washingtonpost.com

Though Obama Had to Leave to Find Himself, It Is Hawaii That Made His Rise Possible

Advertisement

By David Maraniss
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, August 22, 2008; 1:55 PM

On weekday mornings as a teenager, Barry Obama left his grandparents' apartment on the 10th floor of the 12-story high-rise at 1617 South Beretania, a mile and half above Waikiki Beach, and walked up Punahou Street in the shadows of capacious banyan trees and date palms. Before crossing the overpass above the H1 freeway, where traffic zoomed east to body-surfing beaches or west to the airport and Pearl Harbor, he passed Kapiolani Medical Center, walking below the hospital room where he was born on Aug. 4, 1961. Two blocks further along, at the intersection with Wilder, he could look left toward the small apartment on Poki where he had spent a few years with his little sister, Maya, and his mother, Ann, back when she was getting her master's degree at the University of Hawaii before she left again for Indonesia. Soon enough he was at the lower edge of Punahou School, the gracefully sloping private campus where he studied some and played basketball more.

An adolescent life told in five Honolulu blocks, confined and compact, but far, far away. Apart from other unprecedented aspects of his rise, it is a geographical truth that no politician in American history has traveled farther than Barack Obama to be within reach of the White House. He was born and spent most of his formative years on Oahu, in distance the most removed population center on the planet, some 2,390 miles from California, farther from a major landmass than anywhere but Easter Island. In the westward impulse of American settlement, his birthplace was the last frontier, an outpost with its own time zone, the 50th of the United States, admitted to the union only two years before Obama came along.

Those who come from islands are inevitably shaped by the experience. For Obama, the experience was all contradiction and contrast.

As the son of a white woman and a black man, he grew up as a multiracial kid, a "hapa," "half-and-half" in the local lexicon, in one of the most multiracial places in the world, with no majority group. There were native Hawaiians, Japanese, Filipinos, Samoans, Okinawans, Chinese and Portuguese, along with Anglos, commonly known as haole (pronounced howl-lee), and a smaller population of blacks, traditionally centered at the U.S. military installations. But diversity does not automatically translate into social comfort: Hawaii has its own difficult history of racial and cultural stratification, and young Obama struggled to find his place even in that many-hued milieu.

He had to leave the island to find himself as a black man, eventually rooting in Chicago, the antipode of remote Honolulu, deep in the fold of the mainland, and there setting out on the path that led toward politics. Yet life circles back in strange ways, and in essence it is the promise of the place he left behind -- the notion if not the reality of Hawaii, what some call the spirit of aloha, the transracial if not post-racial message -- that has made his rise possible. Hawaii and Chicago are the two main threads weaving through the cloth of Barack Obama's life. Each involves more than geography.

Hawaii is about the forces that shaped him, and Chicago is about how he reshaped himself. Chicago is about the critical choices he made as an adult: how he learned to survive in the rough-and-tumble of law and politics, how he figured out the secrets of power in a world defined by it, and how he resolved his inner conflicts and refined the subtle, coolly ambitious persona now on view in the presidential election. Hawaii comes first. It is what lies beneath, what makes Chicago possible and understandable.

Hawaii involves the struggles of a teenage hapa at Punahou School who wanted nothing more than to be a professional basketball player. It is about his extraordinary mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, deeply loving if frequently absent. While politicians burnish their histories by laying claim to early years of community work and lives of public service, she was the real deal, devoting her career, unsung and underpaid, to helping poor women make their way in the modern world.

It is about his mysterious father, Barack Hussein Obama, an imperious if alluring voice gone distant and then missing. It is about his grandparents, Madelyn and Stan Dunham, Toot and Gramps, the white couple with whom he lived for most of his teenage years, she practical and determined, he impulsive, hokey, well-intentioned and, by his grandson's account, burdened with the desperate lost hopes of a Willy Loman-style salesman. It is about their family's incessant migration away from the heartland, from the Great Plains to the West Coast to Hawaii.

And that was not far enough for their daughter, who followed the Pacific farther to Indonesia and traveled the world until, at the too-early age of 52, she made her way back to Honolulu, taking an apartment next to her parents' in the high-rise on the corner of Beretania and Punahou, to die there of cancer. It was the same year, 1995, that her son made his debut on the national stage with a book about himself that searched for the missing, the void -- his dad, Kenya, Africa -- and paid less attention to the people and things that had shaped his life, especially his mother.

The simple fact is that he would not exist as a human being, let alone as a politician, without his mother's sensibility, naive or adventurous or both. Of all the relationships in Obama's life, none has been deeper, more complex or more important. They lived under the same roof for only perhaps 12 years and were frequently apart during his adolescence, but her lessons and judgments were always with him. In some sense, because they were just 18 years apart, they grew up together, each following a singular path toward maturity.

Like many presidential aspirants before him, and perhaps most like Bill Clinton, Obama grew up surrounded by strong women, the male figures either weak or absent. Once, during the heat of the primary race between Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton, a claim came from Bill Clinton that he "understood" Obama. As different as their backgrounds and families were, it was no doubt this strong-female-weak-male similarity that he had in mind.

* * *

Who was Obama's mother? The shorthand version of the story has a woman from Kansas marrying a man from Kenya, but while Stanley Ann Dunham was born in Wichita in the fall of 1942, it is a stretch to call her a Jayhawk. After leaving Kansas when she was a youngster, she and her parents lived in Berkeley, Calif., for two years, Ponca City, Okla., for two years, and Wichita Falls, Tex., for three years before they ventured to the Seattle area.

They arrived in time for her to enter ninth grade at the new high school on Mercer Island, a hilly slab of land in Lake Washington that was popping with tract developments during the western boom of the postwar 1950s. The island is not much more isolated than Staten Island on the other side of the country. Just east of Seattle, it is connected to the city by what was then called the floating bridge.

The population explosion, along with a nomadic propensity, brought the Dunhams to Mercer Island. Stan was in the furniture trade, a salesman always looking for the next best deal, and the middle-class suburbs of Seattle offered fertile territory: All the new houses going up would need new living room and dining room sets. He took a job in a furniture store in Seattle.

