



Law Review chief Barack Obama

Harvard's first black Law Review president doesn't want cushy job

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — His boyhood friends in Indonesia were street peddlers, and his grandmother still lives in a mud-walled house in Kenya. But Barack Obama is another world away, presiding over the Harvard Law Review as the first black president in the prestigious journal's 103-year history.

The charismatic 28-year-old, ensconced in the halls where tradition reigns, is taking aim at another custom: Obama's sights are set on the South Side of Chicago, not on a U.S. Supreme Court clerkship or a fast-track career with a cushy firm.

"I'm not interested in the suburbs. The suburbs bore me. And I'm not interested in isolating myself," Obama said in a recent interview. "I feel good when I'm engaged in what I think are the core issues of the society, and those core issues to me are what's happening to poor folks in this society."

His passion is rooted in his background. He was born in Hawaii, his father an Oxford- and Harvard-educated economist from the African nation of Kenya, his mother a white anthropologist from Kansas. Obama moved to Southeast Asia at age 2 when his parents divorced and his mother married an Indonesian.

Until the fifth grade, Obama attended Indonesian schools, where most of his friends were the sons of servants, street peddlers and farmers.

Concern for Obama's education led his mother to return him to Hawaii, where he attended public schools through high school. In 1983, he graduated from Columbia University with a degree in political science.

At a recent meeting in a Harvard cafeteria, his affinity with the underdog was readily apparent.

"I lived in a country where I saw extreme poverty at a very early age," Obama said. "Parts of my family in Kenya remain very poor. My grandmother still lives in a mud-walled house with no running water or electricity.

"That's who I am, that's where I come from, not always literally, but at least emotionally."

Obama entered Harvard Law School in 1988, and through a combination of grades and a writing competition, was elected to head the Law Review this February. He succeeded Peter Yu, a first-generation Chinese-American.

Obama cautions against reading too much into his election.

"It's crucial that people don't see my election as somehow a symbol of progress in the broader sense, that we don't sort of point to a Barack Obama any more than you point to a Bill Cosby or a Michael Jordan and say 'Well, things are hunky dory,'" Obama said.

"There's certainly racism here. There are certain burdens that are placed, more emotionally at this point than concretely," Obama said.

sh on prom night

so fast I got back to the TV set in time to see the credits.

So I asked Cathy, a balding sophomore who didn't look much better in a sweater than I did. The night was a washout. She said she was sick — it might have been of me — and I took her home before the first band break.

A tuxedo was optional, so I chose the option that said I didn't have to wear one. I didn't buy a scarf, embroidered or otherwise. I didn't buy fancy shoes. Limos were unheard of. Getting a motel room for a post-prom party was a wonderful fantasy but probably a felony.

My bottom line? Whatever it cost to put gas in my father's car and the \$5 I paid for a two-for-one corsage special. My prom night was a social bust, but it was an accountant's dream.

I'm sure Cathy's dress didn't cost more than \$50. If she wore jewelry or bracelets or earrings, they didn't make an impression. If she paid for tanning sessions, she should have sued to get her money back.

What if you only had \$100 to spend on the Junior-Senior prom, I asked Lisa Pflug.

"My first reaction would be, 'Oh, my God. You can't even get a church dress for that.' Then I'd probably scream."

■ Garret Mathews' column appears Sunday through Thursday.