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Milestones: Barack Obama

The Long Run

A Mother's Influence

A Free-Spirited Wanderer Who Set Obama's Path

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Courtesy of the Obama family

Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro with son Barack in Hawaii.

In the capsule version of the Barack Obama story, his mother is simply the white woman from Kansas. The phrase comes coupled alliteratively to its counterpart, the black father from Kenya. On the campaign trail, he has called her his “single mom.” But neither description begins to capture the unconventional life of Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro, the parent who most shaped Mr. Obama.

Kansas was merely a way station in her childhood, wheeling westward in the slipstream of her furniture-salesman father. In Hawaii, she married an African student at age 18. Then she married an Indonesian, moved to Jakarta, became an anthropologist, wrote an 800-page dissertation on peasant blacksmithing in Java, worked for the Ford Foundation, championed women’s work and helped bring microcredit to the world’s poor.

She had high expectations for her children. In Indonesia, she would wake her son at 4 a.m. for correspondence courses in English before school; she brought home recordings of Mahalia Jackson, speeches by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And when Mr. Obama asked to stay in Hawaii for high school rather than return to Asia, she accepted living apart — a decision her daughter says was one of the hardest in Ms. Soetoro’s life.

“She felt that somehow, wandering through uncharted territory, we might stumble upon something that will, in an instant, seem to represent who we are at the core,” said Maya Soetoro-Ng, Mr. Obama’s half-sister. “That was very much her philosophy of life — to not be limited by fear or narrow definitions, to not build walls around ourselves and to do our best to find kinship and beauty in unexpected places.”

Ms. Soetoro, who died of ovarian cancer in 1995, was the parent who raised Mr. Obama, the Illinois senator running for the Democratic presidential nomination. He barely saw his father after the age of 2. Though it is impossible to pinpoint the imprint of a parent on the life of a grown child, people who knew Ms. Soetoro well say they see her influence unmistakably in Mr. Obama.

Milestones: Barack Obama



Courtesy of the Obama Family

Ms. Soetoro, right, during her trip to Indonesia from 1988 to 1992.
She married an Indonesian, moved to Jakarta and became an anthropologist.



Courtesy of the Obama Family

Ms. Soetoro on her Indonesian trip.



Courtesy of the Obama Family

Ms. Soetoro during her field trip from 1988 to 1992.
She died in 1995 of cancer.



Joe Wrinn / Harvard University

Barack Obama in 1990 when he was elected president of the Law Review at Harvard.

They were close, her friends and his half-sister say, though they spent much of their lives with oceans or continents between them. He would not be where he is today, he has said, had it not been for her. Yet he has also made some different choices — marrying into a tightly knit African-American family rooted in the South Side of Chicago, becoming a churchgoing Christian, publicly recounting his search for his identity as a black man.

Some of what he has said about his mother seems tinged with a mix of love and regret. He has said his biggest mistake was not being at her bedside when she died. And when The Associated Press asked the candidates about “prized keepsakes” — others mentioned signed baseballs, a pocket watch, a “trophy wife” — Mr. Obama said his was a photograph of the cliffs of the South Shore of Oahu in Hawaii where his mother’s ashes were scattered.

“I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book — less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life,” he wrote in the preface to his memoir, “Dreams From My Father.” He added, “I know that she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and that what is best in me I owe to her.”

In a campaign in which Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, has made liberal use of his globe-trotting 96-year-old mother to answer suspicions that he might be an antique at 71, Mr. Obama, who declined to be interviewed for this article, invokes his mother’s memory sparingly. In one television advertisement, she appears

fleetingly — porcelain-skinned, raven-haired and holding her toddler son. “My mother died of cancer at 53,” he says in the ad, which focuses on health care. “In those last painful months, she was more worried about paying her medical bills than getting well.”

‘A Very, Very Big Thinker’

He has described her as a teenage mother, a single mother, a mother who worked, went to school and raised children at the same time. He has credited her with giving him a great education and confidence in his ability to do the right thing. But, in interviews, friends and colleagues of Ms. Soetoro shed light on a side of her that is less well known.

“She was a very, very big thinker,” said Nancy Barry, a former president of Women’s World Banking, an international network of microfinance providers, where Ms. Soetoro worked in New York City in the early 1990s. “I think she was not at all personally ambitious, I think she cared about the core issues, and I think she was not afraid to speak truth to power.”

Her parents were from Kansas — her mother from Augusta, her father from El Dorado, a place Mr. Obama first visited in a campaign stop in January. Stanley Ann (her father wanted a boy so he gave her his name) was born on an Army base during World War II. The family moved to California, Kansas, Texas and Washington in restless pursuit of opportunity before landing in Honolulu in 1960.

In a Russian class at the University of Hawaii, she met the college’s first African student, Barack Obama. They married and had a son in August 1961, in an era when interracial marriage was rare in the United States. Her parents were upset, Senator Obama learned years later from his mother, but they adapted. “I am a little dubious of the things that people from foreign countries tell me,” the senator’s grandmother told an interviewer several years ago.

The marriage was brief. In 1963, Mr. Obama left for Harvard, leaving his wife and child. She then married Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian student.

When he was summoned home in 1966 after the turmoil surrounding the rise of Suharto, Ms. Soetoro and Barack followed.

Those choices were not entirely surprising, said several high school friends of Ms. Soetoro, whom they remembered as unusually intelligent, curious and open. She never dated “the crew-cut white boys,” said one friend, Susan Blake: “She had a world view, even as a young girl. It was embracing the different, rather than that ethnocentric thing of shunning the different. That was where her mind took her.”

Her second marriage faded, too, in the 1970s. Ms. Soetoro wanted to work, one friend said, and Mr. Soetoro wanted more children. He became more American, she once said, as she became more Javanese. “There’s a Javanese belief that if you’re married to someone and it doesn’t work, it will make you sick,” said Alice G. Dewey, an anthropologist and friend. “It’s just stupid to stay married.”