Madelyn, who brought home a paycheck most of her life, found a job in a banking real estate escrow office, and the family settled into a two-bedroom place in a quiet corner of the Shorewood Apartments, nestled near the lakeshore in view of the Cascade Mountains. Many islanders lived there temporarily as they waited for new houses to be finished nearby. But the Dunhams never looked for another home, and

they filled their high-ceilinged apartment with the Danish modern furniture of that era.

Stanley Ann was an only child, and in those days she dealt head-on with her uncommon first name. No sense trying to hide it, even though she hated it. "My name is Stanley," she would say. "My father wanted a boy, and that's that." Her mother softened it, calling her Stanny or Stanny Ann, but at school she was Stanley, straight up. "She owned the name," recalled Susan Botkin, one of her first pals on Mercer Island. "Only once or twice was she teased. She had a sharp tongue, a deep wit, and she could kill. We all called her Stanley."

In a high school culture of brawn and beauty, Stanley was one of the brains. Often struggling with her weight, and wearing braces her junior year, she had the normal teenage anxieties, according to her friends, though she seemed less concerned with superficial appearances than many of her peers. Her protective armor included a prolific vocabulary, free from the trite and cliched; a quick take on people and events; and biting sarcasm.

John W. Hunt said those traits allowed Stanley to become accepted by the predominantly male intellectual crowd, even though she had a soft voice. "She wasn't a shouter, but sat and thought awhile before she put forth her ideas. She was one of the most intelligent girls in our class, but unusual in that she thought things through more than anyone else," Hunt said.

Stanley would not use her wit to bully people, her classmates recalled, but rather to slice up prejudice or pomposity. Her signature expression of disdain was an exaggerated rolling of her big brown eyes.

Susan Botkin thought back to late afternoons when she and Stanley would go downtown to the Seattle library and then hitch a ride home with Stan and Madelyn. "We would climb into the car, and immediately he would start into his routine," she recalled. In the back seat, the daughter would be rolling her eyes, while in the front, Madelyn -- "a porcelain doll kind of woman, with pale, wonderful skin, red hair, carefully coiffed, and lacquered nails" -- would try to temper her husband with occasional interjections of "Now, Stan . . ."

Another high school friend, Maxine Box, remembered that they enjoyed getting rides in the old man's white convertible and that he was always ready and willing to drive them anywhere, wanting to be the life of the party. "Stanley would gladly take the transportation from him," Box said, but would "just as soon that he go away. They had locked horns a lot of times." The mother, she sensed, was "a buffer between Stan and Stanley."

Stanley and her friends would escape across the bridge into Seattle, where they hung out at a small espresso cafe near the University of Washington. Anything, Hunt said, to "get away from the suburban view. We would go to this cafe and talk and talk and talk" -- about world events, French cinema, the meaning of life, the existence of God.

Their curiosity was encouraged by the teachers at Mercer Island High, especially Jim Wichterman and Val Foubert, who taught advanced humanities courses open to the top 25 students. The assigned reading included not only Plato and Aristotle, Kierkegaard and Sartre, but also late-1950s critiques of societal conventions, such as "The Organization Man" by William H. Whyte, "The Lonely Crowd" by David Riesman and "The Hidden Persuaders" by Vance Packard, as well as the political theories of Hegel and Mill and Marx. "The Communist Manifesto" was also on the reading list, and it drew protests from some parents, prompting what Wichterman later called "Mothers Marches" on the school -- a phrase that conjures up a larger backlash than really occurred but conveys some of the tension of the times. "They would come up in ones and twos and threes and berate the teacher or complain to the principal," Hunt recalled.

Wichterman and Foubert, noted Chip Wall, were "instrumental in getting us to think, and anybody who tries to do that, particularly in high school, has trouble. 'Make my kid a thinker, but make sure he thinks like I do.' " In tracking the Obama story this year, some conservative Web sites have seized on the high

school curriculum of his mother as evidence of an early leftist indoctrination. Wall, who has spent his life challenging dogma from any ideology, and whose take on the world often veers from the politically correct, answered this interpretation with a two-word dismissal: "Oh, crap."

Stanley was decidedly liberal. She challenged the existence of God and championed Adlai Stevenson. But while some of her friends turned toward cynicism, she did not. "She was intrigued by what was happening in the world and embraced change," Susan Botkin recalled. "During our senior year, the Doomsday Clock seemed as close as it had ever been to boom. And the thought affected people in our class. There was a sense of malaise that permeated the group: Why bother? The boom is going to happen. But Stanley was better able to laugh it off, to look beyond it. Come out of that bomb shelter and do something."

Their senior class graduated in June 1960, at the dawn of the new decade. A few days after commencement, Stanley left for Honolulu with her parents. Decades later she told her son that she had wanted to go to the University of Chicago, where she had been accepted, but that her father would not let her be that far from them, since she was barely 17. Her friends from Mercer Island recalled that, like many of them, she intended to stay in Seattle and go to "U-Dub," the University of Washington, but that again her father insisted that she was too young even for that and had to accompany them to Hawaii.

That was nearly a half-century ago. Time compresses, and the high school classmates of Stanley Ann Dunham now have an unusual vantage point from which to witness the presidential campaign of her son. "You see so much of her in his face," Maxine Box said. "And he has his grandfather's long chin." In watching Obama speak and answer questions, Chip Wall could "instantly go back and recognize the person" he knew decades ago. Stanley is there, he said, in the workings of the son's mind, "especially in his wry sense of speech pattern." The fact that her son is black was surprising but not out of character; she was attracted to the different and untouched by racial prejudice.

The hardest thing for them to grasp was that Barack Obama Jr. came into being only a little more than a year after Stanley left Mercer Island. She seemed like such an unlikely candidate for teenage motherhood, not just because of her scholarly ways and lack of boyfriends, but because she appeared to have zero interest in babies. Botkin had two little brothers and was always babysitting, she recalled, but "Stanley never even babysat. She would come over to the house and just stand back, and her eyes would blink and her head would spin like, 'Oh, my God, what's going on here?' "

In the fall of 1960, as Botkin worried about whether she had the proper clothes to go through sorority rush at U-Dub, where they pinched the young women to make sure they were wearing girdles and where nylons were part of the uniform, she received her first letter from her friend in Hawaii. Stanley was enjoying newfound freedoms. She had ditched her first name and was now going by Ann. And no more nylons and perfect outfits, either. "I'm wearing shorts and muu muus to class," she wrote.

