

Flash

# Obama's Young Mother Abroad



Friends and family of Stanley Ann Dunham

Stanley Ann Dunham at Borobudur in Indonesia, in the early 1970s.

By JANNY SCOTT

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The photograph showed the son, but my eye gravitated toward the mother. That first glimpse was surprising — the stout, pale-skinned woman in sturdy sandals, standing squarely a half-step ahead of the lithe, darker-skinned figure to her left. His elastic-band body bespoke discipline, even asceticism. Her form was well padded, territory ceded long ago to the pleasures of appetite and the forces of anatomical destiny. He had the studied casualness of a catalog model, in khakis, at home in the viewfinder. She met the camera head-on, dressed in hand-loomed textile dyed indigo, a silver earring half-hidden in the cascading curtain of her dark hair. She carried her chin a few degrees higher than most. His right hand rested on her shoulder, lightly. The photograph, taken on a Manhattan rooftop in August 1987 and e-mailed to me 20 years later, was a revelation and a puzzle. The man was Barack Obama at 26, the community organizer from Chicago on a visit to New York. The woman was Stanley Ann Dunham, his mother. It was impossible not to be struck by the similarities, and the dissimilarities, between them. It was impossible not to question the stereotype to which she had been expediently reduced: the white woman from Kansas.

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The president's mother has served as any of a number of useful oversimplifications. In the capsule version of Obama's life story, she is the white mother from

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### Milestones: The Life of Obama's Mother

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Friends and family of Stanley Ann Dunham Barack Obama with his mother in Hawaii.

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The Obama Presidential Campaign/AP Photo  
**PACIFIC RIM** Barack Obama and his grandfather, Stanley Armour Dunham in Hawaii.

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The Obama Presidential Campaign/AP Photo  
Obama, 9, with his stepfather, Lolo Soetoro, his mother, Ann, and his sister, Maya, in Indonesia in 1970.

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Kansas coupled alliteratively to the black father from Kenya. She is corn-fed, white-bread, whatever Kenya is not. In "Dreams From My Father," the memoir that helped power Obama's political ascent, she is the shy, small-town girl who falls head over heels for the brilliant, charismatic African who steals the show. In the next chapter, she is the naïve idealist, the innocent abroad. In Obama's presidential campaign, she was the struggling single mother, the food-stamp recipient, the victim of a health care system gone awry, pleading with her insurance company for coverage as her life slipped away. And in the fevered imaginings of supermarket tabloids and the Internet, she is the [atheist](#), the Marxist, the flower child, the mother who abandoned her son or duped the newspapers of Hawaii into printing a birth announcement for her Kenyan-born baby, on the off chance that he might want to be president someday.

The earthy figure in the photograph did not fit any of those, as I learned over the course of two and a half years of research, travel and nearly 200 interviews. To describe Dunham as a white woman from Kansas turns out to be about as illuminating as describing her son as a politician who likes golf. Intentionally or not, the label obscures an extraordinary story — of a girl with a boy's name who grew up in the years before the women's movement, the pill and the antiwar movement; who married an African at a time when nearly two dozen states still had laws against interracial marriage; who, at 24, moved to Jakarta with her son in the waning days of an anticommunist bloodbath in which hundreds of thousands of Indonesians were slaughtered; who lived more than half her adult life in a place barely known to most Americans, in the country with the largest Muslim population in the world; who spent years working in villages where a lone Western woman was a rarity; who immersed herself in the study of blacksmithing, a craft long practiced exclusively by men; who, as a working and mostly single mother, brought up two biracial children; who believed her son in particular had the potential to be great; who raised him to be, as he has put it jokingly, a combination of [Albert Einstein](#), [Mahatma Gandhi](#) and [Harry Belafonte](#); and then died at 52, never knowing who or what he would become.

