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Family portraits

Strong personalities shaped a future senator, Barack Obama

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MERCER ISLAND, Wash. -- Chip Wall can't help but zero in on the little stuff whenever he watches Sen. Barack Obama on TV.

The turn of the smile, the sharp wit, the comfortable self-assuredness, all of which he saw up close, a half-century ago.

It's his old pal Stanley.



For Wall and a few dozen others, Obama on the campaign trail often brings to mind Stanley Ann Dunham, Obama's mother and a strong-willed, unconventional member of the Mercer Island High School graduating class of 1960.

"She was not a standard-issue girl of her times. ... She wasn't part of the matched-sweater-set crowd," said Wall, a classmate and retired philosophy teacher who used to make after-school runs to Seattle with Dunham to sit and talk -- for hours and hours -- in coffee shops.

"She touted herself as an atheist, and it was something she'd read about and could argue," said Maxine Box, who was Dunham's best friend in high school. "She was always challenging and arguing and comparing. She was already thinking about things that the rest of us hadn't."

The education of Obama the would-be politician didn't begin, of course, until after his birth in 1961, in Honolulu. But the parental traits that would mold him -- a contrarian worldview, an initial rejection of organized religion, a questioning nature -- were already taking shape years earlier in the nomadic and sometimes tempestuous Dunham family, where the only child was a curious and precocious daughter of a father who wanted a boy so badly that he named her Stanley -- after himself.

In his best-selling book, "Dreams From My Father" and in campaign speeches, Obama frequently describes the story of his mother, who died of cancer in 1995, as a tale of the Heartland. She's the white woman from the flatlands of Kansas and the only daughter of parents who grew up in the "dab-smack, landlocked center of the country," in towns "too small to warrant boldface on a roadmap."

Implicit in that portrayal is this message: If you have any lingering questions or doubts about the Hawaiian-born presidential candidate with a funny name, just remember that Mom hails from America's good earth. That's the log cabin story, or his version of Bill Clinton's "Man from Hope."

That presentation, though, glosses over Stanley Ann Dunham's formative years, spent not on the Great Plains but more than 1,800 miles away on a small island in the Pacific Northwest.

Obama visited the Seattle area last October, and in a speech to a Democratic Party rally at Bellevue Community College, he mentioned that his mother attended Mercer Island High School before moving on to Hawaii. In "Dreams," Obama wrote that the family moved to Seattle "long enough for my mother to finish high school."

But her stop was more than some educational cup of coffee; Obama's mother spent 8th grade through high school here. Four of those five years were spent on Mercer Island, a 5-mile-long, South America-shaped stretch of Douglas firs and cedars, just across from Seattle in Lake Washington.

Her parents, Stanley and Madelyn Dunham -- he was a boisterous, itinerant furniture salesman in downtown Seattle, she worked for a bank and was the quiet yet firm influence at home -- moved to Mercer Island in 1956, after one year in a Seattle apartment. The lure was the high school that had just opened and the opportunity it offered for their daughter, who was then 13.

Stanley Dunham died in 1992, and the Obama campaign declined to make Madelyn Dunham, 84, available.

But interviews with their friends from Kansas, now in their mid-to-late 80s, and interviews with their daughter's former classmates and teachers, now in their mid-60s or older, paint a vivid portrait of Barack Obama's mother as a self-assured, iconoclastic young teen seemingly hell-bent to resist Eisenhower-era conformity.

Boyish-looking, Stanley Ann was prone to rolling her eyes when she heard something she didn't agree with. She didn't like her nose, she worried about her weight, she complained about her parents -- especially her domineering father. Her sarcasm could be withering and, while she enjoyed arguing, she did not like to draw attention to herself. The bite of her wit was leavened by a good sense of humor.

While her girlfriends, including Box, regularly baby-sat, Stanley Ann showed no interest. "She felt she didn't need to date or marry or have children," Box recalled. "It wasn't a put-down, it wasn't hurtful. That's just who she was."

Her name was something to tolerate -- barely. Elaine Johnson, who used to wait for the school bus with her, picked up on that when Dunham introduced herself one morning.

"I know, it's a boy's name, and no, I don't like it. I mean, would you like to be called Stanley?" Johnson recalled her saying. "But my dad wanted a boy and he got me. And the name 'Stanley' made him feel better, I guess."

Susan Blake, a classmate and former city councilwoman from Mercer Island who long ago changed the infant Barack's messy diaper, said of her friend: "Hers was a mind in full tilt."

Over time, the distinctive and often clashing qualities of Madelyn, Stanley and Stanley Ann have been merged, smoothed, polished and put on display in the politician who is their grandson and son. Obama's voice volume is lower than his excitable grandfather's. The overt skepticism of his mother and grandmother has been papered over, and Stanley Ann's aversion to attention is gone. The candidate who vows to help bridge America's racial, religious and cultural divides has shed his mother's rejection of organized religion, calling his embrace "a vessel for my beliefs."

He lost his grandfather's impetuosity but kept the sales skills, attracting enough big money and broad support to reshape the race for president.

