

PHIL BOERNER INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Phil Boerner
College classmate
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
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MATTHEW HENDERSON:
Phil Boerner Interview, Take 1. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Phil Boerner
College Classmate

Visiting Obama in the White House

01:00:12:21

PHIL BOERNER:

I visited President Obama in the White House in November 2011. And I had not seen him since he left New York in 1985, I think. So, we had corresponded, and we've got some of--I've saved those letters. But I hadn't actually seen him in person since then. So—and as far as how it came about, I'm from Washington DC, I was born in Washington DC, so I come back here to visit family members. And so, I contacted the White House. I didn't get any response for months. So then when I was going back, I knew I was gonna go back in November of 2011, I contacted that person and said, "I'll be in town again, is it ok if I swing by the White House?" And within 24 hours I had a response that yeah, you know, we'd like to see you and they suggested an appointment time which—and then that came about.

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From the waiting room to where the secretary's—Executive Assistant's office was, he was standing there waiting for me and gave me a big old hug, had a big old smile. And then he led me directly into the oval office, which was right next door. And we just—a photographer followed us in and took a bunch of pictures in the first five minutes, but then we were alone for ten minutes by ourselves and we just talked about catching up on family and friends. The girlfriend I had when I was at Columbia, which is Karen McCaw, we got married and we've been married for 31 years now. But anyway, so he knew my girlfriend from then, so I updated him that, you know, what she was up to, we've had two children and what they were up to. I showed him pictures. I had a flip phone camera at the time so I'm showing—in the oval office I'm pulling out this flip phone camera and showing him pictures and just updating on people we knew.

Meeting Obama in college

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PHIL BOERNER:

We both were—went to Occidental college in the fall of 1979 as freshman, and we were in the same dormitory which was Hanes Hall and we were in the Hanes Annex. So more people had accepted admission than the college expected, so they--I think in that hallway they were out of nine rooms, seven of them were triples that were supposed to be doubles. And our rooms were opposite each other. And so it just—the rooms were so small that everyone congregated in the hallway and socialized that way. So that's how I got to met him because his room was ten feet across the hall from mine. And one of his friends, one of his roommates, Paul Carpenter, became very good friends with me and so we were—just had mutual friends in common.

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There were people from all different backgrounds. Ya know, Middle Eastern, Black, Hispanic, white, different religions. It was a real melting pot and it's kind of ya know, what we hoped the world would be I suppose you could say and what Occidental, which was primarily not so- so multicultural at the time but later became, I think. So it was a real melting pot of different people and also an important thing is there was a freshman dormitory that—where most freshmen went that because we were kind of the overflow, we were in this dormitory with juniors and seniors and sophomores as well as freshman so it gave us a real mixture of people in the hall—in the Hanes Annex.

A shared interest in writing

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PHIL BOERNER:

You know, my impression of him when we were in college was that he wanted to be a writer and, of course, he did ultimately become a writer and have a best seller, more than one of course. But we—I think he was more—he took a writing class, I believe, at Occidental, at least one, and I was more keeping a diary of—and writing my own short stories. So I think we -- Everyone—both of us had that interest I think and we shared drafts of stories, more so later after Occidental College than at that time.

A shared international perspective

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PHIL BOERNER:

They were international students; they were from say Pakistan or different countries; we had a student from France. And he himself, of course, coming from a background of being in Indonesia and Hawaii, which would—of course is not international, but he had a lot of experience of traveling the world and I think as a diplomat's kid I had the same experience. You know, so we'd—whether it's rootlessness or something like that, I don't know but- but

we had at least the experience because when I wasn't at Occidental, I would fly home to London for Christmas or for the summer break and I worked at the Embassy there, actually.

Political views at Occidental College

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PHIL BOERNER:

In the Hanes Annex there were all different viewpoints expressed. There were some conservative people but on the whole, he and I were liberal and Occidental College was that way of accepting different personalities. I was kind of surprised later on that the gay marriage issue was not something that he was immediately in favor of because I would have had the impression, he was in favor of it, you know, gay rights and all of that right from the get go. So it was a very liberal atmosphere but also welcoming of conservative viewpoints for when we'd have late night debates or things like that.