Obama placed the ghost of his absent father at the center of his lyrical account of his life. At times, he has seemed to say more about the grandparents who helped raise him than about his mother. Yet she shaped him, to a degree Obama has seemed increasingly to acknowledge. In the preface to the 2004 edition of "Dreams From My Father," issued nine years after the first edition and nine years after



Obama for America/AP  
Photo

**HAWAII TIME** Barack Obama with his father at the Honolulu airport at Christmas in 1971.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Friends and family of Stanley Ann Dunham

Barack Obama with his mother at the Punahou School commencement in 1979.

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Dunham's death, Obama folded in a revealing admission: had he known his mother would not survive her illness, he 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.”

Dunham, for whom a letter in Jakarta from her son in the United States could raise her spirits for a full day, surely wondered about her place in his life. On rare occasions, she indicated as much — painfully, wistfully — to close friends. But she would not have been inclined to overstate her case. As she told him, with a dry humor that seems downright Kansan, “If nothing else, I gave you an interesting life.”

**Ann Dunham**, who jettisoned the name Stanley upon emerging from childhood, was just 17 years old in the fall of 1960 when she became pregnant with the child of a charismatic Kenyan named Barack Hussein Obama, a fellow student at the [University of Hawaii](#) who was more than six years her senior. She dropped out of school, married him and gave birth shortly before their union ended. In the aftermath, she met Lolo Soetoro, an amiable, easygoing, tennis-playing graduate student from the Indonesian island of Java. They married in 1964, after Ann's divorce came through, but their early life together was upended by forces beyond their control. On Sept. 30, 1965, six Indonesian army generals and one lieutenant were kidnapped and killed in Jakarta, in what the army characterized as an attempted coup planned by the Communist Party. Students studying abroad, including Lolo, whose studies were sponsored by the

government, were soon summoned home. A year later, in 1967, Ann graduated with a degree in anthropology, gathered up her 6-year-old child and moved to Indonesia to join her husband.

The four years that followed were formative for mother and son — and are a subject of curiosity and an object of speculation for many Americans today. These were years in which Ann lived closely with the young Obama, who at the time was called Barry; she impressed upon him her values and, consciously and unconsciously, shaped his emerging understanding of the world. She made choices about her own life too, setting an example that in some ways Obama would eventually embrace, while in other ways intentionally leaving it behind.

The white woman and her half-African son made quite a pair traveling in Indonesia together. Elizabeth Bryant, an American who lived in the city of Yogyakarta at the time, remembers a lunch held at another expatriate's house that Ann and Barry attended. Ann arrived in a long skirt made of Indonesian fabric — not, Bryant noticed, a look that other American women in Indonesia seemed to favor. Ann instructed Barry to shake hands, then to sit on the sofa and turn his attention to an English-language workbook she brought along. Ann, who had been in Indonesia for nearly four years, talked about whether to go back to Hawaii. “She said, ‘What would *you* do?’” Bryant recalled when I spoke to her nearly 40 years later. “I said, ‘I could live here as long as two years, then would go back to Hawaii.’ She said,

'Why?' I said it was hard living, it took a toll on your body, there were no doctors, it was not healthy. She didn't agree with me."

Over lunch, Barry, who was 9 at the time, sat at the dining table and listened intently but did not speak. When he asked to be excused, Ann directed him to ask the hostess for permission. Permission granted, he got down on the floor and played with Bryant's son, who was 13 months old. After lunch, the group took a walk, with Barry running ahead. A flock of Indonesian children began lobbing rocks in his direction. They ducked behind a wall and shouted racial epithets. He seemed unfazed, dancing around as though playing dodge ball "with unseen players," Bryant said. Ann did not react. Assuming she must not have understood the words, Bryant offered to intervene. "No, he's O.K.," Ann said. "He's used to it."

"We were floored that she'd bring a half-black child to Indonesia, knowing the disrespect they have for blacks," Bryant said. At the same time, she admired Ann for teaching her boy to be fearless. A child in Indonesia needed to be raised that way — for self-preservation, Bryant decided. Ann also seemed to be teaching Barry respect. He had all the politeness that Indonesian children displayed toward their parents. He seemed to be learning Indonesian ways.