In the next letter, she said she was dating an African student she had met in Russian class. Botkin was more interested in the fact that her friend was studying Russian than in whom she was dating. But soon enough came a card revealing that Ann was in love, and then another that said she was married and expecting a baby in the summer.

* * *

The first African student at the University of Hawaii, Barack Hussein Obama, reached Honolulu 11 months before Stanley Ann Dunham and her parents got there from Seattle. He was on the first airlift of Kenyan students brought to study at U.S. universities as part of a program organized by Kenyan nationalist Tom Mboya and funded primarily by hundreds of American supporters. At the time, there were no colleges in Kenya, which was in the last throes of British colonialism. His arrival in Honolulu was announced in an article in a local newspaper, the Star-Bulletin, under the headline: "Young Men from Kenya, Jordan and Iran Here to Study at U.H."

Obama told the journalist, Shurei Hirozawa, that he grew up on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, in east Africa, and was a member of the Luo tribe. He said he had worked as an office clerk in Nairobi for several years to save money for college and settled on the University of Hawaii "when he read in an American magazine about its racial tolerance."

Other accounts have said he went to Hawaii because it was the only U.S. university to offer him a scholarship, but that appears unlikely, based on this contemporaneous report. Obama told Hirozawa that he had enough money to stay in Hawaii only for two semesters unless he applied for a scholarship. He said he would study business administration and wanted to return to Kenya to help with its transition from tribal customs to a modern economy. He was concerned, he said, about his generation's disorientation as Kenyans rejected old ways yet struggled with westernization.

Taking a room at the Charles H. Atherton branch of the YMCA, not far from campus, Obama quickly adapted to the rhythms of student life. One of his frequent hangouts was the snack bar in an old Army barracks-style building near his business classes. It was there that he met the Abercrombie brothers, first Neil and then Hal, who had escaped the darkness of Buffalo to attend graduate school in Honolulu, and their friends Peter Gilpin, Chet Gorman and Pake Zane. They were antiestablishment intellectuals, experimenters, outsiders, somewhere between beatniks and hippies, and they loved to talk and drink coffee and beer. They were immediately taken by the one and only African student in their midst.

"He was very black, probably the blackest person I've ever met," recalled Zane, a Chinese Hawaiian, who now runs an antiques shop a few miles from the university. "Handsome in his own way. But the most impressive thing was his voice. His voice and his inflection -- he had this Oxford accent. You heard a little Kenyan English, but more this British accent with this really deep, mellow voice that just resounded. If he said something in the room and the room was not real noisy, everybody stopped and turned around. I mean he just had this wonderful, wonderful voice. He was charismatic as a speaker."

It was not just the voice, said Neil Abercrombie, who went on to become a congressman from Honolulu, but Obama's entire outsize persona -- the lanky 6-foot-1 frame, the horn-rimmed glasses, the booming laugh, the pipe and an "incredibly vital personality. He was brilliant and opinionated and avuncular and opinionated. Always opinionated. If you didn't know him, you might be put off by him. He never hesitated to tell you what he thought, whether the moment was politic or not. Even to the point sometimes where he might seem a bit discourteous. But his view was, well, if you're not smart enough to know what you're talking about and you're talking about it, then you don't deserve much in the way of mercy. He enjoyed the company of people who were equally as opinionated as he was."

An interesting note about the snack bar crowd is that, even decades later, they all pronounce the first name of their Kenyan friend "Bear-ick" -- with the accent on the first syllable. That is how he referred to himself, they said. In Hawaii at least, they never heard him call himself "Buh-rock," with the accent on the second syllable, the pronunciation his son would adopt in his adult life. Perhaps it was a minor accommodation to westernization.

In late November, a few months into Obama's first semester, the Honolulu paper wrote another story about him, this time focusing on his positive conclusions about racial attitudes on the island. "No one seems to be conscious of color," he said. But there were stereotypes to shatter on both sides -- his of Hawaii and Hawaii's of Africa. "When I first came here, I expected to find a lot of Hawaiians all dressed in native clothing and I expected native dancing and that sort of thing, but I was surprised to find such a mixture of races," he acknowledged.

When asked if people questioned him about Kenya, he laughed and said: "Oh, yes. People are very interested in the Mau Mau rebellion [a long-standing uprising against the British] and they ask about race relations in Kenya. I tell them they've improved since the rebellion but are not perfect. They also ask if Kenya is ready for self-government. Some others ask me such questions as how many wives each man has back home, what we eat, how I dress at home, how we live, whether we have cars."

He did not answer those questions in the story. Nor, on one matter, was he forthcoming with his friends at the university. Neither newspaper readers nor his fellow students knew that he had left a son and a pregnant wife back in Kenya.

The events in Africa intrigued Obama's fellow students and were inevitably part of the movable discussion, which often went from the university snack bar over to the Stardust Lounge or George's Inn, where beer pitchers cost two bucks, and then on to Peter Gilpin's apartment nearby. As they listened to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee on the hi-fi, Obama pontificated on Kenya and nationalism and colonialism and his fears about what might happen. "He was very concerned that tribalism would trump nationalism," Neil Abercrombie said. "And that people like himself would not be properly recognized, would not be fully utilized, and there would be discrimination and prejudice. Jomo Kenyatta [Kenya's first postcolonial leader] was a Kikuyu, and Barack and Mboya were Luo, and Kikuyu were going to run things. We'd get into it that deeply."

