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# Barack Obama



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Written by R. K. Burrice

# Barack Obama



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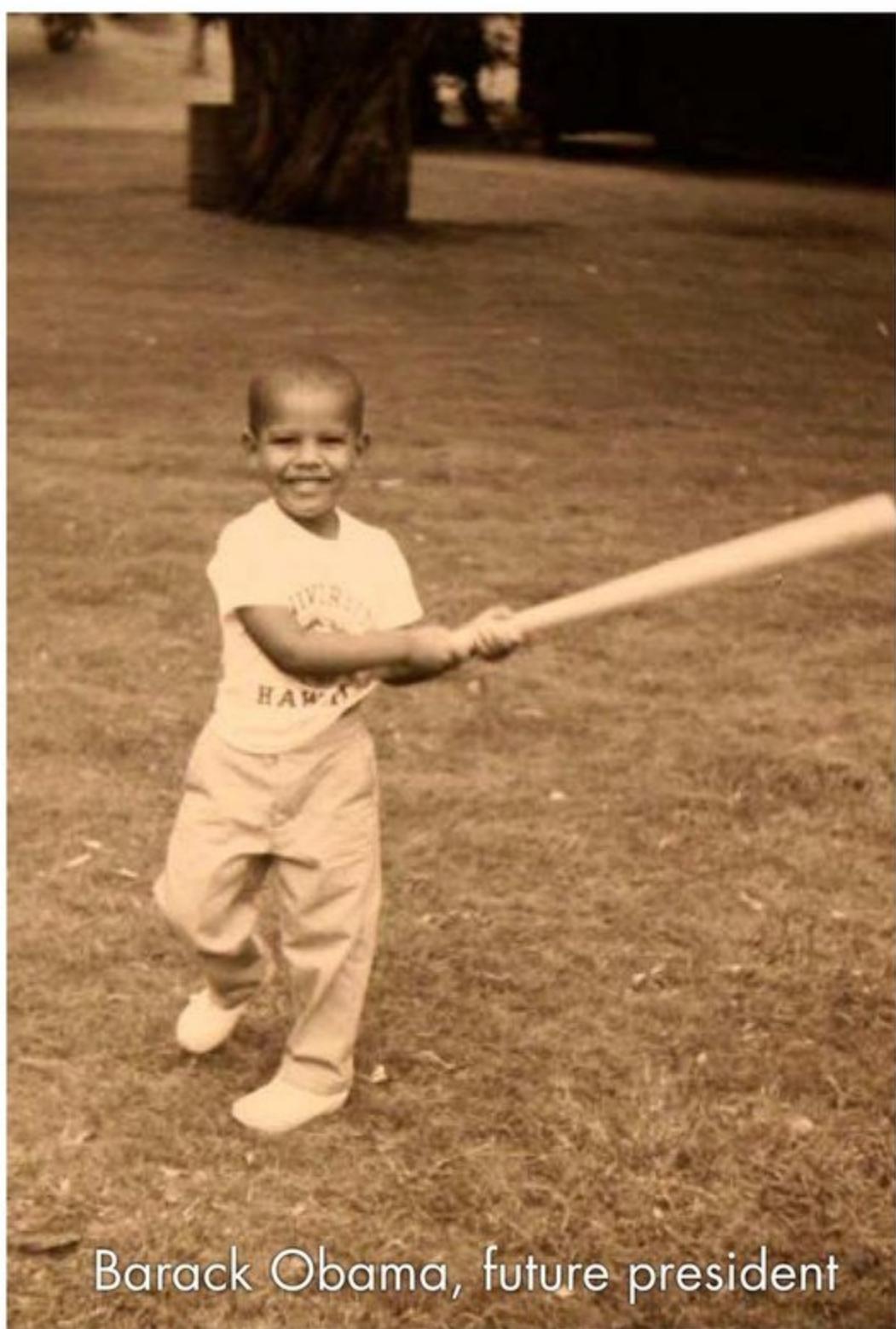
Young Barry in high school

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## Introduction

Every child dreams about growing up. Some children know what they want to be as adults. They may want to be artists or musicians, or doctors or lawyers. Others have no idea what they want to be. Some do not find a direction for their life until they are adults.