The proposal of a draft renewal in 1980

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PHIL BOERNER:

In February 1980, there was a rally on the campus, which I took a few pictures of—of against the draft because it had been proposed. The slogan was, ya know, “Draft beer, not people.” So it was definitely one of the issues that was being talked about on campus, of whether you should register or not and where you should register. So if you were in a foreign country, that would be some place to register because you figure it'd be harder for them to find you if you didn't want to serve. You know, but I think it was just one of the many issues along with Iran-Contra and the 1980 election and Apartheid of course which was a huge issue that was being discussed on campus. So we definitely were aware of the proposed—you know, bringing back the draft, which had been ended not that long prior to that.

Obama's anti-apartheid activism

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PHIL BOERNER:

Well, in the late 70's, early 80's, and before and after that period, Apartheid was a big issue for us culturally. It was in a lot of the music we listened to so ya know, Bob Marley, and Reggae music in general was something that brought that up. But it was in the news and at Occidental College, there were student groups that were trying to get the college to divest from investing in South Africa, and there were both sides of that issue that were explored because the companies that were operating in South Africa were also the ones that were providing jobs to blacks in the country so—to some of them anyway.

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So, it was definitely an issue in the news and it wasn't all clear cut that the US should divest from companies in the United States. But it was something that we talked about all the time. And of course famously at Occidental College there was a rally I think in 1981 in front of the—where the board was meeting, the trustees, and Barack Obama was the first speaker at that rally and kind of a staged thing where he was carted off supposedly by, you know, Afrikaners I guess to sort of symbolize what was going on in South Africa, but you know, that rally probably had two or three hundred people at it. It was a big deal on campus and he was a part of that and wanted to be a part of it.

Deep conversations

1:07:48:01

PHIL BOERNER:

When Barack and I talked, and this wouldn't just be the two of us, but late-night bull sessions if you will in the Hanes Annex, there'd be lots of other

people around but it was mostly guys and partying was going on at the time as well. But we talked about our classes, we talked about current events, we talked about sports. And then issues in the news such as Apartheid or Iran-Contra or reinstating the draft. The election coming up, I think—you know--I can't remember if that was the year John Anderson ran as an independent but, you know, Ted Kennedy was running, and no one of course wanted Reagan and couldn't believe that someone so horrible as Reagan would actually be elected president, but it came to happen. But now we look back at that as glory times, I guess. When we talked, ya know, late at night in the Hanes Annex, I think it was also to some extent yeah, where was our place in the world, what did we want to become. Obviously, we were interested in becoming writers, but we did kind of start to begin the process of thinking about what we would want to become and what role we could play and what our values were. Of course, always when you're talking late at night, it's about things like that, your values and- and- and beliefs.

Obama's values and beliefs

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PHIL BOERNER:

Well, when I first met him, Barack, he was fun to be around, he was a good conversationalist, and I think as far as values go, sure we hashed out things like—ya know, things like equal rights or—rights in South Africa or gay rights or just acceptance of all people. I think those were certainly part of our conversations but, you know, it was current events, things like that and sports and what we were studying in our classes which would also be philosophical issues.

The impact Occidental College had on Obama

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PHIL BOERNER:

When Barack came to Occidental, I think he was fairly naïve, so I believe that the ideas he was introduced to at Occidental and through his classes and through late night Bull Sessions in the Hanes Annex had a big impact on his development and thinking about the larger world and ya know, perhaps eventually wanting to make an impact in it. I mean, we could see that he was a bright, charismatic person and that he would be successful at something. I didn't see him as being the first Black president of the United States, but he—you could see that he—ya know, he was good looking, he was charismatic, he was very bright and that he would be a success at something. So I think the transition-- he was pretty naïve I think when he first came to Occidental, at least that was my impression. And I—as the son of a diplomat, I had probably had a little more sophistication at that point than he did. So I don't—I'm jumping ahead, but when we went to New York and shared an apartment, I remember the first time that I wrote the rent check, he was kind of looking over my shoulder and I—the thought occurred to me which might be wrong but maybe he didn't know how to write a check or ya know, I'm sure he's very familiar with writing checks now but you know, so he was a little bit green I think when he first came to Occidental, to Occi.

