

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ZARIFF INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
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Zariff
Barber, Hyde Park Salon
October 23, 2018
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 14 minutes and 44 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:
Zariff interview, take one, marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Zariff
Barber, Hyde Park Hair Salon

Meeting Obama

01:00:13:09

ZARIFF:
You're in Hyde Park, Chicago. It's Hyde Park Hair Salon. Yes. Well, this is actually the second place I cut his hair. The first place is a little bit further down the street. We probably moved about eight years ago to this location. One day he came in, the other barber had opened up another shop down the street and I told him, he came in, "Hey, " you know, "where's Wally?" I said, "He just opened a shop down the street." He said, "What you doin?" I said,

“Well, right now I’m cutting your hair.” That started that right there. He was just a regular guy coming in the shop. I don’t think he was heavy into politics then. You know, he was a little louder, you know, but you would listen because he knew what he was talking about. Sports, different platforms we’d talk about in the shop. At the time of course I didn’t know he was an attorney. I didn’t know he was this or that. Normally when you come into a shop, into Hyde Park hair salon, you’re just—you’re yourself. No titles, you know. Any mask that you’re wearing on the outside you definitely couldn’t bring it in there because we take it off right away. So, most of our clients knew that.

Obama’s 2004 DNC speech

01:01:28:21

ZARIFF:

That was the first time I really had an opportunity to hear him on a different platform. He was the same person, genuine but a different message. He was in earlier, and he said he needed a haircut. “Gotta look good, you know.” I said, “Ok.” And he told me what it was about. I said, “Ok, well we’re gonna change your haircut up a little bit.” Because before that he was wearing his hair a little bit longer. So, I cut it shorter and cropped pretty much the way you see it right now. But I had no idea that he was going in to make that type of speech. I wasn’t into politics a whole lot, although a lot of politicians came into the shop. So mostly I kept it neutral. But that was the first time I -- I really heard a politician speak and it resonated, and I felt it. I’ve been knowing the guy for a while, you know, up ‘til that point, so it was a little

different for me. Very powerful. And still at that point people knew who he was but didn't know a whole lot about him or they didn't know him, so it was kind of subtle. But after that, when there was talk of him running for President, you know, and then it started kicking up and going from that point.

Hyde Park Hair Salon

01:02:49:03

ZARIFF:

Well, it's loud, jovial, interesting at times. Everybody's talking at once or individual conversations, or some people just jump in on different conversations or we're watching sports. The President comes on the television, yeah, we take notice.

Obama's race against Bobby Rush

01:03:11:02

ZARIFF:

I -- I think he was different as a politician, but it was somewhat seamless, you couldn't tell it because he was that smooth with it. But I also saw a lot of strength, because Bobby, you know, really defeated him well, and if—I don't know if you can go back to that campaign, you know, it was this and that and he's talking about the guy with the funny name and this and you know, he really let him have it. But Barack kept his chin up and kept moving forward and you can see that strength about him. It didn't appear that it affected him

a lot. I don't know how it is when he went private with it but on the surface, everybody looking, it definitely didn't faze him, he kept moving.

Obama's children

01:03:57:21

ZARIFF:

Yeah. At times, he would bring his daughters into the shop with him. They'd come in from time to time and sit back and watch him get his haircut. When he finished getting his haircut, they'd ask him, "Dad, you still look the same?" And he would say, "Yeah, that's the point." And I thought that was so poignant because it was—it was perfect.

Obama's demeanor

01:04:23:03

ZARIFF:

His—his demeanor. The questions and the answers that he'd come back with, you know, pretty much on point. Most times flawless. What I mean by that, you know, he just really didn't answer or speak without thought.

Advice to Obama

01:04:45:02

ZARIFF:

Don't wear your feelings on your sleeve. If you can remember, when he was in office, he battled a lot. A lot of things was said about him, a lot of things was said about his wife, about his children, but being a leader, you know,

comes from the ground up. There's a lot of trials and tribulations, and you learn early not to wear your feelings on your sleeves so people can attack you even more.

Obama's presidential barber

01:05:15:12

ZARIFF:

When he won, of course that was a -- that was a whole different feeling in itself. So I had to control that, you know, it was so powerful. He asked me if I would—if I wanted to keep—continue to cut his hair and I said, “For sure. Yes, I'd love to.” I really had no doubt about it, you know, but when he asked me, you know, I was relieved because I felt it was my duty to continue to keep that presidential look about him. To me, I was very happy about that. So I agreed to do it because I felt it was my duty. And as any of my clients, if they would've become president or so, I would've felt obligated to do that. For me, it was pretty immense. Even going into the White House was pretty immense. So I had to keep our relationship so far as barber-client, that calmed me and that's how I was able to deal with everything. Hey, he's just your client, he's just Barack. Then the other guy on your shoulder, no, he's the President of the United States. But you can't go into a panic. You have to stay calm and say, he's just Barack. So that's how I handled everything. Conversation remained the same, and like I had mentioned earlier, it had to stay the same for me to really just handle the magnitude of everything and what was going on, but pretty soon that becomes second nature.