Barack Obama, future president

This is the story of just such a child. Things happened in his life that caused him to doubt himself and made him feel as though he did not fit in. He was bothered by many things that happened around him. Over time, those things helped him discover his

purpose in life. He developed a strong desire to change the practices that had made him feel like an outsider. That desire led him to become president of the United States of America.



Young Barry with his mother, Ann

## Growing Up

Barack Obama Jr.—called Barry during his childhood—was born in 1961 in Hawaii. His mother, Ann Dunham, was from the state of Kansas. His father, Barack Obama Sr., was from the country of Kenya, in eastern Africa. His parents met and married while they were students at the University of Hawaii. The marriage did not last. By the time Barry turned four, his parents had divorced and his father had moved back to Kenya.

Barry's mother married a man from Indonesia when Barry was six. The family left Hawaii and moved to Indonesia, where his half-sister was born. Barry attended school in Indonesia for four years. He learned the language and customs of his new country. He also saw what it meant to be very poor. Many Indonesian families struggled each day just to have enough food to eat.

Barry sometimes felt strange being so far from Hawaii. He felt he was not part of the community where he now lived. He wondered who he was and where he belonged in the world. Having parents of different **races** and from different **continents** caused him to wonder and question even more.



While the family lived in Indonesia, Barry's mother began teaching him about race and ethnicity. He learned about slavery and about the **civil rights** movement in the United States. Ann also taught him about important African Americans in politics, history, music, culture, and sports who helped to improve the world. She wanted Barry to be proud of his racial **heritage**.



U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. inspired Barry.

But Barry was confused. Although his mother taught him about African American leaders, he also learned about people who were **ashamed** of the color of their skin. He also learned about people who thought others were wrong or ignorant just because of their skin color or religion. Barry began to see that race and ethnicity were complicated issues. How could people feel pride when they were being judged on the very things they were proud of?

After four years in Indonesia, Barry's mother thought that he could receive a better education back in the United States. So in 1971, when he was ten, she sent Barry back to

Hawaii to attend school and to live with his grandparents.



Barry and his grandparents

In Hawaii, Barry again felt like an outsider. He was one of only two African American students in his class. Some of his classmates made fun of his unusual name. He gained strength from reading about other people who felt like outsiders but who had successfully found their way in the world. He was **inspired** by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders who believed in peaceful social change.