Transferring to Columbia University

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PHIL BOERNER:

At our sophomore year at Occidental College, we had perhaps become a little bit restless and Occi was a very small place. There were 1,600 students and my high school had 2,100 students. So it was very—ya know, very like—I'd describe it like Peyton Place. Everyone knew everyone else's business. So I think we were getting a little bit restless and feeling like it was, you know, a small world where we were and we wanted to be part of something larger. And at the same time in our sophomore year, because our freshman year we had had friends who were juniors and seniors, a lot of

them were graduating or moving on to semesters abroad or something like that. So we kind of felt like if we'd come through the freshman dorm and been with them, we would have had a lot more ties there but because a lot of our friends were moving on, we kind of wanted to—it felt like maybe it was time for us to move on as well.

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But also, I'm from the east coast so wanting to go to Columbia made sense to me to be closer, ya know, to home and I think for him, he just wanted—New York City, there's just no end to what's—the possibilities of what's available in there, and so being aware of that, that's kind of as much as your education as going to school in New York, is just being in New York and where Occidental was and Eagle Rock, at least at the time, it was not so integrated with the community that it was in, it was sort of like its own little enclave. So I think we wanted to get away to a larger, bigger world with more things to do. When we applied to Columbia in New York, we didn't do that jointly, it was something—I mean, I applied to several schools, perhaps he did as well but Columbia is where we happened to be accepted and so independently of that, we later decided to room together. It wasn't—it was—so it wasn't a plan like ok, we'll transfer together and we'll room together. It was more like, ya know, he was able to get a sublet I think through a friend of his moms and aware that I was also looking for a place to live, he offered that to me as a place to live. And Columbia, at the time, did not have on-campus housing for transfer students so you were on your own.

Isolation at Columbia University

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PHIL BOERNER:

As a transfer student, they have this core curriculum that's very rigorous, it kind of dictates the first two years and you're not exempt from that as a

transfer student. So you're going into those classes, which I thought were very good, like world history overview or literature overview, but you're in there with you know, freshman and sophomores and you're a junior as a transfer. So you didn't march through the college with your freshman class the way that most people probably do, so you definitely felt isolated in terms of not knowing many of your fellow classmates, other than who you happen to meet through the classes. And then combine that with living off campus, which you had to do, it felt more like a commuter school for us than you know, being within the Columbia community.

Correspondence from their time in New York City

01:14:00:12

PHIL BOERNER:

Let me read you a letter from our friend Paul Carpenter, that Paul wrote to me in that summer of '81. Paul—so Paul said, "I'm afraid he may be..." he, meaning Obama, "I'm afraid he may be hard to reach during the summer. He's leaving next Thursday for Indonesia and continuing westward from there through Pakistan, Paris, and London, to New York. Knowing Obama, he will reach the shores of the Empire State at the last possible moment if not later." In the summer of 1981 when I was still trying to figure out what my housing arrangement would be at Columbia, I corresponded with my girlfriend Karen McCraw. And so, this is a quote from one of the letters that I wrote to her. "I now have an apartment in New York City. You'll be happy, I hope to know, I'll be sharing it with Barry Obama, a friend of mine from Occidental College. He just transferred to Columbia too. He's Black and from Hawaii and has the typically western casual outlook on life. I haven't seen the apartment yet; the rent is 180 dollars a month for each of us."

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PHIL BOERNER:

Barry and I shared the apartment in New York in the fall of 1981, he had gotten it through a sublet and he was there first. I think he described in one of his books about sleeping in the alley that night because he couldn't get in. So he was already there by the time I arrived and I don't remember if that was late August or early September. So I got there with my luggage and the doorbell didn't work and so I had to yell up to the—ya know, he had the window open. I had to yell up and say that I was here, and he could come down and let me in. So that apartment, that was one of the many issues we had with that apartment, which I can describe later. But when we first—when I first got there, he was already there and I—so I had to call up. And he had left a note, which I still have somewhere, saying “Yo, I'm upstairs.” Or something like that on the door.

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So the apartment that Barack and I shared in the fall of '81 was on West 109th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus. I think the Con-Ed building was right opposite so that was what we had a view of. But it was kind of a rundown neighborhood. It wasn't great and it was a three—we were on the third story—floor, and so we had to walk up. The apartment next door to us was burned out the whole time that we were there, so it was vacant and if you saw it from the outside, you'd see where the black smoke had been and so on. The apartment itself, it rarely had heat or hot water and so when the heat was on...it didn't matter in August and September, but later when it got colder, when the heat was on, it would be on so hot we'd have to open all the windows but most of the time it wasn't on so we sat around if we were in the apartment with blankets or sleeping bags around us and studied. We didn't have a television or stereo or—this was before computers. So we did a lot of our studying in the library at Columbia. And then as freshmen students, we also—there was a requirement at Columbia that you take I think a year of Phys-ed, which you got out of one semester if you passed the swimming test which Barack and I both knew how to swim so we got out of that, but that got

us to the locker rooms at Columbia and so we were able to shower there some of the time 'cause—since we didn't have hot water in our apartment, or at least very rarely.

