

Obama's Multi-ethnic Early Years

In Hawaii, diversity was norm

(AP) -- He was known as Barry Obama, and with his dark complexion and mini-Afro, he was one of the few blacks at the privileged Hawaiian school overlooking the Pacific.

Yet that hardly made him stand out.

Diversity was the norm at the Punahou School in Honolulu, one of the state's top private schools. The 3,600 students came from a wide variety of backgrounds, with a blend of Polynesian, Asian, European and other cultures. Everybody in Hawaii is a minority.

At Punahou, Barack Obama was known primarily for his appealing personality, his honesty and his aggressive play on the basketball court.

"It was a good melting pot. There were people from all different races," said Eric Smith, a friend and classmate of Obama's in the 1970s. "Everyone seemed to meld together."

As he pursues the presidency, the chapters of Obama's unfamiliar biography are drawing greater scrutiny. The Democratic senator from Illinois was born in Honolulu 45 years ago and lived in one the



U.S. Sen. Barack Obama



This 1976 yearbook photo shows Barack Obama (front row, fourth from right) with his 9th grade class outside of Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii. Punahou is a prestigious private school that attracts the island's wealthiest and most accomplished students.

at age 6, left Hawaii to live for four years in Indonesia with his mother and Indonesian stepfather, Lolo Soetoro. In 1971, she sent Obama, then 10, back to Hawaii to be with his maternal grandparents mostly because she wanted him to receive his education at Punahou, which boasts a rigorous high school curriculum.

Obama's grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, a bank vice president, and grandfather, Stanley Dunham, a salesman, lived in a two-bedroom apartment in downtown Honolulu and helped raise their grandson along with his mother until he graduated from high school. Obama's mother died in 1995. His

father and grandfather also are deceased.

As a teenager, Obama went to parties and sometimes sought out gatherings on military bases or at the University of Hawaii that were mostly attended by blacks. He wrote in his book that he tried drugs and let his grades slip in his final years of high school.

But friends and teammates said he didn't appear to be discontented and always seemed to fit in.

"He never let that show, so maybe it was more of an internal struggle," said teammate Alan Lum, who now teaches at Punahou.



Barack Obama poses with his 1979 state basketball championship team for Punahou School in Hawaii. Identified as Barry Obama, he is in the back row, last player on the right.

country's most diverse metropolitan areas for the better part of 18 years. He spent four childhood years in Indonesia.

In his 1995 memoir, "Dreams From My Father," Obama recalls experiencing some discrimination growing up in the islands, such as when other kids laughed at his name. He also wrote about his internal struggles as black friends would accuse all white people of mistreating others — harsh words as Obama was being raised by his white mother and grandparents.

"I tried to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant," he wrote.

But Obama acknowledges he wasn't growing up in the Jim Crow South or the housing projects of Harlem — he was in Hawaii, where his peers mostly treated him the same as others.

"He always had a basketball in his hands and was always looking for a pickup game," said teammate Larry Tavares, 46, now an estate planner at First Hawaiian Bank.

Obama's parents, Ann Dunham and Barack Obama Sr., met and married in Honolulu — a white woman from the mainland and a black man from Kenya.

After that marriage failed, Obama,

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At school, Obama was surrounded by the island's richest and most accomplished students. America Online founder Steve Case, actress Kelly Preston and former Dallas Cowboys lineman Mark Tuinei, who died in 1999, attended the school around that time. Pro golf sensation Michelle Wie, 17, is a student there now.

A lanky, left-handed forward, Obama became known for his elusive moves on the basketball court.

By his senior year, Obama was part of a talented team with at least three college-bound players. As a backup forward, Obama helped Punahou win the state championship in 1979. Teammates described him as charis-

matic, a somewhat quiet leader and outspoken with coaches when he didn't agree with them or understand their methods.

"He wasn't afraid to challenge authority," Lum said. "Sometimes I couldn't believe he would say it, but I would be thinking the same thing. I remember him being honest and courageous. I respected him for that."

Off the court, Obama brought books to read on road trips, served on the school literary magazine's editorial board and sang in choir as a freshman and sophomore.

Obama also spent time with his grandfather, sometimes playing checkers with the locals at Alii Park,

spear fishing in Kailua Bay or listening to Stevie Wonder and Billie Holiday records.

Russell Cunningham, a close friend who often went body surfing with Obama, remembered his friend Barry for introducing him to new music and for giving him sound advice.

"He introduced us to jazz and George Benson when we were all listening to rock 'n' roll," said Cunningham, now an attorney in Sacramento, Calif. "He also told me to stick to my studies because they'll take me where I want to go. And I did, and I got to where I wanted to be."

"Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others."

—Rosa Parks

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war," he said. He noted that he was against the invasion from the start.

Obama talked how previous generations have brought change -- fighting off colonizers, slavery and the Great Depression, welcoming immigrants, building railroads and landing a man on the moon.

"Each and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what's needed to be done," he said. "Today we are called once more - and it is time for our generation to answer that call."

Obama said it is because of Lincoln that Americans of every race face the challenges of the 21st century together.