Late in the summer of 1960, at the start of his second year and the beginning of her first, Obama and Stanley Ann Dunham met in a beginning Russian class. He was 25; she was not yet 18. She called him "Bear-ick," too. He called her Anna. Decades later, Ann would tell her son a story about their first date that he then depicted in his memoir, "Dreams From My Father." "He asked me to meet him in front of the university library at one. I got there and he hadn't arrived, but I figured I'd give him a few minutes. It was a nice day, so I laid out on one of the benches, and before I knew it I had fallen asleep. An hour later he showed up with a couple of friends. I woke up and three of them were standing over me and I heard him saying, serious as can be . . . 'You see gentlemen, I told you she was a fine girl, and that she would wait for me.' "

Recounting the scene long after the fact, knowing how the relationship would end, the son was at his most lyrical. "My mother was that girl with the movie of beautiful black people in her head, flattered by my father's attention, confused and alone, trying to break out of the grip of her own parents' lives. The innocence she carried that day, waiting for my father, had been tinged with misconceptions, her own needs, but it was a guileless need, one without self-consciousness, and perhaps that's how any love begins."

This was the prelude to the beginning of the second Barack Obama, the hapa, and in the narrative he creates about his mother, here, as always after, he writes with the sensibility not so much of a son as of an acute if sympathetic psychologist, approaching condescension but not quite crossing that line.

During his time in Hawaii, the elder Obama seemed adept at walling off various aspects of his life. He eventually told Ann about a former marriage in Kenya but said he was divorced, which she would discover years later was a lie. While the scene in the book includes two friends who were with him when he arrived late for a first date with Ann, few members of the snack bar crowd remember the Obama-Dunham relationship. Hal Abercrombie said he never saw them together. Pake Zane, who left the island for a spell in 1961, could not recall Ann from those days but had precise memories of Obama.

Neil Abercrombie did remember her appearing at some of the weekend gatherings. Obama was such a strong personality, he said, that he could see how the young woman was awed and overwhelmed by him. "She was a girl, and what I mean by that is she was only 17 and 18, just out of high school. And he brought her at different times. She mostly observed because she was a kid. Everybody there was pretty high-powered grad-student types."

Before the end of her first semester, Ann learned she was pregnant. The jolt that most parents might feel at such news from a teenage daughter was intensified for the Dunhams by the fact that the father was Obama. Madelyn Dunham has steadfastly declined requests for interviews this year, but a few years ago she talked to the Chicago Tribune's David Mendell, who was researching his biography, "Obama: From Promise to Power." Dunham, known for her practicality and skepticism in a family of dreamers, told Mendell that Stanley Ann had always been stubborn and nonconformist, and often did startling things, but none were more stubborn or surprising than her relationship with Obama.

When Mendell pressed her about Obama, she said she did not trust the stories the Kenyan told. Prodding further, the interviewer noted that Obama had "a great deal of charm" and that his father had been a medicine man. "She raised her eyebrows and nodded to herself," Mendell wrote of Madelyn. " 'He was . . .' she said with a long pause, 'strange.' She lingered on the a to emphasize 'straaaaaange.' "

On Feb. 2, 1961, against Madelyn's hopes, and against the desires of Obama's father back in Kenya, Ann and Obama hopped a plane to Maui and got married. No guests, not even family members, were there. Barack Hussein Obama Jr. was born six months later in Honolulu.

Ann, the earnest student, dropped out of school to take care of him. Her husband finished his degree, graduating in June 1962, after three years in Hawaii, as a Phi Beta Kappa straight-A student. Then, before the month was out, he took off, leaving behind his still-teenage wife and namesake child. He did not return for 10 years, and then only briefly. A story in the Star-Bulletin on the day he left, June 22, said Obama planned a several-weeks grand tour of mainland universities before he arrived at Harvard to study economics on a graduate faculty fellowship. The story did not mention that he had a wife and an infant son.

Many years later, Barack Jr., then in high school, found a clipping of the article in a family stash of birth certificates and old vaccination forms. Why wasn't his name there, or his mother's? He wondered, he later wrote, "whether the omission caused a fight between my parents."

On his way east, Obama stopped in San Francisco and went to dinner at the Blue Fox in the financial district with Hal Abercrombie, who had moved to the city with his wife, Shirley. Abercrombie would never forget that dinner; he thought it showed the worst side of his old friend, a combination of anger and arrogance that frightened him. Shirley was a blonde with a high bouffant hairdo, and when she showed up at the side of Hal and Barack, the maitre d' took them to the most obscure table in the restaurant. Obama interpreted this as a racial slight. When the waiter arrived, Obama tore into him, shouting that he was an important person on his way to Harvard and would not tolerate such treatment, Abercrombie recalled. "He was berating the guy and condescending every time the waiter came to our table. There was a superiority and an arrogance about it that I didn't like."

In the family lore, Obama was accepted into graduate school at the New School in New York and at Harvard, and if he had chosen the New School there would have been enough scholarship money for his wife and son to come along. However, the story goes, he opted for Harvard because of the world-class academic credentials a Crimson degree would bring. But there is an unresolved part of the story: Did Ann try to follow him to Cambridge? Her friends from Mercer Island were left with that impression. Susan Botkin, Maxine Box and John W. Hunt all remember Ann showing up in Seattle late that summer with little Barry, as her son was called.

"She was on her way from her mother's house to Boston to be with her husband," Botkin recalled. "[She said] he had transferred to grad school and she was going to join him. And I was intrigued with who she was and what she was doing. Stanley was an intense person . . . but I remember that afternoon, sitting in my mother's living room, drinking iced tea and eating sugar cookies. She had her baby and was talking about her husband, and what life held in store for her. She seemed so confident and self-assured and relaxed. She was leaving the next day to fly on to Boston."

But as Botkin and others later remembered it, something happened in Cambridge, and Stanley Ann returned to Seattle. They saw her a few more times, and they thought she even tried to enroll in classes at the University of Washington, before she packed up and returned to Hawaii.

* * *

By the time he was 6, Barry Obama was a hyper-aware boy with much to think about. His mother had returned to school at the University of Hawaii and had received a degree in what her family considered an unlikely major -- math. She had divorced Barack Obama Sr., who had finished his graduate work at

Harvard and was back in Kenya, now living with a third woman. Ann had moved on and was soon to wed another international student, Lolo Soetoro, and follow him back to his home country, Indonesia, bringing Barry along. Her brief first marriage was in the past, Seattle in the remote distance, and Kansas farther still.