Why Obama transferred to Columbia

01:17:16:07

PHIL BOERNER:

So Barack came to New York I think for wanting to be part of—to see part of the larger world, but I also think it was to distance himself from some of the parting that had been going on at Occidental College. In terms of discovering his Black identity, definitely I think that was part of it. Because Occidental College did not have a lot of Black students, although the Hanes Annex where our dormitory was freshman year did have a fair number. So I think finding his Black identity by coming to New York, which obviously had a much larger Black population and rich history with important figures like Malcolm X and so on, that definitely was part of his reason for coming to New York, but it wasn't the sole reason.

Obama's 'dark years' in New York

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PHIL BOERNER:

Well, I guess I've read in the biographies that he's—the years in New York were described as Obama's dark years and I don't entirely agree with that, but I think to the extent that he was becoming more serious about life and cutting back on things like partying, that that's true and the situation that we were in as transfer students, we didn't really know a lot of other students. We weren't really integrated into the community so it was definitely more of a time for him to focus on studies and becoming more serious. So in terms of

it being a dark period, I would say that that's somewhat true but it's not entirely true 'cause he still—I mean he still socialized and things like that.

Obama's "monkish" period

01:18:47:21

PHIL BOERNER:

When we were in New York, we were somewhat isolated from the main student body so in terms of that aspect of it, you can describe it as monkish because—and the apartment that we were in, we couldn't really hang out if the weather was either too hot or too cold. So there would be a lot of time studying at the library. I think it was fairly typical to be in the library till midnight or something like that. In terms of the fasting, I think that was something that he did after the period when we were living together, but he was with Sohail over on the east side and I think that might be something that he experimented with at that time, the fasting or just, you know, seeing what he could—he was also getting more physically fit, running around Central Park, things like that. So I think he was more concerned with his health and physical fitness. When Obama came to Occidental, he was already, you know, the -- physically the same person that we see today. I think he wasn't chubby or anything like that. So there was a fair amount of- of exercising at Occidental College and that continued in New York so I don't think that there was a radical physical change from Occidental to Columbia to the time afterwards.

Columbia University friends

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PHIL BOERNER:

So in New York when we were rooming together, we had friends visit from Occidental College like Paul Carpenter and Beth Khan for example, or Earl Chu, I believe. And then we also went over to Sahail's apartment and there was a real Pakistani crowd there that would be hanging out and we all had curry chicken, that was one of the common dishes that we had. But in terms of the people he hung out with, ya know, he met Genevieve later of course who was from Australia. It was more sticking with the Occidental people or the people that he knew through other connections than through the college.

Obama's self confidence

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PHIL BOERNER:

Barack was always very self-confident. He—ya know, was fun to be around and easy going and a good conversationalist so I think he just had that aura around him or charisma or what have you that, you know, he wanted to share his opinion, but not in a dominating way. He listened to all of the opinions that we had that were offered during our late night bull sessions, things like that. But he—you know, was very charismatic and wanted—was very outgoing. And once you got to know him—I mean, he was reserved at first; I think once you got to know, then he was more, you know, ebullient.

How Obama compartmentalized

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PHIL BOERNER:

So Barack was—was someone who while I said was charismatic and all of that, he also was—I think he compartmentalized. So there were things he shared with some people that he didn't share with others. For instance, like I didn't know when his father died, I wasn't aware of that. He didn't share that with me, I don't think he shared it with Sohail, either. And that's part of the

chameleon-like way that he was at the time. And I think that reflected later when people of all different groups found something appealing in him. You know, I think that was evident at the time as well but he didn't—there's some things that I didn't know about that were probably important points in his life but for whatever reason he didn't share those with me but he shared them with other people, just like—and he shared things with me that he didn't with others. When Barack heard about his father's death, I think we weren't living together in the same apartment when that happened. But I didn't know anything about it at the time, he didn't share it. So...and that's also true when he was at Occidental College, I wasn't aware that he was being raised by white grandparents, so we kind of—we're living in the moment and that was probably true about me as well. I wasn't sharing things about my past, ya know, we were just there and living in the moment.

