



preface Obama

Update: This was the first major story ever written on Barack Obama. Five years later, in 2008, he was President of the United States. The first Black president was re-elected to a second term in 2012 and Michelle became one of the most popular First Ladies in American history. The Obamas left office in January 2017 to oversee development of the Obama Presidential Library, located on the South Side of Chicago.



Barack Obama

By Paul Davis & Photography by Victor Powell | Originally Published March 6, 2003

His resume beams with the elements that the country's most prestigious law firms and universities yearn for: Harvard graduate, college professor, author, lecturer, and community organizer.

What? Community organizer. This is no tall tale. Barack Obama, state senator from Illinois' 13th District, earned his spurs by toiling in the 'hood.

Obama's surreal odyssey of community service began in New York's legendary Harlem community. From there, he headed to the Midwest, to Chicago's divergent yet politically active Black communities.

Obama says he has spent virtually his entire adult life catering to the needs of people with fragmented hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Now he has readied himself for his greatest career challenge to date: a Democratic primary election run for the United States Senate in March 2004.

The Obama campaign for the U.S. Senate went from a kind of idling position to full-throttle in January after Carol Moseley-Braun announced that she would not seek a rematch with Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R) for her former Senate seat.

Moving swiftly, Obama officially declared his candidacy for the Senate three days later during an announcement press conference.

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Noticeably absent from Obama's lineup of support was Congressman Bobby Rush, whom Obama unsuccessfully challenged for Rush's congressional seat in 2000.

"I've said publicly he gave me a good spanking. That was a good early lesson in my political career — you have to be patient, and it doesn't make sense to divide the African-American base," Obama remarked on his defeat by Rush.

The senatorial candidate said that over the course of the next year, he expects to work with numerous leaders in the African-American community to help communicate his message for change.

The key element for an African-American candidate seeking to run successfully statewide, Obama said,

is to be rooted in the African-American community, recognize it as your base, and yet not be limited by it.

"The nice thing about running statewide is that it gives me the opportunity to recognize that all the issues that African Americans face specifically as a community are issues that also should speak to the broader pool of voters."

Helping To Develop Communities

Obama came from New York to the Windy City in 1985 and worked in low-income neighborhoods on the far South Side of Chicago with an organization called the Developing Communities Project, a faith-based program that involved about 25 churches.

The group addressed a myriad of problems, Obama says, including improving city services, job training, renovated parks and play lots, and housing and environmental issues. It also helped shape some of the school reform initiatives that produced legislation in 1988.

Obama's work in this area left an indelible mark in his mind about what could be accomplished in the public/political arena.

"It was a terrific education for me, a great experience. It confirmed in my mind that ordinary people can do extraordinary things," he said. "Since then, my entire adult life has been dedicated to providing opportunities for people in need."

Educationally, he earned a B.A. degree from Columbia University in New York, and in 1988, enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he became the first African American to serve as president of the Harvard Law Review. He was a member of the Executive Board of the Black Law Students Association and graduated Magna Cum Laude.

Following his exemplary work at Harvard, Obama could have easily accepted a position with a corporate law firm, but instead his career thirst led him to work at the grassroots level.

In 1992, Obama was tabbed to serve as Illinois Executive Director of Project Vote, a voter registration program that targeted low-income communities of color throughout Cook County. This expansive effort added an astounding 150,000 newly

registered voters to the rolls.

Those voters had an immediate impact in the state. They helped Carol Moseley-Braun be elected the first African-American woman to the United States Senate, and Bill Clinton be elected President.

Obama describes 1992 as a "watershed year" for Democrats, and says he was proud to be a part of it. The year became even more watershed after the young lawyer/aspiring politician married a work colleague named Michelle Robinson in October 1992.

The Choice He Made

After Project Vote, Obama joined a small civil rights law firm called Miner, Barnhill and Galland. His focus continued to be on civil rights and social justice, and he participated in a voting rights lawsuit against the City of Chicago to insure that African Americans would receive a sufficient number of majority Black wards.

He and his firm also represented clients on employment and discrimination cases, community development corporations that built affordable housing units, and community health clinics.

Shunning the allure of huge corporate dollars and the recognition that would accompany them, Obama's philosophy was grounded in altruism.

"My feeling was I could make a lot of money and not make much of a contribution, or I could make a decent living and be part of the solution. I'm happy

with the choice I've made," he says.

Although Obama, still a young 41, was in his youth during the height of the civil rights movement, he says he was inspired by the work of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Council (SNCC), Fannie Lou Hamer, and Tom Moses. He calls them true American heroes and notes that they opened doors that he was able to walk right through.

