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Obama honed leadership skills as a community activist



Pat Rice, UAW Local 1264 member and quality inspector at Chrysler's Sterling Stamping plant in Sterling Heights, Mich., talks with Barack Obama during the presidential candidate's visit in May. - Photo: Nick Morosky

Barack Obama's meteoric rise from the streets of Chicago to the U.S. Senate to winning the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party showcases the unique experiences and skills he has gained in his years as an organizer, legislator and community activist.

After graduating from Columbia University, Obama worked for a Harlem environmental and consumer advocacy organization in New York City. In 1985 he was hired in Chicago as a community organizer for \$10,000 and a used car. As a staffer for the Developing Communities Project, Obama worked with churches on the city's industrial South Side to organize workers who had lost their jobs due to the steel mill and factory closings.

After three years in some of the toughest neighborhoods of Chicago, Obama decided to attend Harvard Law School, promising to return to these same streets. After being elected the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review, Obama could have turned his academic success into a six-figure job with a prestigious law firm.

Instead he chose to keep his promise.

He returned to Chicago in 1991 where he joined a small civil rights firm and ran a voter registration drive that put 150,000 new voters on the rolls, helping Bill Clinton carry Illinois in 1992.

In 1996 he was elected state senator from his Chicago district. In the Illinois Legislature, Obama worked with Democrats and Republicans to help working families get ahead by creating a state Earned Income Tax Credit. He also pushed through expansion of an early childhood education program.

He also played an important role in drafting bipartisan ethics reform legislation that has made Illinois one of the best states in the nation for campaign finance disclosure.

In 2004 Obama was elected U.S. senator from Illinois, where he has continued to demonstrate exceptional leadership in confronting tough issues.

As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, he has strongly supported Virginia Democratic Sen. Jim Webb's new G.I. Bill that would provide education benefits for all veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Demonstrating his ability to reach across the aisle, Obama traveled to Russia with Republican Sen. Dick Lugar of Indiana to begin a new generation of nonproliferation efforts to find and keep deadly weapons out of the hands of terrorists around the world.

In his first year as senator, Obama scored a 93 percent rating on key legislative issues identified by the UAW.

Over his four years as senator, he has stood with working families by voting for a raise in the minimum wage, for the Employee Free Choice Act with card-check recognition in union organizing drives, and for the right of Medicare to negotiate with drug companies to cut costs for seniors.

He has also stood with us to oppose Republican efforts to privatize Social Security, pass another "free" trade treaty for Central America (CAFTA) and cut Medicaid coverage for the poor.

Sam Stark

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