Dreams from My Father

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PHIL BOERNER:

In Barack's book, *Dreams from My Father*, I think I wasn't in it at all and that's also true of Paul Carpenter, that I thought was a very close friend of his. I think Barack tried to emphasize the black-white, and his finding his Black identity in that book and it definitely distorted things a little bit. Ya know, there was a lot of accuracy in there, but there were also some things that were fictional in that book. Ya know, Paul and I were not part of—were written out of it if you will. It's been a while since I've read *Dreams from My Father*, but I think there was some stuff that wasn't accurate. I think he was trying to emphasize his Black—finding his Black identity. And so he would write out or exclude other things that didn't fit into that narrative. But that doesn't mean that what he has searched for his Black identity wasn't valid or real, that was just what he wanted to emphasize in that book. So it wasn't the full story, and I think he used composite characters so you can't even draw

and say this person was that person necessarily. But he wasn't emphasizing the fact that he had white roommates in college, for example.

Eating at Tom's Restaurant

01:23:48:14

PHIL BOERNER:

When Barack and I were rooming together in the fall of '81, of course, we made a lot of meals at home, it would be something as simple as rice and beans 'cause we were trying to save money, so we didn't eat out a lot but one of the places we ate out at was at Tom's Restaurant 'cause I think it was for \$1.99, you'd get you know, two eggs over easy and toast, something like that, and it was ten blocks or so away. And later that became famous for Seinfeld episodes as a place to be, but we were hanging out there, you know, in the early 80's before that happened.

Genevieve Ahearne

01:24:24:06

PHIL BOERNER:

So Obama in New York—in the New York period had a girlfriend named Genevieve from—who was from Australia. And I didn't get to know her well. I think I only met her once and she came at the end of that period, like 1983, something like that. So I believe we had dinner, you know, her and Obama and me and another friend or two maybe once or twice in that period. So I didn't know her very well. That came in the after—pretty much after the Columbia College period I believe. But, you know, we did get to know each other a little bit.

Obama's family

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PHIL BOERNER:

I never met Barack's mother or sister or grandparents, even though they did come to New York. I think that was part of his compartmentalization, so his personal life—and we never—he never talked about his family at Occidental College with me anyway and I don't think with many other people, so we weren't really aware of his situation at home, being raised by grandparents in Honolulu.

Letters from Obama

01:25:26:16

PHIL BOERNER:

So when I was a student at Columbia, I took a semester off and Barack continued to go to college. So he wrote me a letter in 1983, and so in that letter he was describing what I'm missing out because I'm away—with my girlfriend who later became my wife. But anyways, so Barack writes about life at Columbia as, "Long stretches of numbness punctuated with occasional insight." And he says, "Life rolls on and I feel a growing competence and maturity while simultaneously noting that there isn't much place for such qualities in this mediocre but occasionally lovable society." So for me, that reads like he's just gotten as much out of school as he can, he's ready to move on to the next stage, whatever that is, but he has to punch his ticket, get your union card of getting an undergraduate degree. But he's ready to move on and be done with Columbia is how I interpret that.

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In the summer of 1983 I believe this is... but in the summer of 1983, Barack wrote me a postcard from Indonesia and he kind of—you can tell from it that he's thinking about life, but he says, "I'm sitting on the porch in my sarong, sipping strong coffee and drawing on a clove cigarette, watching the heavy desk close over the paddy terraces of Java. Very kicked back, so far away

from the madness. I'm halfway through vacation but still feel the tug of that tense existence." So to me, that sounds like he's thinking about what his next step is, what he's gonna do. He's done with college, but he doesn't know what kind of a job he wants to do, and I think he goes on to Business International or something like that which he finds unsatisfying, but feels like he has to do something for a few years.