"I think this is one reason he's so *halus*," Bryant said of the president, using the Indonesian adjective that means "polite, refined, or courteous," referring to qualities some see as distinctively Javanese. "He has the manners of Asians and the ways of Americans — being *halus*, being patient, calm, a good listener. If you're not a good listener in Indonesia, you'd better leave."

Indonesia was still in a state of shock when Ann arrived in 1967 for the first of three extended periods of residence that would eventually add up to the majority of her adult life. The details of the attempted coup and countercoup remain in dispute even today, as do the particulars of the carnage that followed. But it is known that neighbors turned on neighbors. According to Adrian Vickers, the author of "A History of Modern Indonesia," militias went door to door in villages, abducting suspects, raping women, even targeting children. "The best way to prove you were not a Communist was to join in the killings," Vickers writes. Bill Collier, a friend of Ann's who arrived in Indonesia in 1968 and spent 15 years doing social and economic surveys in villages, told me that researchers were told by people living near brackish waterways that they had been unable to eat the fish because of decaying corpses in the water. Many Indonesians chose never to speak about what had happened.

The Jakarta that greeted Ann Soetoro and her son was a tapestry of villages — low-rise and sprawling — interwoven with wooded areas, paddy fields and marshland. Narrow alleys disappeared into warrens of tile-roofed houses in the rambling urban hamlets called *kampungs*. Squatter colonies lined the canals, which served as public baths, laundry facilities and sewers, all in one. During the long rainy season from November through March, canals overflowed, saturating cardboard shanties and flooding much of the city. Residents traveled mostly on foot or by bicycle or bicycle-propelled rickshaws called *becaks*. Power outages were common. There were so few working phones that it was said that half the cars on the streets were ferrying messages from one office to the next. "Secretaries would spend hours just dialing and redialing phone numbers trying to get through," Halimah Brugger, an American who moved there in 1968, told me. Westerners were rare, black people even rarer. Western women got a lot of attention. "I remember creating quite a sensation just being pedaled down the street in a *becak*, wearing a short skirt," Brugger said. Letters from the United States took weeks to reach their destination. Foreigners endured all manner of gastrointestinal upsets. Deworming was de rigueur.

Yet the city had a magical charm. People who were children in Jakarta in that period, including Barack Obama, reminisce about the sound of the Muslim call to prayer in the days before public-address systems, and the signature sounds called out by street vendors wheeling their carts through the *kampungs*. Tea was still served on the veranda of the old Hotel des Indes. Ceiling fans turned languidly in the midafternoon heat, and kerosene lamps flickered in the houses lining the narrow alleys at night. For anyone of no interest to government security forces, life was simple. For a foreigner, it was possible to arrive in Indonesia in 1967 largely ignorant of the horror of just two years before. "I was quite naïve about the whole thing," Brugger said. "It was all over then. I never felt the slightest bit endangered." Years later, many people would look back on the late 1960s and early 1970s as a honeymoon period, Vickers writes. Restrictions on the press eased, a youth culture flowered, literary and cultural life thrived. It was, some later commented, Indonesia's Prague Spring.

When Ann arrived, Lolo was in the army. His salary was low. On her first night in Indonesia, Ann complained later to a colleague, Lolo served her white rice and *dendeng celeng* — dried, jerked wild boar, which Indonesians hunted in the forests when food was scarce. But when Lolo completed his military service, his brother-in-law Trisulo used his contacts as a vice president at the Indonesian [oil](#) company Pertamina to help Lolo get a job in the Jakarta office of the Union Oil Company of California. By the early 1970s, Lolo and Ann had moved into a rented house in Matraman, a middle-class area of Jakarta. The house was a *pavilyun*, an annex on the grounds of a bigger main house. It had three bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, a library and a terrace. Like the households of other Indonesians who could afford it, it had a sizable domestic staff. Two female servants shared a bedroom; two men — a cook and a houseboy — slept mostly on the floor of the house or in the garden. The staff freed Ann from domestic obligations to a degree that would have been almost impossible in the United States. There were people to clean the house, prepare meals, buy groceries and look after her children — enabling her to work, pursue her interests and come and go as she wanted. The domestic staff made it possible, too, for Ann and Lolo to cultivate their own professional and social circles, which did not necessarily overlap.