2008 presidential election

01:06:49:13

ZARIFF:

I made sure that he had to have a cut, he looked his best, win or lose. We actually had a function here where we transformed the shop into a huge gathering and all our clients, and more was at the shop. And I was downtown when they announced that, you know, he had won. Wolf Blitzer announced that he had won. And I said, "You know what," I said, "I gotta get back to the shop, we're having a gathering for you." He said, "Well, really?" I said, "Yes." I said, "Man, there's hundreds of people down there, you know? I wanna get back to them to enjoy them." He said, "Well go ahead, go ahead." You know, so I wanted to go back to the shop and get that feeling, which I did, and it was just amazing driving from downtown here knowing that he had won, and then when I get here, it was really crazy. People went wild. There was a trillion reporters out. The special part about this whole experience is meeting people from around the world. Probably I would've never met 'em, shook hands with 'em, you know, looked 'em eye to eye, had conversations with them, because (phone alarm in background) they were complete strangers. But all that connection was through him. So he transcended all races to me at that point.

Obama's inauguration haircut

01:08:16:20

ZARIFF:

That was really something. That was actually at Hay Adams, I think it was, where they were staying at the time. It was a lot of busy going around there. I flew in and then had everything set up, and I took care of it but it was a little bit different and we all knew that it was different. It wasn't the cut at the time, it was about the person and his experience, and everybody felt that and felt for him.

Charleston church shooting

01:08:47:06

ZARIFF:

A very emotional time, very, very heartfelt. It was quiet mostly. I knew what I had to do. It wasn't really a time for a lot of conversation, but consoling. It was painful because we knew what had happened, how it happened and yeah, it wasn't a good time.

Obama's battle with race relations

01:09:13:04

ZARIFF:

Obviously he learned his lessons very well because you have an African father, a white mother, and growing up navigating through all of that with your friends, with the world, is difficult for a lot of people. I'm not saying that he didn't have his difficulties, but you can tell that he managed it very well. And I saw both sides of that world outside of the barber chair, and when he was campaigning in—what was that, Iowa? That was really something. And you can see that, so he learned his lessons very well so far as how to deal

with that. And getting back to one instance, there was some reporters in the shop at one point during the campaign, and one of the reporters asked me, “Do you cut his hair to appear like he’s white?” I’m like, “Excuse me?” So I said, “How do you do that?” That was my reply, but it stunned me. So therefore, that let me know that the race was coming in on it and it was unnecessary. But it’s necessary I guess for a lot of people.

Obama’s character

01:10:36:20

ZARIFF:

I can say that for the over 22, 23 years I’ve been cutting his hair, I have seen no change; it’s been flawless. And what I mean by that, his demeanor, his attitude, his conversations, everything has been level.

Muhammad Ali

01:10:59:15

ZARIFF:

I don’t know when he first came in. I remember the first time I saw him, and it was really something. I was stunned. And, by the way, that was—you know, the president—one of the president’s favorite, favorite people. I was stunned to see the heavyweight champion of the world. Up until that point, I had only seen him on television, in magazines, you know, everything is big. And actually seeing the person, that was really something. He was -- you can go to him and ask him anything. You wasn’t intimidated at all. And I just observed. I did not cut his hair. It was another guy in the shop cutting his hair, but you

all felt a part of him because he included everybody. He had even gotten around to knowing everybody's name; he paid a lot of attention to details you didn't think a person of that stature would do. And Barack is very much like that.

Keeping a low profile

01:12:05:00

ZARIFF:

He had turned Senator, he was coming from the airport, there was an entourage of vehicles of course, and he didn't like pulling up in front of the shop with a whole entourage of vehicles. So therefore, they—half a block away, he'd get out and walk the rest of the way to the shop. Yep, he was very low key about that. He paid attention and he didn't want all the attention, but of course it couldn't be helped.

Dreams from My Father

01:12:36:14

ZARIFF:

From that book, you know, you could tell why he was a well-rounded person, you know. And for a person to really live that and go through it and stay on track to become who you want to be, that's—that's something.

Client relations in the salon

01:12:58:05

ZARIFF:

Normally, when he would come in, just like I said, I'm the only one that knew it, if I was cutting a client, I said, "Excuse me," or just before, I said, "I know it's your time, you know, you had a four o'clock appointment, but I have a customer that's gotta get in and out. Can I, you know, take that—take your time to fit him in?" And she quite simply said, "No." Ok. And then I had to explain to her, I said, "Well, I need this spot. I have a client." I repeated myself and she said, "No." And then I whispered to her, I said, "You know, it's Barack Obama." She said, "No." So I said, "Oh my goodness." She didn't have anything against him but she was a stickler for her appointment, her appointment was at four o'clock. But just before he came in, she said, "Ok." But she was glad she did because she had the seat right there and she can sit there and watch him get his haircut and conversate with everybody, and she really didn't expect for it to be like that. So that was really something there.

Public opinion on Obama after his presidency

01:14:12:19

ZARIFF:

Look at him on—look at him on the campaign trail now. I mean, it's packed. They, they really love him. They wanna see him, they wanna hear from him, you know, they want him to run again. Of course he can't. So, I think that impact right there, it speaks for itself.

Donald Trump

01:14:34:08

ZARIFF:

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I learned a long time ago from my grandma, if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all. So I'm gonna sit back on that one.

END TC: 01:14:43:20