

A LIFE'S CALLING TO PUBLIC SERVICE

by Barack Obama '79

Attorney, author, philanthropist and Illinois State Senator Barack Obama's '79 calling to a career in politics stem from his work on a local level—and the ideals that Hawaii still represent in his mind.



Wherever I go in Chicago, people ask me two questions. First, they ask me how a nice guy like me ever got involved in politics. Second, once they've found out that I grew up in Hawaii, they ask me what the heck I'm doing in a cold place like Chicago.

I admit that there are times when I ask myself the same questions. Every year, my family and I take a Christmas trip to Hawaii to visit my grandmother, and usually at some point during those trips—maybe while I'm sitting on the beach watching our one-year-old daughter, Malia, dig her perfect brown toes into the sand, or maybe while I'm taking an early morning jog through Kapi'olani Park, with a soft ocean breeze brushing against my cheeks—I will think about the snow and sleet and darkness that awaits me back in Chicago, and the pressures and tensions of the next campaign, and wonder if I'm certifiably crazy to have left Hawaii.

The irony is that my decision to work in politics, and to pursue such a career in a big mainland city, in some sense grows out of my Hawaiian upbringing, and the ideal that Hawaii still represents in my mind. As I wrote about in my book, *Dreams From My Father*, my father was a black African who left his homeland to attend the University of Hawaii; my mother was a young white 18-year-old from Kansas whose parents had moved to Hawaii in search of a better life.

They were able to fall in love and marry in part because, in 1961, Hawaii was as close as America got to being the world's mythical melting pot. The Islands were far removed from the segregation and racial conflict that wracked the mainland, and the tolerance of difference was the norm rather than the exception. Both my mother and father embraced the ideal of racial harmony that

order and calm of many Asian nations. By the time I moved back to Hawaii, and started school at Punahou, I had come to recognize that Hawaii was not immune to issues of race and class, issues that manifested themselves in the poverty among so many native Hawaiian families, and the glaring differences between the facilities we at Punahou enjoyed and the crumbling

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Hawaii represented, and although their marriage proved short-lived, it was that ideal that my family continued to nurture in me throughout my early childhood.

As I grew older, of course, the world revealed a greater complexity. My father moved back to Africa and entered the government there. He hoped to use his Western learning to help develop his country, but the tribal conflicts and cultural tensions that face so much of Africa ultimately crushed his spirit, and he died a bitter man. My mother remarried an Indonesian, and with her I moved to Jakarta for a time; there I witnessed first hand the huge gulf between rich and poor that plagues so much of the world, and the corruption that festers beneath the seeming

public schools that so many of our peers were forced to endure.

My budding awareness of life's unfairness made for a more turbulent adolescence than perhaps some of my classmates' experiences. As an African-American teenager in a school with few African-Americans, I probably questioned my identity a bit harder than most. As a kid from a broken home and family of relatively modest means, I nursed more resentments than my circumstances justified, and didn't always channel those resentments in particularly constructive ways.

Opposite: Illinois State Senator Barack Obama '79 entered politics to follow his true passion: public service.

Right: In 1988, Barack enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he served as the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review.



And yet, when I look back on my years in Hawaii, I realize how truly lucky I was to have been raised there. Hawaii's spirit of tolerance might not have been perfect or complete, but it was—and is—real. The opportunity that Hawaii offered—to experience a variety of cultures in a climate of mutual respect—became an integral part of my world view, and a basis for the values that I hold most dear.

All of which explains both my choice of professions and my life in Chicago. For it was only when I went away to college, first in Los Angeles and later in New York, that I was able to appreciate how unique Hawaii truly was. I witnessed first hand the racial conflicts that tore apart cities. I began to spend time in black and Hispanic neighborhoods where almost a third of the children lived in poverty. I met men whose experiences in segregated and underfunded schools had left them unable to read, and whose resulting bitterness had led to lives of drugs or crime. I wandered through public housing projects where children rarely saw grass, much less an ocean.

It was in the face of such a fundamental assault on my ideals that I decided to dedicate myself to public work. I've been doing it most of my adult life now, first as a community organizer, then as a civil rights attorney, and most recently as an elected official. The work can be difficult at times, with long hours, significant financial sacrifice, and plenty of stress—politics in a place like Chicago can be bruising. I stay at it, I think, not so much out of a sense of obligation to others, but rather out of a sense of obligation to myself.

I believe—naively, perhaps—that my own salvation depends on the salvation of the thousands of children I meet, bereft of prospects or hope. I believe that the carefree childhood I experienced in Hawaii, and the wonderful education I received at Punahoa, should not be left to the luck of the draw, but should rather be every child's birthright. I believe that only in a country in which we can appreciate differences of race and religion and ethnicity, while still insisting on our common humanity, will my own soul feel rested.

I admit that all this sounds kind of corny, maybe even a little bit crazy. I'll admit this, as well: that on those cold, windy, January mornings in Chicago, when I'm heading out to a hard day of meetings and negotiations, I let my mind wander back to Sandy Beach, or Manoa Falls, or Punahoa School. It helps me, somehow, knowing that such wonderful places exist and, that at some level, I'll always be able to return to them. ■

Editor's Note: For more information on Barack Obama's book, "Dreams From My Father," check out <http://www.powells.com>

PRIZED ALUMNUS

Barack Obama '79 received his bachelor's degree in political science from Columbia University in 1983. He hasn't stopped working since. After graduation, he served as a community organizer, first in Harlem, and then as the director of Developing Communities Project, a community development organization that improved city services and established job training and youth programs throughout Chicago's Far South Side.

In 1988, Barack enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he was elected the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review. He later joined the law firm of Miner, Barnhill & Galland and specialized in civil rights work. The University of Chicago Law School, where he teaches constitutional law, voting rights law and employment law, is proud to include Obama on its list of distinguished faculty.

Barack was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996 and serves on the Revenue, Judiciary, and Public Health and Welfare committees. Over the past three years, he has helped craft groundbreaking campaign finance reform legislation for the state, and has been a leading advocate for expanded job opportunities for the poor and health care for the uninsured. As a civic leader, Barack serves on the board of directors of several of Chicago's largest foundations, and has been named one of Chicago's "40 Under 40" outstanding young leaders.

This year, Barack will run for Congress from Illinois' First Congressional District. He reports that all his spare time is devoted to his wife of seven years, Michelle Obama, and his one-year-old daughter, Malia Ann Obama.



When not working, family time is priority for Barack Obama '79, shown here with his wife, Michelle, and one-year-old daughter, Malia Ann.