By January 1968, Ann had gone to work as the assistant to the American director of Lembaga Indonesia-Amerika, a binational organization financed by the United States Information Service and housed at the U.S. [Agency for International Development](#). She supervised a small group of Indonesians who taught English classes for Indonesian government employees and businessmen being sent by U.S.A.I.D. to the United States for graduate studies. It would be an understatement to say she disliked the job. "I worked at the U.S. Embassy in Djakarta for 2 horrible years," she wrote to a friend. As Obama describes the job in his memoir, "The Indonesian businessmen weren't much interested in the niceties of the English language, and several made passes at her." Occasionally, she took Barry to work. Joseph Sigit, an Indonesian who worked as the office manager at the time, told me, "Our staff here sometimes made a joke of him because he looked different — the color of his skin."

Joked with him — or about him? I asked.

"With and about him," Sigit said, with no evident embarrassment.

Two years later, at 27, Ann was hired to start an English-language business-communications department in one of the few private nonprofit management-training schools in the country. The school, called the Institute for Management Education and Development, was started several years earlier by a Dutch Jesuit

priest with the intention of helping to build an Indonesian elite. Ann trained the teachers, developed the curriculum and taught top executives. In return, she received not just a paycheck but also a share of the revenue from the program. She also became a popular teacher. Ann's classes "could be a riot of laughter from beginning to end. She had a great sense of humor," said Leonard Kibble, who taught part time at the institute in the early 1970s. Some of the laughter involved Ann's still-incomplete mastery of the Indonesian language. In one slip that Kibble said Ann delighted in recounting, she tried to tell a student that he would "get a promotion" if he learned English. Instead of using the phrase *naik pangkat*, she said *naik pantat*. The word *naik* means to "go up, rise, or mount"; *pangkat* means "rank" or "position." *Pantat* means "buttocks."

That same year, on Aug. 15, 1970, shortly after Barry's ninth birthday and during what would turn out to be the only visit by her mother, [Madelyn Dunham](#), to Indonesia, Ann gave birth to Maya Cassandra Soetoro at Saint Carolus Hospital, a Catholic hospital thought by Westerners at that time to be the best in Jakarta. When Halimah Brugger gave birth in the same hospital two years later, she told me, the doctor delivered her baby without the luxury of a stethoscope, gloves or gown. "When the baby was born, the doctor asked my husband for his handkerchief," Brugger said. "Then she stuffed it in my mouth and gave me 11 stitches without any anesthesia." Ann tried out three different names for her new daughter, all of them Sanskrit, before settling on Maya Cassandra. The name was important to Ann, Maya told me; she wanted "beautiful names." Stanley, the name Ann felt burdened with as a child, was not on the list.

**In Indonesia**, Ann was a striking figure who did not go unnoticed. "Maybe just her presence — the way she carried herself," said Halimah Bellows, whom Ann hired in the spring of 1971. She dressed simply, with little or no makeup, and wore her hair long, held back by a headband. By Javanese standards, she was, as Felina Pramono, an Indonesian colleague, put it, "a bit sturdy for a woman." She had strong opinions — and rarely softened them to please others.

"She used to tear me apart," says Kay Ikranagara, one of Ann's closest friends, in a tone that sounded almost fond. Ann told her she needed to be bolder and stronger. She made fun of her inadequacy in the kitchen. She told her she should give her housekeeper explicit instructions, not simply let her do whatever she wanted. "With everybody she was like that: she would tell them what was wrong with them," Ikranagara said. Family members were not spared. "She was very scathing about the traditional Indonesian wife role," Ikranagara recalled. "She would tell Maya not to be such a wimp. She didn't like this passive Indonesian female caricature. She would tell me not to fall into that."