It was at this point that Barry developed a way of looking at his mother that essentially would last until her death three decades later. His take on her -- both the ways he wanted to be like her and how he reacted against her -- shaped him permanently and is central to understanding his political persona today, the contrast of an embracing, inclusive sensibility accompanied by an inner toughness and wariness. Starting at an early age, he noticed how his mother was curious and open, eager to find the best in people and situations, intent on softening the edges of the difficult world for her hapa son. There were many times when this made him think that she was naive, sometimes heartbreakingly so, and that he had to be the realist in the family. To some degree, especially as he tried to explain himself later in "Dreams From My Father," he seemed to use his mother as a foil, setting her up as the quintessential well-intentioned white liberal idealist as a contrast to his own coming of age as a modern black man.

Whether this perception reflected objective reality is open to question. In her dealings later as a community worker and anthropologist in Indonesia and around the world, Ann showed a keen appreciation of the power structure and how to work with it or around it, and her doctoral thesis and other writings reveal a complex understanding of people and their motivations, free of dreamy idealism and wishful thinking. But she certainly tried to present the world in the most hopeful, unthreatening light to her children, first Barry and then his little sister, Maya, the daughter she bore with Soetoro.

As Maya explained recently, looking back on the way she and her brother were raised: "[She wanted to] make sure that nothing ever became acrimonious and that everything was pretty and everything was sacred and everything was properly maintained and respected -- all the cultural artifacts and ways of being and living and thinking. We didn't need to make choices. We didn't need to discard anything. We could just have it all and keep it all. It was this sense of bounty and beauty."

The son's notion of his loving mother's naivete began in Indonesia, when they arrived in the capital city, Jakarta, in 1967, joining Soetoro, who had returned to his home country several months earlier. The place was a fantasia of the unfamiliar and grotesque to young Barry, with the exotic scent of danger. Monkeys, chickens and even crocodiles in the back yard. A land of floods, exorcisms, cockfights. Lolo was off working for Union Oil, Ann taught English at the U.S. Embassy, and Barry was overwhelmed in this strange new world. He recalled those days in his memoir with more acuity than he possibly could have had as a 6-year-old, but the words reflect his perceptions nonetheless.

His mother taught him history, math, reading and social studies, waking him at 4 each morning to give him special tutoring, pouring her knowledge into his agile brain. But it was left to his stepfather to orient him in the cruel ways of the world. Soetoro taught him how to fight and defend himself, how not to give money to beggars, how to deal strictly with servants, how to interact with the world on its own unforgiving terms, not defining everything as good or bad but merely as it is. " 'Your mother has a soft heart,' he told me after she tried to take the blame for knocking a radio off the dresser," Obama quoted Soetoro in his memoir. " 'That's good in a woman, but you will be a man someday, and a man needs to have more sense.' " Men, Soetoro explained, take advantage of weakness in other men. " 'They're like countries that way.' "

All of this, as Obama later interpreted it, related to the exercise of power, hidden and real. It was power that forced Soetoro to return to Indonesia in the first place. He had been summoned back to his country from Hawaii in 1966 and sent to work in New Guinea for a year because the ruling regime, after a widespread, bloody purge of communists and leftists, was leery of students who had gone abroad and wanted them back and under control. To his mother, power was ugly, Obama determined: "It fixed in her mind like a curse." But to his stepfather, power was reality -- and he "made his peace" with it.

Which response to the world had a deeper effect on the person Barry Obama would become? Without

doubt it was his mother's. Soetoro, described later by his daughter Maya as a sweet and quiet man, resigned himself to his situation and did not grow or change. He became a nondescript oilman, befriending slick operators from Texas and Louisiana who probably regarded him with racial condescension. He went to their parties and played golf at the country club and became western and anonymous, slipping as far away as possible from the dangers of the purge and the freedom of his student days.

Ann certainly had more options, but the one she eventually chose was unusual. She decided to deepen her connection to this alien land and to confront power in her own way, by devoting herself to understanding the people at the core of Indonesian culture, artisans and craftsmen, and working to help them survive.

Here was an early paradox that helped shape Obama's life, one he would confront again and again as he matured and remade himself: A certain strain of realism can lead to inaction. A certain form of naivete can lead to action.

By the time Maya was born in 1970, Ann's second marriage was coming apart. This time, there was no sudden and jarring disappearance. The relationship lingered off and on for another 10 years, and Lolo remained part of Maya's life in a way that Barack Obama did not for Barry.

As Maya analyzed her parents' relationship decades later, she concluded that she came along just as her mother was starting to find herself. "She started feeling competent, perhaps. She acquired numerous languages after that. Not just Indonesian, but her professional language and her feminist language. And I think she really got a voice. So it's perfectly natural that she started to demand more of those who were near her, including my father. And suddenly his sweetness wasn't enough to satisfy her needs."

* * *

"Dreams From My Father" is as imprecise as it is insightful about Obama's early life. Obama offers unusually perceptive and subtle observations of himself and the people around him. Yet, as he readily acknowledged, he rearranged the chronology for his literary purposes and presented a cast of characters made up of composites and pseudonyms. This was to protect people's privacy, he said. Only a select few were not granted that protection, for the obvious reason that he could not blur their identities -- his relatives. And so it is that of all the people in the book, the one who takes it on the chin the most is his maternal grandfather, Stan Dunham.

It is obvious from the memoir, and from interviews with many people who knew the family in Hawaii, that Dunham loved his grandson and did everything he could to support him physically and emotionally. But in the memoir, Gramps comes straight out of the plays of Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill, a once-proud soul lost in self-delusion, struggling against the days.

When Barry was 10, his mother made the difficult decision to send him back to Honolulu to live with her parents so he could get better schooling. He had been accepted into the prestigious Punahou School, and Madelyn and Stan had moved from a large house on Kamehameha Avenue to the apartment on Beretania, only five blocks from the campus.