That both unions ended is beside the point, some friends suggested. Ms. Soetoro remained loyal to both husbands and encouraged her children to feel connected to their fathers. (In reading drafts of her son’s memoir, Mr. Obama has said, she did not comment upon his depiction of her but was “quick to explain or defend the less flattering aspects of my father’s character.”)

“She always felt that marriage as an institution was not particularly essential or important,” said Nina Nayar, who later became a close friend of Ms. Soetoro. What mattered to her, Ms. Nayar said, was to have loved deeply.

By 1974, Ms. Soetoro was back in Honolulu, a graduate student and raising Barack and Maya, nine years younger. Barack was on scholarship at a prestigious prep school, Punahou. When Ms. Soetoro decided to return to Indonesia three years later for her field work, Barack chose not to go.

“I doubted what Indonesia now had to offer and wearied of being new all over again,” he wrote in his memoir. “More than that, I’d arrived at an

unspoken pact with my grandparents: I could live with them and they'd leave me alone so long as I kept my trouble out of sight." During those years, he was "engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America." Ms. Soetoro-Ng recalled her mother's quandary. "She wanted him to be with her," Ms. Soetoro-Ng said. But she added: "Although it was painful to be separated from him for his last four years of high school, she recognized that it was perhaps the best thing for him. And she had to go to Indonesia at that time."

That time apart was hard for both mother and son.

"She longed for him," said Georgia McCauley, who became a friend of Ms. Soetoro in Jakarta. Barack spent summers and Christmas vacations with his mother; they communicated by letters, his illustrated with cartoons. Her first topic of conversation was always her son, her female friends said. As for him, he was grappling with questions of racial identity, alienation and belonging.

"There were certainly times in his life in those four years when he could have used her presence on a more daily basis," Ms. Soetoro-Ng said. "But I think he did all right for himself."

Fluent in Indonesian, Ms. Soetoro moved with Maya first to Yogyakarta, the center of Javanese handicrafts. A weaver in college, she was fascinated with what Ms. Soetoro-Ng calls "life's gorgeous minutiae." That interest inspired her study of village industries, which became the basis of her 1992 doctoral dissertation.

"She loved living in Java," said Dr. Dewey, who recalled accompanying Ms. Soetoro to a metalworking village. "People said: 'Hi! How are you?' She said: 'How's your wife? Did your daughter have the baby?' They were friends. Then she'd whip out her notebook and she'd say: 'How many of you have electricity? Are you having trouble getting iron?'"

She became a consultant for the United States Agency for International Development on setting up a village credit program, then a Ford Foundation program officer in Jakarta specializing in women's work.

Later, she was a consultant in Pakistan, then joined Indonesia's oldest bank to work on what is described as the world's largest sustainable microfinance program, creating services like credit and savings for the poor.

Visitors flowed constantly through her Ford Foundation office in downtown Jakarta and through her house in a neighborhood to the south, where papaya and banana trees grew in the front yard and Javanese dishes like opor ayam were served for dinner. Her guests were leaders in the Indonesian human rights movement, people from women's organizations, representatives of community groups doing grass-roots development.

"I didn't know a lot of them and would often ask after, 'Who was that?'" said David S. McCauley, now an environmental economist at the Asian Development Bank in Manila, who had the office next door. "You'd find out it was the head of some big organization in with thousands of members from central Java or someplace, somebody that she had met some time ago, and they would make a point of coming to see her when they came to Jakarta."

An Exacting Idealist

As a mother, Ms. Soetoro was both idealistic and exacting. Friends describe her as variously informal and intense, humorous and hardheaded. She preached to her young son the importance of honesty, straight talk, independent judgment. When he balked at her early-morning home schooling, she retorted, "This is no picnic for me either, buster."

When Barack was in high school, she confronted him about his seeming lack of ambition, Mr. Obama wrote. He could get into any college in the country, she told him, with just a little effort. ("Remember what that's like? Effort?") He says he looked at her, so earnest and sure of his destiny: "I suddenly felt like puncturing that certainty of hers, letting her know that her experiment with me had failed."

Ms. Soetoro-Ng, who herself became an anthropologist, remembers conversations with her mother about philosophy or politics, books, esoteric Indonesian woodworking motifs. One Christmas in Indonesia, Ms. Soetoro found a scrawny tree and decorated it with red and green chili peppers and popcorn balls.

“She gave us a very broad understanding of the world,” her daughter said. “She hated bigotry. She was very determined to be remembered for a life of service and thought that service was really the true measure of a life.” Many of her friends see her legacy in Mr. Obama — in his self-assurance and drive, his boundary bridging, even his apparent comfort with strong women. Some say she changed them, too.

“I feel she taught me how to live,” said Ms. Nayar, who was in her 20s when she met Ms. Soetoro at Women’s World Banking. “She was not particularly concerned about what society would say about working women, single women, women marrying outside their culture, women who were fearless and who dreamed big.”

The Final Months

After her diagnosis, Ms. Soetoro spent the last months of her life in Hawaii, near her mother. (Her father had died.) Mr. Obama has recalled talking with her in her hospital bed about her fears of ending up broke. She was not ready to die, he has said. Even so, she helped him and Maya “push on with our lives, despite our dread, our denials, our sudden constrictions of the heart.”

She died in November 1995, as Mr. Obama was starting his first campaign for public office. After a memorial service at the University of Hawaii, one friend said, a small group of friends drove to the South Shore in Oahu. With the wind whipping the waves onto the rocks, Mr. Obama and Ms. Soetoro-Ng placed their mother’s ashes in the Pacific, sending them off in the direction of Indonesia.