Ikranagara was the daughter of a development economist from the [University of California](#) who taught at the University of Indonesia in the late 1950s. She lived in Jakarta as a teenager, studied anthropology and linguistics in the 1960s at Berkeley and then returned to Jakarta, where she met her husband. She met Ann while teaching part time at the management school and writing her dissertation in linguistics. They had a lot in common: Indonesian husbands, degrees in anthropology, babies born in the same month, opinions shaped by the 1960s. They were less conscious than others of the boundaries between cultures, Ikranagara told me, and they rejected what they saw as the previous generation's hypocrisy on the subject of race. "We had all the same attitudes," she said. "When we met people who worked for the oil companies or the embassy, they belonged to a different culture than Ann and I. We felt they didn't mix with Indonesians, they were part of an insular American culture." Servants seemed to be the only Indonesians those Americans knew.

But by the early 1970s, Lolo's new job had plunged him deeply into the oil-company culture. Foreign businesses in Indonesia were required to hire and train Indonesian partners. The exercise struck some people as a sham: companies would hire an Indonesian director, pay him well and give him little or nothing to do. Trisulo, Lolo's brother-in-law, told me he did not recall the exact nature of Lolo's job with Union Oil. His son, Sonny Trisulo, said it may have been "government relations." Whatever it was, Lolo's job included socializing with oil-company executives and their wives. He joined the Indonesian Petroleum Club, a private watering hole in Central Jakarta for oil-company people and their families, which offered swimming, tennis and dining. Ann was expected to socialize, too. Any failure to do so reflected badly on Lolo. "It's the society that asks it," Ikranagara said. "Your husband is supposed to show up at social functions with you at his side, dressed in a *kain* and *kebaya*," a costume consisting of a traditional, tightly fitted, long-sleeved blouse and a length of unstitched cloth wound around the lower part of the body. "You're supposed to sit with the women and talk about your children and your servants."

Ann begged off. "She didn't understand these folks — the idea of living an expatriate life that was so completely divorced from the world around you, that involves hiding yourself away in these protective cells of existence," Maya said. "That was peculiar to her, and she was bored by it." Ann complained to her friend Bill Collier that all those middle-aged white Americans talked about inane things. Lolo, she told Collier, "was becoming more American all the time." Occasionally, the young Obama would overhear Lolo and Ann arguing in their bedroom about Ann's refusal to attend his oil-company dinners, at which, he writes in "Dreams From My Father," "American businessmen from Texas and Louisiana would slap Lolo's back and boast about the palms they had greased to obtain the new offshore-drilling rights, while their wives complained to my mother about the quality of Indonesian help. He would ask her how it would look for him to go alone and remind her that these were her own people, and my mother's voice would rise to almost a shout.

"They are *not* my people."

The relationship between Ann and Lolo appears to have begun deteriorating even before Lolo took the oil-company job. As Obama describes it, something happened between them when Lolo was called back to Jakarta during the time of unrest in Indonesia and they spent a year apart. In Hawaii, Lolo was full of life, regaling Ann with stories from his childhood, confiding his plans to return to his country and teach at the university. Now he barely spoke to her. Some nights, he would sleep with a pistol under his pillow; other nights, she would hear him "wandering through the house with a bottle of imported whiskey, nursing his secrets." Ann's loneliness was a constant, Obama writes, "like a shortness of breath."

Ann had pieced together some of what happened in Indonesia in 1965 and afterward from fragmentary information that people let slip. Her new Indonesian friends talked to her about corruption in government agencies, police and military shakedowns, the power of the president's entourage. Lolo would not talk about any of it. According to Obama, a cousin of Lolo's finally explained to Ann what happened when her husband returned from Hawaii. Upon arriving in Jakarta, he was taken away for questioning and told he had been conscripted and would be sent to the jungles of New Guinea for a year. It could have been worse: students returning from Soviet-bloc countries were jailed or even vanished. Obama writes that Ann concluded that "power had taken Lolo and yanked him back into line just when he thought he'd escaped, making him feel its weight, letting him know that his life wasn't his own." In response, Lolo made his peace with power, "learned the wisdom of forgetting; just as his brother-in-law had done, making millions as a high official in the national oil company."