In a recent interview, Obama called his mother "the dominant figure in my formative years. . . . The values she taught me continue to be my touchstone when it comes to how I go about the world of politics."

Those values trace to the get-rich-quick oil fields east of Wichita, Kan.

Maternal grandmother

Madelyn Payne was born in the oil boomtown of Augusta, to stern Methodist parents who did not believe in drinking, playing cards or dancing. She was one of the best students in the graduating class of 1940. And, in ways that would foretell the flouting of conventions by her daughter Stanley Ann, Madelyn was different.

"A bunch of us would go to Wichita, to the Blue Moon Dance Hall," said Nina Parry, a classmate who still lives in Augusta. "We'd hear Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. . . . All the big bands came. It was wonderful."

Then Madelyn met Stanley.

Four years older, Stanley Armour Dunham lived 17 miles east, in El Dorado. In 1920, El Dorado, with a population of 12,000, seemed to exist solely for the purpose of drilling holes in the ground. And for good reason. In 1918, the El Dorado field produced 9 percent of the world's oil production.

The Dunhams were Baptists. Unlike the Paynes, Stanley Dunham did not come from the white-collar crowd. Gregarious, friendly, challenging and loud, "he was such a loose wheel at times," said Clarence Kerns, from the El Dorado class of 1935. Others who knew Dunham described him as a salesman "who could charm the legs off a couch."

His marriage to Madelyn was one of those that acquaintances said spanned both sides of the railroad tracks, and Stanley was always placed on the wrong side. They secretly married on the spring weekend of the annual junior-senior banquet in 1940, Madelyn's senior year, several weeks before graduation, according to friends. Continuing to live with her parents, Madelyn didn't tell them about her marriage until she got her diploma in June. The news was not a big hit at the Payne family home, but parental objections didn't matter.

When World War II came, Stanley enlisted in the Army. Madelyn became a Rosie-the-Riveter at Boeing Co.'s B-29 production plant in Wichita. And Stanley Ann Dunham arrived in late November 1942.

The Dunhams were full-time working parents, renters and strugglers in pursuit of the next opportunity. After the war, Madelyn worked in restaurants while Stanley managed a furniture store on Main Street in El Dorado.

Mack Gilkeson, a retired engineering professor who grew up in El Dorado and knew both Madelyn and Stanley, has watched their now-famous grandson too. "If I were to squint my eyes and look at Barack," he said, "I'd almost see his grandparents."

'Anarchy alley'

The Dunhams that Gilkeson saw after the war moved from El Dorado to a bigger opportunity in 1955 -- a large store in downtown Seattle called Standard-Grunbaum Furniture at the corner of 2nd Avenue and Pine Street. "First in Furniture, Second at Pine," read the Yellow Pages ad in the Seattle telephone directory.

Seattle in the 1950s had no Space Needle, no Microsoft, no Starbucks. Mercer Island, now a pricey home to corporate luminaries such as Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, was then "a rural, idyllic place," said Elaine Johnson, who remembered summers with "sleepovers along the water in sleeping bags. It was so safe." The island was quiet, politically conservative and all white.

But consistent with the 1950s, there were undercurrents of turmoil. In 1955, the chairman of the Mercer Island school board, John Stenhouse, testified before the House Un-American Activities Subcommittee that he had been a member of the Communist Party.

At Mercer High School, two teachers -- Val Foubert and Jim Wichterman -- generated regular parental thunderstorms by teaching their students to challenge societal norms and question all manner of authority. Foubert, who died recently, taught English. His texts were cutting edge: "Atlas Shrugged," "The Organization Man," "The Hidden Persuaders," "1984" and the acerbic writings of H.L. Mencken.



Val Foubert in 1960 [photo inserted only in this PDF edition of story]

Wichterman taught philosophy. The hallway between the two classes was known as "anarchy alley," and students pondered the challenging notions of Wichterman's teachings, including such philosophers as Sartre and Kierkegaard. He also touched the societal third rail of the 1950s: He questioned the existence of God. And he didn't stop there.

"I had them read 'The Communist Manifesto,' and the parents went nuts," said Wichterman, adding that parents also didn't want any discussions about "anything to do with sex," religion and theology. The parental protests were known as "mothers' marches."

"The kids started questioning things that their folks thought shouldn't be questioned -- religion, politics, parental authority," said John Hunt, a classmate. "And a lot of parents didn't like that, and they tried to get them [Wichterman and Foubert] fired."

The Dunhams did not join the uproar. Madelyn and Stanley shed their Methodist and Baptist upbringing and began attending Sunday services at the East Shore Unitarian Church in nearby Bellevue.

"In the 1950s, this was sometimes known as 'the little Red church on the hill,' " said Peter Luton, the church's senior minister, referring to the effects of McCarthyism. Skepticism, the kind that Stanley embraced and passed on to his daughter, was welcomed here.

For Stanley Ann, the teachings of Foubert and Wichterman provided an intellectual stimulant and an affirmation that there indeed was an interesting life beyond high school dances, football games and all-night slumber party chatter.