Gramps now seemed as colorful and odd as those monkeys in the back yard in Jakarta. He cleaned his teeth with the red cellophane string from his cigarette packs. He told off-color jokes to waitresses. A copy of Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People" was always near at hand -- and only those who lived with him knew the vast distance between his public bonhomie and his private despair. The most powerful scene in the memoir, as devastating as it is lovingly rendered, described how Stan, by then out of the furniture business and trying his hand as a John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance salesman, prepared on Sunday night for the week ahead.

"Sometimes I would tiptoe into the kitchen for a soda, and I could hear the desperation creeping out of

his voice, the stretch of silence that followed when the people on the other end explained why Thursday wasn't good and Tuesday not much better, and then Gramps's heavy sigh after he had hung up the phone, his hands fumbling through the files in his lap like those of a card player who's deep in the hole."

By the time Barry returned to Hawaii, Toot had become the stable financial source in the family, well known in the local lending community. In the library of the Honolulu Advertiser, no clippings mention Stan Dunham, but Madelyn Dunham crops up frequently in the business pages. A few months before Barry arrived from Indonesia, his grandmother had been promoted to vice president at the Bank of Hawaii along with Dorothy K. Yamamoto -- the first two female vice presidents in the bank's history.

It was during Barry's first year at Punahou School that his long-lost father stepped briefly into his life, and just as quickly disappeared again. He came for the month of December, and his mother returned from Indonesia beforehand to prepare Barry for the visit. She taught him more about Kenya and stories of the Luo people, but all of that knowledge dissolved at the first sight of the old man. He seemed far skinnier than Barry had imagined him, and more fragile, with his spectacles and blue blazer and ascot and yellowish eyes.

It was not an easy month, and what stuck in the boy's memory were the basketball that his dad gave him as a present and two dramatic events: when his father ordered him, in front of his mother and grandparents, to turn off the TV and study instead of watching "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," and when his father came to Miss Mabel Hefty's fifth-grade class at Punahou's Castle Hall to talk about Kenya. The first moment angered Barry; the second made him proud. But nothing much lingered after his father was gone.

That visit to Honolulu was bracketed by two trips that Obama's old snack bar friends from the University of Hawaii made to see him in Kenya. Late in 1968, Neil Abercrombie and Pake Zane traveled through Nairobi on a year-long backpacking trip around the world and stayed with Obama for several days before they made their way on to the port city of Mombasa and to India. No mention was made of Ann or the boy, but it was clear to Abercrombie that his old friend's life was not turning out as he had planned. "He seemed very frustrated, and his worst fears in his mind were coming true -- that he was being underutilized," Abercrombie said. "Everybody's virtue is his vice, and his brilliance and his assertiveness was obviously working against him as well."

Five years later, in 1973, Zane returned during another trip around the world.

"This time when I met Barack [Bear-ick, he said], he was a shell of what he was prior to that," Zane recalled. "Even from what he was in 1968. . . . He was drinking very heavily, and he was very depressed and as you might imagine had an amount of rage. He felt totally vulnerable."

Meanwhile, Barry's circumstances had changed somewhat. His mother, separated from Lolo, was back in Hawaii with little Maya. Barry joined them in an apartment at Poki and Wilder, even closer to Punahou School. Ann was now fully engaged in the artisan culture of Indonesia and was beginning her master's degree work in anthropology. They had no money beyond her graduate school grants.

Maya's earliest memories go back to those years. Thirty-five years later, she can remember a filing cabinet and a rocking chair, and how she and her big brother would sit in the chair and keep rocking harder until it flipped over, which is what they wanted it to do. There was a television across from the rocker, and she would purposely stand in front of it during basketball games to irritate him. There were picnics at Puu Ualakaa State Park with Kentucky Fried Chicken and Madelyn's homemade baked beans and coleslaw and potato salad with the skins still on. And there was Big Sandwich Night, when Gramps would haul out all the meats and cheeses and vegetables.

After three years in Hawaii, Ann had to go back to Indonesia to conduct her fieldwork. Barry had absolutely no interest in returning to that strange place, so he stayed behind with his grandparents.

* * *

Keith and Tony Peterson were rummaging through the discount bin at a bookstore in Boulder, Colo., one afternoon and came across a copy of "Dreams From My Father" several years after it was first published. "We've got to buy this," Keith said to his brother. "Look who wrote it." Barry Obama. Their friend from Punahou School. They both bought copies and raced through the memoir, absorbed by the story and especially by the sections on their high school years. They did not recognize any of the names, since they were all pseudonyms, but they recognized the smells and sounds and sensibility of the chapters and the feelings Obama expressed as he came of age as a black teenager.

This was their story, too. They wondered why Obama focused so much on a friend he called Ray, who in fact was Keith Kukagawa. Kukagawa was black and Japanese, and the Petersons did not even think of him as black. Yet in the book, Obama used him as the voice of black anger and angst, the provocateur of hip, vulgar, get-real dialogues.

But what interested the Petersons more was Obama's interior dialogue with himself, his sense of dislocation at the private school, a feeling that no matter what he did, he was defined and confined by the expectations and definitions of white people. Keith Peterson had felt the same way, without being fully able to articulate his unease. "Now keep in mind I am reading this before [Obama] came on the national scene," he said later. "So I am reading this still person to person, not person to candidate, and it meant a lot more for that reason. It was a connection. It was amazing as I read this book, so many decades later, at last I was feeling a certain amount of closure, having felt so isolated for so long. I wasn't alone. I spent a good portion of my life thinking I had experienced something few others had. It was surprisingly satisfying to know I wasn't crazy. I was not the only one struggling with some of these issues."

But his brother Tony, who reached Punahou first, said he had regular discussions with Obama about many issues, including race. Tony was a senior when Obama was a freshman. The Petersons lived miles away, out in Pearl City, having grown up in a military family that was first based at Schofield Barracks. While Obama walked only five blocks to school, Tony had to ride city buses for an hour and a half each morning to get there.

As he remembered it, he was one of a handful of black students at Punahou then, a group that included Obama, Lewis Anthony, Rik Smith and Angie Jones. Peterson, Smith and Obama would meet on the steps outside Cooke Hall for what, with tongue in cheek, they called the Ethnic Corner. Obama and Smith were biracial, one black and white, the other black and Indian. Both of Peterson's parents were black, but he felt uneasy because he was an academically inclined young man whom people thought "sounded white."