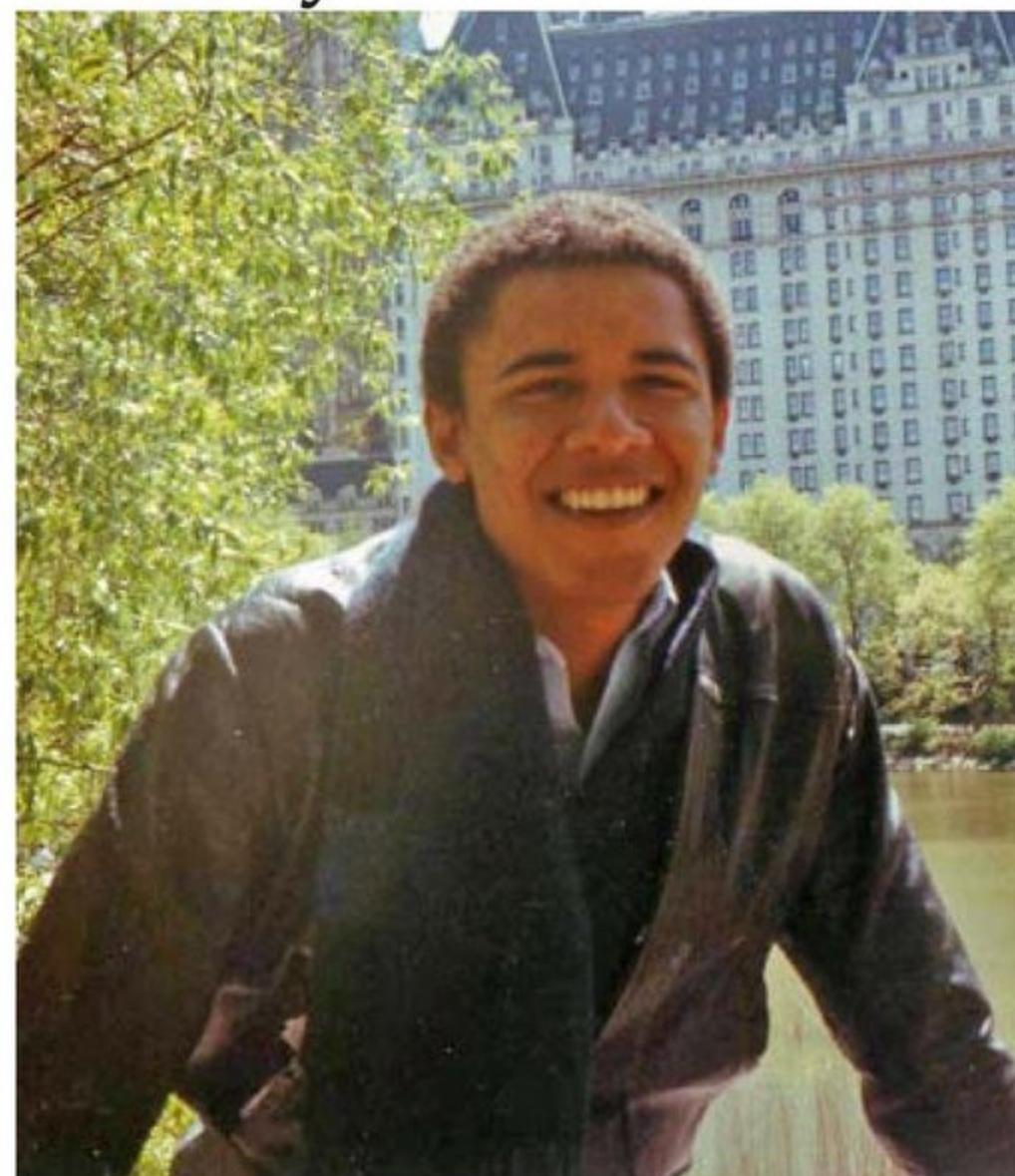
### Do You Know?

The year Barry returned to Hawaii, his father came from Kenya for a month. That visit was the last time Barry saw his father, who was killed in a car accident in 1982. His mother died of cancer in 1995.

## Finding His Way

After he graduated from high school in Hawaii, Barry went to college in Los Angeles. During that time, he and other students spoke out against South Africa's white government, which favored terrible treatment of black people. Barry began to embrace his African heritage and started using his Kenyan name, Barack, which means "blessed." He started to understand that he didn't have to choose between his white and black backgrounds—he was both.

Barack wanted to learn how laws and government worked. He wanted to help change some of the **injustices** he saw. In 1981, he transferred to Columbia University in New York City. He graduated in 1983 with a **degree** in political science.



Barack as a Columbia student

By the time Barack finished college, he knew he wanted to help people in communities. He wanted to involve people in creating better lives for themselves. He also wanted to see **local** laws changed so people would receive fair treatment. He found a job and moved to Chicago in 1985. He became the director of an organization that helped people in poor neighborhoods find jobs and improve their lives.

## Do You Know?

Before Barack moved to Chicago, he held a job with a big business for a short time. He started earning good money, but he was not happy. He hungered to be involved in something bigger than his own life. He quit his job and found one where he could help people. Later he said, "There's nothing wrong with making money, but focusing your life [just] on making a buck shows a poverty of ambition."



A Chicago neighborhood that Barack helped



Chicago residents sign up to vote.

Barack helped set up a job-training program for African Americans who had lost their jobs when factories closed. He also helped call attention to a dangerous material called asbestos that was in the walls of buildings where many poor people lived. His organization started a tutoring program to help young people who wanted to go to college. Barack also managed a program to sign up new voters. He encouraged people to get involved in politics so that fairer laws could be passed.