In 1992, Obama began teaching constitutional and civil rights law at the University of Chicago Law School, and conducted seminars on race and the law.

Four years later, when State Senator Alice Palmer opted to run for Congress in the 2nd Congressional District, Obama said a number of supporters urged him to run for the state senate office she vacated.

The New State Senator

He did and was elected to the State Senate in 1996, then to a second term in 1998. He said he has maintained a consistent thread of empowering working people and people of color.

In the State Senate, Obama said he has forged working partnerships on tax fairness issues that have passed the earned income tax credit, increased the personal exemption to provide more money in the pockets of working families, and worked on juvenile justice legislation.

Currently, Obama is the lead sponsor in the Senate on issues pertaining to racial profiling, videotaping



interrogations, and death penalty reforms.

The upcoming 2004 U.S. Senate race in Illinois, Obama said, is simply an extension of the path he has traveled his entire adult life, one option of service, and not an attempt by him to simply win another job.

"This U.S. Senate race is an opportunity to help frame the national debate," he says. "I see this as a mission, not just as a way of elevating myself individually."

Obama believes the country is at a crossroads as a nation. With the world becoming increasingly more complex, he said America is faced with important decisions to make, both domestically and internationally.

Americans across-the-board are facing more and more vulnerabilities in their jobs, and mounting concerns about health insurance.

According to Obama, the economic growth of the 1990s disguised some disturbing trends in this country.

Chief among them, he says, is the growing inequality between the rich and the poor; an ongoing disparity in the mortality rates between African Americans, Hispanics, and their White counterparts; a decline in the quality of public school education; and an enormous rise in the rate of incarceration of African-American youth who are trapped in a drug economy.

The challenge facing the Democratic Party and himself as a U.S. Senator, Obama maintains, is to articulate an alternative plan and alternative vision to challenge the "selfish vision" of President George W. Bush and the Republican Party.

Addressing National Healthcare

At the top of Obama's agenda is healthcare. As a state senator, he chairs the Senate's healthcare committee and has conducted a series of healthcare hearings across Illinois where he's heard countless times about the healthcare crisis and the millions of people who are uninsured.

The discussions range from small businesses that cannot provide health coverage because premiums are too high, to seniors who don't have adequate prescription drug coverage, to hospitals whose reimbursement rates are too low.

"Across the board, you're seeing suburbanites, city folks, Black folks, White folks, Hispanics, businesses, labor unions, all recognizing that the healthcare system is in crisis," Obama says.

The crisis in healthcare, he believes, creates an opportunity nationally to develop a system that every other industrialized country in the world has – basic healthcare coverage for everyone. Obama says he doesn't have any illusion that will happen right away in the Senate, but said the country should begin moving in that direction.

A second priority for Obama is improving the

quality of education in Illinois. He says far too many schools are attempting to provide a quality-learning environment in crumbling school buildings that are not wired for the Internet.

Obama also wants to work to make college more affordable in Illinois and is also pushing for, at the state and federal levels, additional funding for early childhood education programs.

He plans to address the federal government's role in promoting economic development and job growth, saying that historically, Illinois has been one of the lowest ranking states in receiving a return on its federal dollars. Part of the reason, he suggests, is that the federal government has failed to direct monies toward transportation, infrastructure, and large-scale projects that would create jobs in the state.

Obama stresses that lawmakers must re-examine drug laws, saying that federal mandatory minimum sentencing for non-violent offenses has been a mistake at both the state and federal levels. He explained that the harsh sentencing guidelines do not take into account the potential for rehabilitation for young people who are involved in non-violent crimes.

Obama also feels that more funding should be provided to educate people who are incarcerated, noting that, "A prisoner who can read is far less likely to land back in jail, because he or she has the opportunity to find a job once they get out."

Affirmative Action And Diversity

Although Obama is a strong supporter of affirmative action, he believes that current programs are inadequate to address the need to open up opportunity to African-American businesses.

A true commitment to diversity, he insists, must be "affirmative" in providing capital opportunities and technical assistance to African-American entrepreneurs and start-up businesses.

"You can have as many affirmative action programs as you want, but if brothers and sisters out here who want to start a business can't get a bank loan, or don't know how to access the latest information in terms of inventory control or marketing techniques, they're going to fail anyway," Obama notes. "We've got to be a lot more aggressive at the federal level in providing capital and technical assistance to entrepreneurs."

Obama said he also supports efforts of businesses of color to compete as general contractors, primes, and to seek senior management roles, not just co-management on projects.

"I've proven at the state level that not only can I open the doors, but I can also help guide these businesses through the process, and insist that they get the full measure of opportunity that's out there economically," he says.



Photo by Victor Skrebneski