"Barry had no personal reference for his blackness. All three of us were dealing with it in different ways," Peterson recalled. "How do we explore these things? That is one thing we talked about. We talked about time. We talked about our classes. We talked about girls. We talked specifically about whether girls would date us because we were black. We talked about social issues. . . . But our little chats were not agonizing. They were just sort of fun. We were helping each other find out who we were. We talked about what we were going to be. I was going to be a lawyer. Rick was going to be a lawyer. And Barry was going to be a basketball player."

Obama's interest in basketball had come a long way since his absent father showed up and gave him his first ball. Now it was his obsession. He was always dribbling, always playing, either on the outdoor courts at Punahou or down at the playground on King Street across from the Baskin-Robbins where he worked part-time. He was a flashy passer with good moves to the basket but an uneven and unorthodox jump shot, pulling the ball back behind his head so far that it almost disappeared behind him. Basketball dominated his time so much that his mother worried about him. In ninth grade, at least, he was the naive one, believing he could make a life in the game.

In Tony Peterson's senior yearbook, Obama wrote: "Tony, man, I sure am glad I got to know you before you left. All those Ethnic Corner trips to the snack bar and playing ball made the year a lot more enjoyable, even though the snack bar trips cost me a fortune. Anyway, great knowing you and I hope we keep in touch. Good luck in everything you do, and get that law degree. Some day when I am a pro basketballer, and I want to sue my team for more money, I'll call on you."

Barry's mother, who had a wry sense of humor, once joked to friends that she was a pale-skinned Kansan who married a Kenyan and an Indonesian so she could have brown children who would not have to worry about sunburn. Her understanding of race was far deeper than that joke; she was always sensitive to issues of identity and made a point of inculcating her children in the cultures of their fathers. Still, there were some problems she could not resolve for them. Maya later said that her mother's overriding desire that her children not suffer perhaps got in the way.

"She didn't want us to suffer with respect to identity. She wanted us to think of it as a gift that we were multilayered and multidimensional and multiracial. This meant that she was perhaps unprepared when we did struggle with issues of identity. She was not really able to help us grapple with that in any nuanced way. Maybe it would make her feel like she hadn't succeeded in surrounding us with enough love. I remember Mom wanting it not to be an issue."

In an apparent effort to show a lifelong plot to power, some opponents last year pushed a story about Obama in which he predicted in kindergarten that one day he would be president. The conspiracy certainly seemed to go off the rails by the time he reached high school. Unlike Bill Clinton, who was the most political animal at Hot Springs High in Arkansas -- organizing the marching band as though it was his own political machine, giving speeches at the local Rotary, maneuvering his way into a Senate seat at the American Legion-sponsored Boys Nation -- Obama stayed away from student leadership roles at Punahou and gave his friends no clues that a few decades later he would emerge as a national political figure.

"When I look back, one of the things that stood out was that he didn't stand out," said Keith Peterson, who was a year younger than Obama. "There was absolutely nothing that made me think this is the road he would take." His friends remember him as being kind and protective, a prolific reader, keenly aware of the world around him, able to talk about foreign affairs in a way that none of the rest of them could, and yet they did not think of him as politically or academically ambitious. In a school of high achievers, he coasted as a B student. He dabbled a little in the arts, singing in the chorus for a few years and writing poetry for the literary magazine, Ka Wai Ola.

The group he ran with was white, black, brown and not identified with any of the traditional social sets at the school: the rich girls from the Outrigger Canoe Club, the football players, the math guys, the drama crew, the volleyball guys. Among Obama's friends, "there were some basketball players in there, but it was kind of eclectic," recalled Mike Ramos, also a hapa, his mother Anglo and his father Filipino. "Was there a leader? Did we defer to Barry? I don't think so. It was a very egalitarian kind of thing, also come as you are."

They body-surfed at Sandy Beach Park on the south shore, played basketball day and night, went camping in the hills above the school, sneaked into parties at the university and out at Schofield Barracks, and listened to Stevie Wonder, Fleetwood Mac, Miles Davis and Grover Washington at Greg and Mike Ramos's place across from the school or in Barry's room at his grandparents' apartment. ("You listen to Grover? I listen to Grover," Mike Ramos still remembers Barry saying as a means of introducing himself during a conversation at a party.)

And they smoked dope. Obama's drug use is right there in the memoir, with no attempt to make him look better than he was. He acknowledged smoking marijuana and using cocaine but said he stopped short of heroin. Some have suggested that he exaggerated his drug use in the book to hype the idea that he was on the brink of becoming a junkie; dysfunction and dissolution always sell in memoirs.

But his friends quickly dismissed that notion. "I wouldn't call it an exaggeration," Greg Ramos said. Keith Peterson said: "Did I ever party with Barack? Yes, I did. Do I remember specifically? If I did, then I didn't party with him. Part of the nature of getting high is you don't remember it 30 minutes later. Punahou was a wealthy school with a lot of kids with disposable income. The drinking age in Hawaii then was 18, so a lot of seniors could buy it legally, which means the parent dynamic was not big. And the other partying materials were prevalent, being in Hawaii. There was a lot of partying that went on. And Barack has been very open about that. Coming from Hawaii, that would have been so easy to expose. If he hadn't written about it, it would have been a disaster."

If basketball was Obama's obsession during those years, it also served as a means for him to work out some of his frustrations about race. In the book and elsewhere, he has emphasized that he played a "black" brand of ball, freelancing his way on the court, looking to drive to the hoop rather than wait around for a pick and an open shot. His signature move was a double-pump in the lane. This did not serve him well on the Punahou varsity team. His coach, Chris McLachlin, was a stickler for precisely where each player was supposed to be on the court and once at practice ordered his team to pass the ball at least five times before anyone took a shot. This was not Obama's style, and he had several disagreements with the coach. He never won the arguments, and the team did well enough anyway. Adhering to McLachlin's deliberate offense, the Buffanblu won the state championship, defeating Moanalua 60-28. Obama came off the bench to score two points. So much for the dream of becoming a rich NBA star.