Barack's work in Chicago fed his **passion** for helping poor people. But through his work, he saw that to make lasting changes, he would need to learn how to change laws. He believed that by changing unfair laws, communities could improve the lives of their people.

### **Do You Know?**

Before entering law school in 1988, Barack traveled to Kenya for the first time. He met many relatives there, including his grandmother.

Barack entered Harvard Law School, near Boston, in 1988. During his time there, he became the first African American to be in charge of a respected

magazine called the *Harvard Law Review*. He earned a law degree in 1991 and graduated with **honors**.



Barack with Mama Sara Obama, his Kenyan grandmother



Barack and Michelle Obama with their daughters, Malia (mah-LEE-uh), 6, right, and Sasha, 3, in 2004

After finishing law school, Barack moved back to Chicago and worked for a law company for the summer. A female lawyer named Michelle Robinson advised him, and they became friends. Barack invited Michelle along when he went to visit some of the people and communities he had helped in the 1980s. Michelle was deeply **moved** by Barack's vision of a better world. She saw how much the people he had worked with respected him. Barack and Michelle married in 1992.



Barack and Michelle Obama with daughters Malia and Sasha campaigned in 2004 for Barack to be a U.S. Senator.

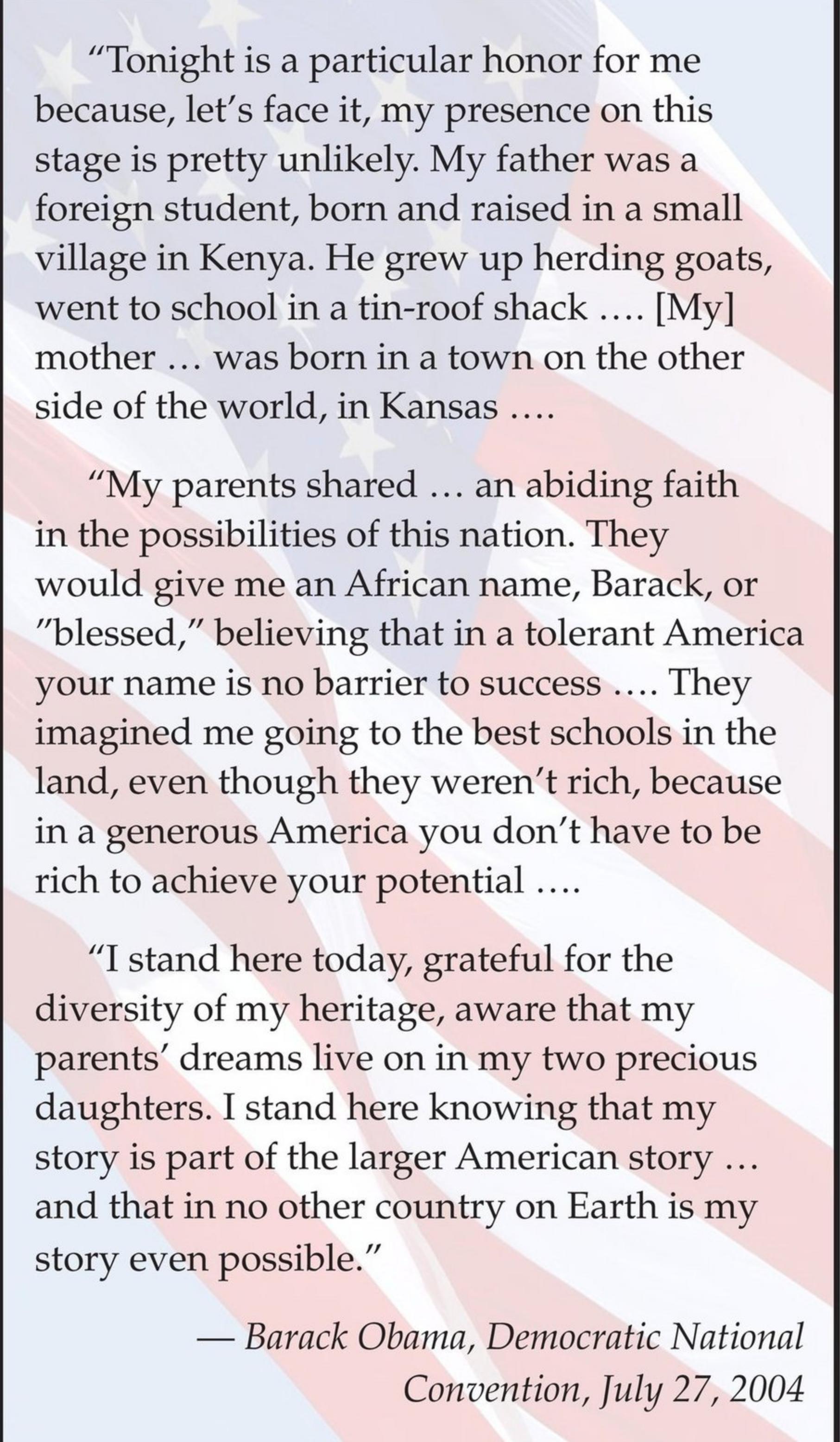