Lolo had disappointed Ann, but her refusal to conform to his culture's expectations apparently angered him as well. "She didn't know, as little I knew, how Indonesian men change when suddenly their family is around," Renske Heringa, a Dutch anthropologist and close friend of Ann's in the 1980s who herself married a man who was half Indonesian, told me. "And how Indonesian men like women to be easy and open abroad, but when you get to Indonesia, the parents are there, the family is there, you have to behave. You have to be the little wife. As a wife, you were not supposed to make yourself visible besides being beautiful. By the time I knew Ann, she was a hefty woman. She didn't care about getting dressed, wearing jewelry, the way Indonesian women do. That was not her style. He expected her to do it. That is one reason she didn't stick it out. She absolutely refused to. I understand why he couldn't accept it."

One morning in January 2009, at the offices of the management school for which Ann had worked, I met a man in his late 50s named Saman. Like some Javanese, he went by a single name. Speaking in Bahasa Indonesia, with Ann's former assistant Felina Pramono translating, he told me that he worked as a houseboy for Lolo and Ann in the early 1970s. One of seven children from a family of farmers, Saman moved to Jakarta as a teenager to find work. When he worked for Ann and Lolo, his duties included gardening; taking care of a pet turtle, dog, rabbit and bird; and taking Barry to school by bicycle or *becak*. Ann and Lolo paid Saman well and treated all four members of the household staff equally, he said. He remembered Lolo as stern and Ann as kindhearted.

Ann would finish teaching at 9 in the evening and sometimes not return home until midnight, Saman said. She seemed barely to sleep. She would stay up, typing and correcting Barry's homework, then get up again before dawn. On one occasion, Saman said: "She got home late with a student, but the student didn't see her home properly. So he dropped her near the house, and Soetoro got very mad because of that." An argument ensued, which Saman overheard. "He said: 'I've warned you many times. Why are you still doing this?'" Saman recalled. Whether Lolo's worry was infidelity or simply what others might think is unclear from Saman's story. After the argument, he said, Ann appeared in the house with a towel pressed to her face and blood running from her nose. It is difficult to know what to make of the nearly 40-year-old recollection. No one else I interviewed suggested there was ever violence between Ann and Lolo, a man many people described as patient and sweet-tempered.

When one fellow teacher, an Indonesian man whom Ann befriended, asked about her husband in 1968 or 1969, she told him grimly: "I'm never asked. I'm told." Reflecting on her marriage some years later, Ann told another Indonesian friend, Yang Suwan, resignedly: "Don't you know that you don't argue and you don't discuss with a Javanese person? Because problems don't exist with Javanese people. Time will solve problems."

**With her children**, Ann made a point of being more physically affectionate than her mother had been with her, she told one friend. She was cuddly and would say, "I love you," according to Maya, a hundred times a day. She was playful — making pottery, weaving decorations, doing art projects that stretched across the room. "I think that we benefited a great deal from her focus when we were with her, when she was beside us," Maya told me. "So that made the absences hurt a little less." Where her children were involved, Ann was easily moved to tears, even occasionally when speaking about them to friends. She preferred humor to harping, but she was exacting about the things she believed mattered most. Richard Hook, who worked with Ann in Jakarta in the late 1980s and early 1990s, said she told him that she worked to instill ideas about public service in her son. She wanted Barry to have a

sense of obligation, to give something back. She wanted him to start off, Hook said, with the attitudes and values she had taken years to learn.

