

# Son finds inspiration in the dreams of his father

by Monice Mitchell

Who am I? In an ideal world, answering that question would be simple or perhaps, not even necessary. But when the time is the turbulent sixties and a little brown boy is born to a white American mother from Kansas and a black African father from Kenya, answering becomes a little more difficult.

And consuming. For most of his adolescent and young adult life, Barack Obama—whose first name means “beloved” in Arabic—struggled to separate his identity from the absent father he never knew.

His parents, who met and married as students at the University of Hawaii, separated when Obama was two-years-old. His father then returned to Kenya, and the father-son relationship became sporadic, distant and unresolved.

Upon his father's death, Obama traveled to Kenya for answers. The result was an emotional homecoming and awakening, detailed in his new autobiographical book, *Dreams of My Father*.

“My parents came together during a very idealistic time hopeful time, and a somewhat innocent time. And I was a product of that relationship,” said Obama, a 34-year-old first time author and civil rights attorney with a downtown law firm. “Because I didn’t know my father, most of my life was spent trying to piece together who he was and patch together an identity for myself. My life came full circle when I went to Kenya and learned who my father was. It was a healing process.”

If the journey to Kenya was the healing, then the symptoms began to creep into his life as a young boy when he was living in Indonesia with his mother after she remarried.

While reading a copy of Life magazine in the U.S. Embassy Library in Jakarta, he saw photos of black people who had burned their skin with chemicals to appear white.

“For the first six years of my life, I was too young to know I needed a race. Growing up in Hawaii, all of the kids were kind of brown. I didn’t stand out. I was too busy running around being a kid,” said Obama, breaking into a playful grin, then pausing. “But after reading that story, I knew there had to be something wrong with being black. I knew there were some

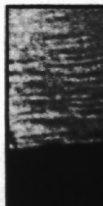
problems somewhere.”

Obama first got hit in the face with those problems and had an eye opening experience with affirmative action while attending Punahou Academy, a prestigious prep school in Honolulu. He discovered that he had no choice about his racial identity. To be half-white was to be black all the way.

“I never did not want to be black. My mother gave me a positive self image of being a black person. She raised me on stories about my father, Dr. King, Harry Belafonte and the civil rights movement,” he said, smiling with his dark brown eyes, “To be honest, it all kind of blurred together. I think to some extent, she romanticized black life.”

As Obama entered his teenage years, though, the romance of his mother's stories couldn't compete with the reality he faced every day. He started hanging out with a group of similar young angry black men and dabbled with drugs and trouble.

“I did what most young black men do. I gave in to the stereotypes, the anger. My situation was different, though, because unlike most African Americans, I have a direct connection to my white blood. I could see it. I could touch it,”



said Obama, who teaches a civil rights course at the University of Chicago. “It was tough balancing my anger as a black man and love for my mother and her family, but I did. I never pushed them away.”

Obama didn't stray too far from education, either. He attended Occidental College in Los Angeles and graduated with a degree in political science and English literature from Columbia University.

Before attending Harvard University's Law School, Obama—motivated by the appointment of Chicago's first African American mayor, the late Harold Washington—moved to Chicago to work as a community organizer in Chicago's Altgeld housing project. He said the move, along with an earlier stint as a community organizer in Harlem, helped him put his identity struggles in perspective.

“I came home in Chicago. I began to see my identity and my individual struggles were one with the struggles that folks face in Chicago. My identity problems began to mesh once I starting working on behalf of something larger than myself,” he said. “Through this work, I could be angry about the plight of African Americans without being angry at all white folks.”

Barely three years later, Washington died and Obama, convinced he needed additional skills, enrolled in Harvard—his father's alma mater. But before he set foot on the campus, he traveled to Kenya with his new-found half brother and sister to get an education about his father. Once there, the myths came crashing down. Obama learned of his father's drinking habits and found that his father, a Harvard-trained economist who fell out of favor with Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta, had been hopelessly torn between cultures.

With that understanding, Obama entered Harvard and in 1990, became the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review. In 1991, he turned down a clerkship on the Supreme Court and returned to Chicago to work on an academic book about race relations. It would later become his autobiography.

“I got a lot of publicity after I was elected president of the law review and publishers approached me about writing a book about my experiences at Harvard, but I didn't think that would be interesting. I wanted to write about race relations,” said Obama, who will celebrate his third wedding anniversary in October and