## Becoming a Politician

Barack had become a lawyer to help people. But he soon saw that helping people as a lawyer was a very slow process. He decided that entering politics and changing laws would be an even faster way to help. In 1996, he ran for and won a seat in the Illinois state senate. As a state senator, he helped change laws so poor working families could pay lower taxes. He also helped change laws so children would have better education and health care.

Barack ran for the United States Senate in 2004. He was asked to speak at an important meeting of the Democratic Party. He gave a hopeful speech about all Americans working together to help the United States become an even greater country. The speech was a big success, and Barack's words inspired many people. He easily won a seat in the U.S. Senate later that year. Because of the speech, many people encouraged Barack to run for president—the biggest job in the United States—in 2008.



Barack spoke during the 2004 Democratic National Convention.



“Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let’s face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack .... [My] mother ... was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas ....

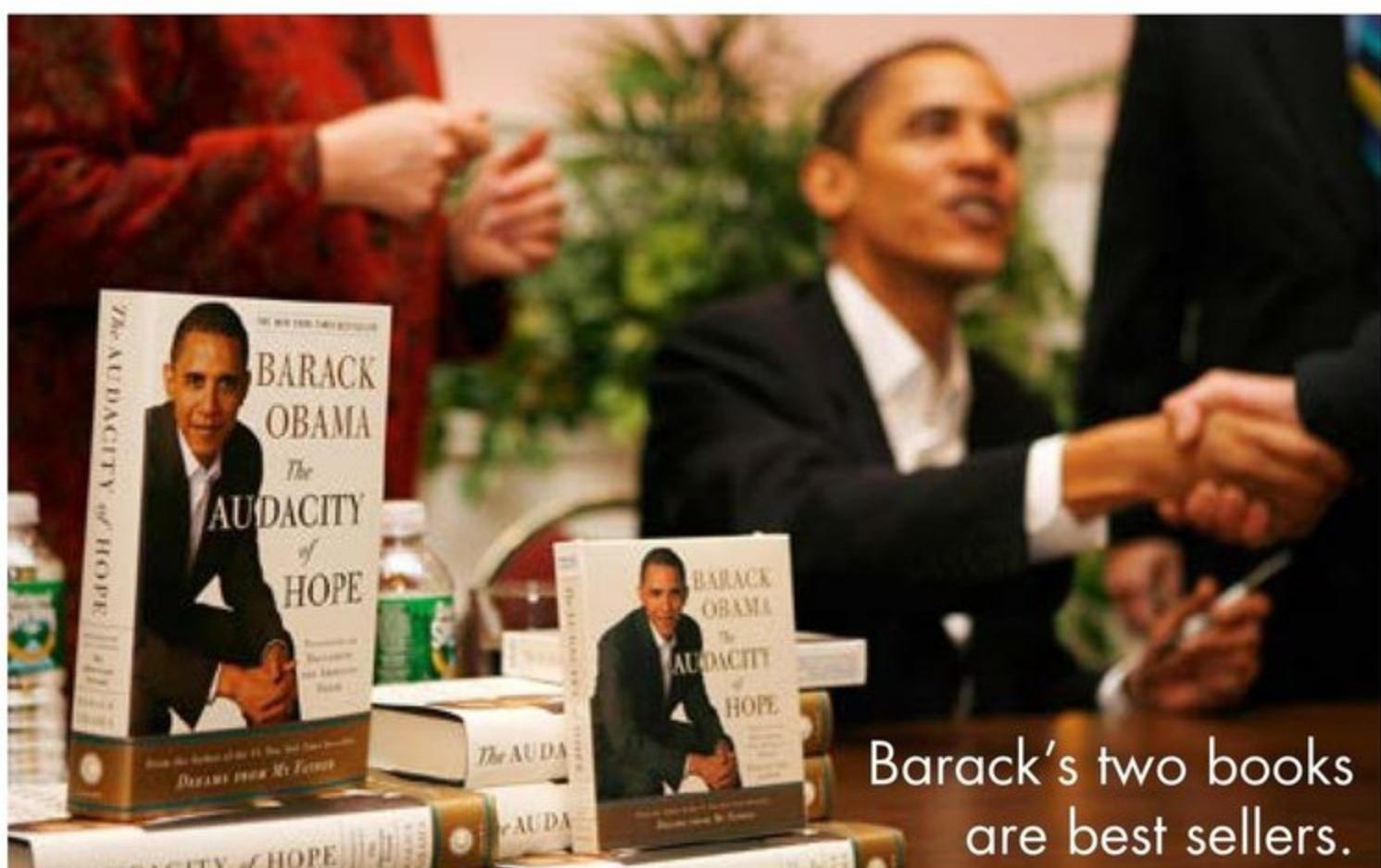
“My parents shared ... an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or “blessed,” believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success .... They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren’t rich, because in a generous America you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential ....