01:27:12:12

PHIL BOERNER:

So in 1985, Barack had moved to Chicago and I was still living in New York working at Firehouse Magazine as it happens. Anyway, he—so he wrote me a letter about his first impressions of Chicago and what he was up to. And one of the things I did when I was younger was write a lot of letters. My grandparents always said, "If you want to get letters, you gotta write letters." So I wrote lots of letters to lots of people. And so he wrote back this really long letter, it was like three pages on legal sized paper, and it gives some first impressions of Chicago, which I found pretty interesting. And so one of the things that he said in that letter, "Chicago's Southside is a city of neighborhoods and to a much greater degree than New York, the various tribes remain discreet within their own turf. You go ten miles in any direction and will not see a single white face." So after the time when Barack had moved to Chicago and I was still in New York and he wrote me about what his activities typically were.

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So on November 20th he wrote, "Since I often work at night, I usually reserve the mornings to myself for running, reading, and writing. I live in mortal fear of Chicago winters." He hadn't been through the first winter yet. "I often feel impotent to initiate anything with major impact. After 1987, I'll have to make a judgment as to whether I've got the patience and determination necessary for this kind of work." Ok, so in September in 1999, I got this letter—this note

really from Barack. “Phil, great to hear from you. Main news, Michelle and I have a beautiful baby daughter, Malia, one year old. Two, I’m running for Congress. Life is hectic but good.” So I think this letter captures, you know, a critical moment in his life when he’s getting into politics. So he lost that House race to Bobby Rush, which may have been the best thing that ever happened to him because just by chance one of the times when I was coming to Washington with my family, and we said ok let’s do the traditional thing. We contacted our Congressperson, Doris Matsui, and got tickets to go see Congress. And so we went to Congress and Bobby Rush happened to be speaking on the floor at the time about renaming some post office.

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And I—so—it occurred to me like later if Barack had won that election, he would be in Congress talking about renaming a post office in Chicago. And so it was one of the best things that ever happened to him. So he says, “I’m running for Congress.” But as—in this letter, it does show that he’s getting into politics and we know how that went, eventually. So I think that—you know, that’s an important—captures an important point in his life. In April, 1994, I got this note from Barack addressed to my wife—me and my wife Karen. “Terrific to hear from you...” And I’ll just show you what it looks like on the front. And I had just had—our daughter had been born so that’s why he sent this card. So, “Phil and Karen, terrific to hear from you and what wonderful news. I’m sure Laura Allison is a lovely child. I’m assuming she takes after you, Karen and that the lack of sleep isn’t too tough on the two of you. I must say that I’m thinking about a family of my own. In fact, I’m more than halfway there since I got married last year to Michelle. Picture enclosed. Other news, I’m a practicing lawyer in Chicago, mostly civil rights cases. I teach a course at the University of Chicago Law School and I’m finishing up a book that will probably—that will hopefully be published next year. I hear from Ahmad from time to time, he seems to be doing fine in Pakistan. I haven’t heard from Carpenter since a visit with him and Beth while I was at

Harvard. I still have the nicotine habit, but Michelle has made me promise to quit as soon as the book is done, otherwise no babies. Hope all three of you have a fine summer and look forward to hearing from you soon.”

01:30:49:16

So I think that captures, you know, a point in his life where he’s working on this book that later became the best seller, and then in November 20th, 1985, Barack wrote this long letter, three pages on legal size paper and it gives his first impressions of Chicago, which I think is pretty interesting. We talked about this, an excerpt from that later. But he also talks about in another, “I’ll be trying to bring together a group of welfare mothers at 15, grandmothers at 30, great grandmothers at 45, trying to help them win better job training and daycare facilities from the state. In either situation, I walk into a room and make promises I hope they can help me keep. They generally trust me.” So I thought -- I found it interesting that he used the word hope there, which later became a campaign slogan. And then he signs his letters, “Love, Barack.” And then there’s a PPS. “I work with churches a lot in the Black community, which may explain the context of the story. So he had enclosed a short story, which I no longer have. But I imagine I marked up my comments on how it could be improved and sent it back to him. And unfortunately, I didn’t photocopy it, but I wasn’t thinking he’d become President necessarily but anyway, so it mentions his working with the Black churches and mentions love and hope, which I think are important campaign slogans and promises of his later, and which he did provide to the country.