His senior year, his mother was back home from Indonesia and concerned that her son had not sent in his college applications. In their tensest confrontation in the memoir, he eggs her on by saying it that was no big deal, that he might goof off and stay in Hawaii and go to school part-time, because life was just one big crapshoot anyway.

Ann exploded. She had rebelled herself once, at his very age, reacting against her own parents -- and perhaps against luck and fate -- by ignoring their advice and getting pregnant and marrying a man she did not know the way she thought she did. Now she was telling her son to shape up, that he could do anything he wanted if he put in the effort. "Remember what that's like? Effort? Damn it, Bar, you can't just sit around like some good-time Charlie, waiting for luck to see you through."

* * *

Sixteen years later, Barry was no more, replaced by Barack, who had not only left the island but had gone to two Ivy League schools, Columbia undergrad and Harvard Law, and written a book about his life. He was into his Chicago phase, reshaping himself for his political future, but now was drawn back to Hawaii to say goodbye to his mother. Too late, as it turned out. She died on Nov. 7, 1995, before he could get there.

Ann had returned to Honolulu early that year, a few months before "Dreams From My Father" was published. She was weakened from a cancer that had been misdiagnosed in Indonesia as indigestion. American doctors first thought it was ovarian cancer, but an examination at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York determined that it was uterine cancer that had spread to her ovaries. Stan had died a few years earlier, and Madelyn still lived in the apartment on Beretania. Ann took an apartment on the same floor, and underwent chemotherapy treatments while keeping up with her work as best she could. "She took it in stride," said Alice Dewey, chair of the University of Hawaii anthropology department, where Ann did her doctoral dissertation. "She never complained. Never said, 'Why me?' "

Ann's career had reached full bloom. Her dissertation, published in 1992, was a masterwork of anthropological insight, delineating in 1,000 pages the intricate world of peasant metalworking industries in Indonesia, especially traditional blacksmithing, tracing the evolution of the crafts from Dutch colonialism through the regime of General Suharto, the Indonesian military strongman. Her deepest work was done in Kajar, a blacksmithing village near Yogyakarta. In clear, precise language,

she described the geography, sociology, architecture, agriculture, diet, class structure, politics, business and craftsmanship of the village, rendering an arcane subject in vivid, human terms.

It was a long time coming, the product of work that had begun in 1979, but Dewey said it was worth the wait: Each chapter as she turned it in was a polished jewel.

Her anthropology in Indonesia was only part of Ann's focus. She had also worked in Lahore, Pakistan; New Delhi; and New York, helping to develop microfinancing networks that provided credit to female artisans in rural communities around the world. This was something she had begun in Jakarta for the Ford Foundation in the early 1980s, when she helped refine Bank Rakyat, set up to provide loans to farmers and other rural entrepreneurs in textiles and metalwork, the fields she knew best. David McCauley, who worked with her then, said she had earned a worldwide reputation in the development community. She had a global perspective from the ground up, he said, and she passed it along to her children, Barack and Maya.

Maya was in New York, about to start graduate school at New York University, when her mother got sick. She and her brother were equally slow to realize that the disease was advancing so rapidly. Maya had seen Ann during that visit to Sloan-Kettering, and "she didn't look well. She was in a wheelchair . . . but I guess I thought that was the treatment. I knew that someday she would die, but it never occurred to me that it would be in November. I think children are capable of stretching out the boundaries of denial." School always came first with Ann, and she had urged Maya to stay at NYU until the December break.

But by November her condition had worsened. She was put on morphine to ease the pain and moved from her apartment to the Straub Clinic. One night she called Maya and said she was scared. "And my last words to her, where she was able to respond, were that I was coming. I arrived on the seventh. My grandmother was there and had been there for some time, so I sent her home and talked to Mom and touched her and hugged her, and she was not able to respond. I read her a story -- a book of Creole folk tales that I had with me about renewal and rebirth -- and I said it was okay with me if she decided to go ahead, that I couldn't really bear to see her like that. And she died. It was about 11 that night."

Barack came the next day. He had just finished a book about his missing father, but now it was more clear to him than ever that his mother had been the most significant force in shaping his life. Even when they were apart, she constantly wrote him letters, softly urging him to believe in himself and to see the best in everyone else.

A small memorial service was held in the Japanese Garden behind the East-West Center conference building on the University of Hawaii campus. Photographs from her life were mounted on a board: Stanley Ann in Kansas and Seattle, Ann in Hawaii and Indonesia. Barack and Maya "talked story," a Hawaiian phrase that means exactly what it sounds like, remembering their uncommon mother. They recalled her spirit, her exuberance and her generosity, a worldliness that was somehow very fresh and naive, maybe deliberately naive, sweet and unadulterated. And her deep laugh, her Midwestern sayings, the way she loved to collect batiks and wear vibrant colors and talk and talk and talk.

About 20 people made it to the service. When it was over, they formed a caravan and drove to the south shore, past Hanauma Bay, stopping just before they reached Sandy Beach, Barry's favorite old haunt for body surfing. They gathered at a lookout point with a parking lot, and down below, past the rail and at the water's edge, a stone outcropping jutting over the ocean in the shape of a massive ironing board. This was where Ann wanted them to toss her ashes. She felt connected to Hawaii, its geography, its sense of aloha, the fact that it made her two children possible -- but the woman who also loved to travel wanted her ashes to float across the ocean. Barack and Maya stood together, scattering the remains. The others tossed flower petals into the water.

Suddenly, a massive wave broke over the ironing board and engulfed them all. A sign at the parking lot had warned visitors of the dangers of being washed to sea. "But we felt steady," Maya said. "And it

was this very slippery place, and the wave came out of nowhere, and it was as though she was saying goodbye."

Barack Obama left Hawaii soon after and returned to his Chicago life.

View all comments that have been posted about this article.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

The All-New BlackBerry®
3G, WiFi®, GPS, and Full Exchange Support. Get The BlackBerry® Today.
BlackBerry.com/GetTheFacts