable heat or steady hot water. Kitchen modest, but take out available, including New York bagels for only a quarter.

Such were the accommodations that greeted the future president, Barack Obama, when he moved to New York in 1981 to pursue his undergraduate studies at Columbia, according to the recollections of Phil Boerner, his roommate for a semester.

A young Phil Boerner, in a photo he says was taken by Barack Obama.

Both men were transfer students from Occidental College in Los Angeles, and as transfers were locked out of university housing at the time. Mr. Obama, 20, a junior, had spent two years at

Occidental, where he had lived in the same dorm as Mr. Boerner.

Mr. Obama, who ultimately made Chicago, and now Washington, his home, enjoyed his New York years, Mr. Boerner recalls. Museums. Jogging in the park. Breakfasts at [Tom's on Broadway](#), not yet the celebrated hangout of Jerry Seinfeld and George Costanza.

"I miss New York and the people in it," he would write Mr. Boerner a few years after they graduated. "The subways, the feel of Manhattan streets, the view downtown from the Brooklyn Bridge."

The apartment they shared, however, took some getting used to, Mr. Boerner recalled: 3E at 142 West 109th Street, a five-story building between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues.

The building at 142 West 109th Street.

Mr. Obama has recalled spending his first night in New York in an alley near the apartment, after arriving too late to be let in. The apartment had no interior doors, just archways, and Mr. Boerner had to walk through Mr. Obama's room to reach his own. Hot water was scarce, and the two young men often showered at the Columbia gym.

"It had a bathtub but no shower, just one of those plastic shower things that works ineffectively," said Mr. Boerner, who also recounted his experience with Mr. Obama in an [essay he wrote this month](#) for Columbia College Today, an alumni publication.

Mr. Boerner, who lives in California and is a registered Democrat, said he had kept his recollections to himself during the campaign, but thought he would share them now as his friend makes history.

A photo of Barack Obama, taken by Phil Boerner.

When they lived together, Mr. Boerner said he thought Mr. Obama wanted to be a writer, not a politician. Columbia recently tracked down, with the help of a graduate, one piece that Mr. Obama wrote in his senior year about two antiwar groups on campus for a now-defunct student periodical called “Sundial.” (See below.)

In it, he is already using phrases like “distorted national priorities” and “shifting America off the dead-end track,” which foreshadow messages of his later years.

“He’ll be a great president because of his intelligence and even more because of his good heart,” Mr. Boerner said.

New York was on the rebound when Mr. Obama arrived in New York. Ronald Reagan was president. Edward I. Koch was mayor and the city’s fiscal crisis had just started to abate.

Life for Columbia students could be hard, however. Mr. Boerner recalls Mr. Obama wrapping himself in a green sleeping bag (seen in this photo Mr. Boerner took) to keep warm when they studied at home. They listened to reggae. Bob Marley. Peter Tosh. Talked philosophy. Theories of justice and John Rawls. Mr. Boerner recalled Mr. Obama joking that he would rather be spending his time pondering Lou Rawls, the singer.

Some nights Mr. Obama would whip up some chicken curry, a dish he learned from a Pakistani friend. Other meals were at Tom’s.

“We would just go there for the breakfast special, two eggs over easy and toast,” said Mr. Boerner. “It was like \$1.99, and we lived on a lot of bagels. They were, like, a quarter then, but they expanded in your stomach.”

They also ventured out to Mr. Boerner’s family farm in the Catskills, where Mr. Obama helped with morning chores.

Though the two men stayed in touch, the housing arrangement ended that winter. Mr. Boerner thinks the leaseholder took the apartment back. Mr. Obama recalled in his memoir giving up the place “for lack of heat.”

Barack Obama’s addresses as a student were listed in Columbia directories.

The 1982-83 student directory shows Mr. Obama [living in his senior year at Apartment 6A of 339 East 94th Street](#). His letters to Mr. Boerner reflected the wistfulness of all expatriate New Yorkers.

“I am still amazed when I think of what we put up with there,” he wrote Mr. Boerner in October 1986. “Still, I think you’ll find you miss it once you’ve been gone awhile.”

[Obama 1983 article](#)

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