Their high school class was an in-between generation. The Beat generation had passed, and the 1960s era of protest was yet to begin. Classmates of Dunham -- Wall, Blake, Hunt -- felt they were on the cusp of societal change, the distant early warning of the '60s struggles over civil rights, women's rights and war.

"If you were concerned about something going wrong in the world, Stanley would know about it first," said Chip Wall, who described her as "a fellow traveler. . . . We were liberals before we knew what liberals were."

One classmate, Jill Burton-Dascher, said Stanley Ann "was intellectually way more mature than we were and a little bit ahead of her time, in an off-center way."

The two Stanleys, though, were not soul mates. Stanley the father "was always welcoming to the kids, but he embarrassed Stanley because he tried too hard," Maxine Box said. The two would argue, Box said, and Madelyn usually mediated.

Susan Blake said Stanley's father was "always looking for a rise out of people," Blake said. "It seemed like every time her father opened his mouth, she would roll her eyes."

Full emergence in Hawaii

When the Mercer Island High School yearbooks began circulating in the spring of 1960, Stanley Ann's senior year, classmates scribbled best wishes to friends and remembered slumber parties, one mother's exceptionally good chocolate cake and thoughts on some goofy boys.

Dunham wrote to Maxine Box: "Remember me when you are old and gray. Love & Luck, Stanley." Seemingly out of the blue, her father had found a better opportunity -- another furniture store, this one in Hawaii. "He just couldn't settle," Box recalled.

"I remember she didn't want to go to Hawaii," she added.

That was only the first surprise. Stanley Ann began classes at the University of Hawaii in 1960, and shortly after that, Box received a letter saying that her friend had fallen in love with a grad student. He was black, from Kenya and named Obama.

About that same time, another letter crossed the Pacific, this one heading to Africa. It was from Barack Obama Sr. to his mother, Sarah Hussein Onyango Obama. Though the letter didn't go into great detail, it said he had met a young woman named Ann (not Stanley). There wasn't much on how they met or what the attraction was, but he announced their plans to wed.

The Dunhams weren't happy. Stanley Ann's prospective father-in-law was furious. He wrote the Dunhams "this long, nasty letter saying that he didn't approve of the marriage," Obama recounted his mother telling him in "Dreams." "He didn't want the Obama blood sullied by a white woman."

Parental objections didn't matter. For Stanley Ann, her new relationship with Barack Obama and weekend discussions seemed to be, in part, a logical extension of long coffeehouse sessions in Seattle and the teachings of Wichterman and Foubert. The forum now involved graduate students from the University of Hawaii. They spent weekends listening to jazz, drinking beer and debating politics and world affairs.

The self-assured and opinionated Obama spoke with a voice so deep that "he made James Earl Jones seem like a tenor," said Neil Abercrombie, a Democratic congressman from Hawaii who was part of those regular gatherings.

While Obama was impatient and energized, Stanley Ann, whom Abercrombie described as "the original feminist," was endlessly patient but quietly passionate in her arguments. She was the only woman in the group.

"I think she was attracted to his powerful personality," Abercrombie said, "and he was attracted to her beauty and her calmness."

Six months after they wed, another letter arrived in Kenya, announcing the birth of Barack Hussein Obama, born Aug. 4, 1961. Despite her husband's continued anger, Sarah Obama said in a recent interview, she "was so happy to have a grandchild in the U.S."

When the same news hit Mercer Island, it dumbfounded Stanley's classmates.

"I just couldn't imagine her life changing so quickly," said Box, thinking about her independent-minded friend who had disdained marriage and motherhood.

Although he didn't say it at the time, Abercrombie privately feared that the relationship would be short-lived. Obama was one of the most ambitious, self-focused men he had ever met. After Obama was accepted to study at Harvard, Stanley Ann disappeared from the University of Hawaii student gatherings, but she did not accompany her husband to Harvard. Abercrombie said he rarely saw her after that.

"I know he loved Ann," Abercrombie said, but "I think he didn't want the impediment of being responsible for a family. He expected great things of himself and he was going off to achieve them."

The marriage failed. Stanley Ann filed for divorce in 1964 and remarried two years later, when her son was 5. The senior Obama finished his work at Harvard and returned to Kenya, where he hoped to realize his big dreams of taking a place in the Kenyan government.

Years later, Abercrombie and another grad school friend looked up their old pal during a trip through Africa.

At that point, the senior Obama was a bitter man, according to the congressman, feeling that he had been denied due opportunities to influence the running of his country. "He was drinking too much; his frustration was apparent," Abercrombie said.

To Abercrombie's surprise, Obama never asked about his ex-wife or his son.

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ON VIDEO: Two Mercer Island High School classmates and a teacher share their memories of Stanley Ann Dunham, Sen. Obama's mother.

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Reference to Val Foubert & Jim Wichterman is here:

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/politics/chi-0703270151mar27,1,3372079.story?page=2&coll=chi-news-hed>

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