“I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents’ dreams live on in my two precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story ... and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.”

— *Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004*

Barack had to be convinced that being president was the best thing for him and his family. He thought that he did not have enough experience as a U.S. senator. Barack knew that, because he was African American, running for president could be dangerous. He knew that just running for president would change his and his family's lives forever. He could no longer take a walk or get his hair cut without drawing a crowd.

While he thought about whether or not to run for president, Barack's **reputation** grew. The two books he had written inspired many people to write to him and encourage him. He continued to give speeches and talk to people. Many more people became inspired by his words, his clear thinking, his respect for all people, and his belief in peaceful solutions to big problems.



Barack's two books are best sellers.

## Conclusion

Barack began his job as president on January 20, 2009. He, his wife Michelle, and their two young daughters moved into the White House in Washington, D.C. In October 2009, President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts to make the world a better and more peaceful place.

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

—Barack Obama



Barack Obama spoke to a huge crowd after being elected president on November 4, 2008.

## Glossary

**ashamed** (*adj.*) embarrassed (p. 7)

**civil rights** (*n.*) legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 7)

**continents** (*n.*) one of the main landmasses on Earth, including Africa, South America, Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, and Antarctica (p. 6)

**degree** (*n.*) a title given to a student by a college or university after completing a program of study (p. 9)

**ethnicity** (*n.*) the state of belonging to a group of people with a common cultural heritage or nationality distinguished by customs, characteristics, language, and common history (p. 7)

**heritage** (*n.*) a way of life, tradition, or characteristic that is passed down from generation to generation (p. 7)

**honors** (*n.*) awards for outstanding achievement (p. 12)

**injustices** (*n.*) the unfair treatment of a person or group of people (p. 9)

<b>inspired</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	prompted to be brave or creative (p. 8)
<b>local</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	limited to a specific place (p. 10)
<b>moved</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	caused to have strong feelings (p. 13)
<b>passion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	intense enthusiasm (p. 12)
<b>races</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	populations of humans as defined by skin color and features or by genetics (p. 6)
<b>reputation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the general way that a person or thing is thought of by others (p. 17)
<b>slavery</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the state or condition of being a slave, or the property of another person (p. 7)

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