Obama’s move to Chicago

01:32:21:21

PHIL BOERNER:

When Barack moved to Chicago to become a community organizer, it seemed like something out of the blue to me, but he obviously was searching within himself for what was—he might find meaningful in life. He—ya know, wasn’t

satisfied with his job in New York. You know, wasn't feeling like it was doing anything meaningful for him personally. And so I think he felt like -- just like when he moved from Honolulu to Los Angeles, that was kind of a new environment for him. Moving from LA to New York was a chance to remake himself again and become more serious and figure out his place in the world. And I think ultimately moving from New York to Chicago was maybe the biggest step of all for finding out who he was and what his purpose in life was. So I think it was a very big step for him and, you know, it was a courageous step for him to do. He had matured so much from if you consider the greenhorn that came from Hawaii in the fall of '79 to the Hanes Annex to off on his own on Chicago and trying to help out with community organizing.

When Obama became a politician

01:33:29:14

PHIL BOERNER:

So when Barack became known as a politician, of course, I had read *Dreams from My Father* when it came out and sort of he became a little bit of a celebrity from that although I think the book only sold a few thousand copies or something initially. So I think I just heard about him becoming a politician through news reports and became aware of that and I contributed to his campaigns from the beginning, at least in a small way.

Obama's speech at the 2004 DNC

01:34:03:21

PHIL BOERNER:

So in 2004, Barack spoke at the Democratic National Convention. I'm a democrat so of course I'm watching the whole thing, and he gave this dynamic speech, and it was very moving and you couldn't believe what he had become and how dynamic he was. So it was very exciting to hear that

speech and to see it and see the reaction from the crowd. You know, we—my wife and I were thrilled at that, and we knew that he'd be a superstar from that point on. So when he first became a Senator, I guess I didn't see him becoming president so quickly as he did because you thought he needed to have some experience on the job. I think he was only a Senator for two years or four years or whatever when he finally became President. But that seemed to be the way the world was turning was people wanted something new and something fresh. His call for unity of the red states and the blue states, you know, resonated with people at the time in 2004 and, you know, you could see that he was going to become a star.

Obama “seemed to get along with everyone”

01:35:06:16

PHIL BOERNER:

Barack was someone, even going back to his Occidental days, that was a bit of a chameleon and I think everyone seemed to see something that they liked in him from their own experience so for instance, when we were at Columbia, we went to the Catskills one winter where my grandparents had a farmhouse. And we went around to visit the various neighbors and he seemed to get along with everybody and fit in so I think it's just part of his natural character, to fit in, and people find that appealing to him. And so he wasn't emphasizing one aspect of himself over another, but it's kind of a thing where you see in him what you want to see, you know, for whatever reason he was able to embody that.

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

01:35:55:01

PHIL BOERNER:

Well, when the Reverend Wright incident happened and Barack had to speak out about race in the country, I think it was a very powerful moment for him because it was an issue that had to be addressed, but it also was explaining what was going on in the Black community and the importance of the Black churches and how they felt they were being treated in the city so, you know, it was a very powerful moment.

Obama's presidency

01:36:22:18

PHIL BOERNER:

When Barack became President, all of us that knew him from way back when were very proud and I think he had a number of accomplishments, but I think he was also held back because there was a bunch of resistance from the Republican side. People forget John Boehner, and I often thought 'cause Boehner and my last name Boerner are very similar, that he would have loved it if I had been in that office instead of Boehner. But I think he was limited in what he could do because of the just uniform opposition to not have him succeed at anything possible. So, I think he did a lot for lifting the spirits of the country and making us feel that we were making progress, but in terms of some of the actual accomplishments that he would have liked to have done, he was held back. But the first two years, he was able to get the healthcare—you know, Obamacare, the Affordable Care Act passed through and that was a huge accomplishment. I know there's people that are disappointed that he couldn't do more, but you can't do everything and you can't satisfy everybody and he felt that getting healthcare to 30 million more people was very important, and I would agree with that as well. So you kind of have to pick and choose your battles.

Race in politics

01:37:33:00

PHIL BOERNER:

The Republican opposition to Obama, I think while he was in office, definitely race is a factor. I mean, I definitely have—I have friends today who are Trump supporters, but I can hear the underlying, you know, racial tone. I think the reaction—the election of Trump afterwards was a reaction to having the first Black president. So I think it was -- race was definitely part of the reason why he was opposed on so many things. I think if it was someone else-- if it had been Joe Biden proposing those things, some of them would've been passed. Or he would have had a supreme court nominee approved, things like that.

END TC: 01:38:09:07