“If you want to grow into a human being,” Obama remembers her saying, “you’re going to need some values.” When necessary, Ann was, according to two accounts, not unwilling to reinforce her message. “She talked about disciplining Barry, including spanking him for things where he richly deserved a spanking,” said Don Johnston, who worked with Ann in the early 1990s, sometimes traveling with her in Indonesia and living in the same house. Saman said that when Barry failed to finish homework sent from Hawaii by his grandmother, Ann “would call him into his room and would spank him with his father’s military belt.” President Obama, through a spokeswoman, said his mother never resorted to physical discipline.

One evening in the house in Matraman, Saman said, he and Barry were preparing to go to sleep. They often slept in the same place — sometimes in the bunk bed in Barry’s room, sometimes on the dining-room floor or in the garden. On this occasion, Barry, who was 8 or 9 at the time, asked Saman to turn out the light. When Saman did not do it, he said, Barry hit him in the chest. When he did not react, Barry hit him harder, and Saman struck him back. Barry began to cry loudly, attracting Ann’s attention. According to Saman, Ann did not respond. She seemed to realize that Barry had been in the wrong. Otherwise, Saman would not have struck him.

“We were not permitted to be rude, we were not permitted to be mean, we were not permitted to be arrogant,” Maya told me. “We had to have a certain humility and broad-mindedness. We had to study. . . . If we said something unkind about someone, she would try to talk about their point of view. Or, ‘How would you feel?’ Sort of compelling us ever toward empathy and those kinds of things and not allowing us to be selfish. That was constant, steady, daily.”

It was clear to many that Ann believed Barry, in particular, was unusually gifted. She would boast about his brains, his achievements, how brave he was. Benji Bennington, a friend of Ann’s from Hawaii, told me, “Sometimes when she talked about Barack, she’d say, ‘Well, my son is so bright, he can do anything he ever wants in the world, even be president of the United States.’ I remember her saying that.” Samardal Manan, who taught with Ann in Jakarta, remembered Ann saying something similar — that Barry could be, or perhaps wanted to be, the first black president.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Lolo asked Barry one evening, according to Saman.

“Oh, prime minister,” Barry answered.

What mattered as much as anything to Ann, as a parent, was her children’s education. But that was not simple. Indonesian schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s were inadequate; there were not enough of them, the government controlled the curriculum, teachers were poorly trained. Westerners sent their children to the Jakarta International School, but it was expensive and difficult to get into. Obama attended two Indonesian schools, one Catholic and one Muslim. The experience cannot have failed to have left a mark. The Javanese, especially the Central Javanese, place an enormous emphasis on self-control. Even to sneeze was to exhibit an untoward lack of self-control, said Michael Dove, who got to know Ann when they were both anthropologists working in Java in the 1980s. “You demonstrate an inner strength by not betraying emotion, not speaking loudly, not moving jerkily,” he said. Self-control is inculcated through a culture of teasing, Kay Ikranagara told me. Her husband, known only as Ikranagara, said, “People tease

about skin color all the time." If a child allows the teasing to bother him, he is teased more. If he ignores it, it stops. "Our ambassador said this was where Barack learned to be cool," Kay told me. "If you get mad and react, you lose. If you learn to laugh and take it without any reaction, you win."

With time, Ann's thinking about Barack's future changed. "She had always encouraged my rapid acculturation in Indonesia," he wrote in his memoir. "It had made me relatively self-sufficient, undemanding on a tight budget, and extremely well mannered when compared with other American children. She had taught me to disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that too often characterized Americans abroad. But she now had learned, just as Lolo had learned, the chasm that separated the life chances of an American from those of an Indonesian. She knew which side of the divide she wanted her child to be on. I was an American, she decided, and my true life lay elsewhere."

In early 1971, Ann told Barry that he would be returning to Hawaii. He would live with his grandparents in Honolulu and attend Punahou School, a respected prep school within walking distance of the Dunhams' apartment. "She said that she and Maya would be joining me in Hawaii very soon — a year, tops — and that she'd try to make it there for Christmas," he wrote in "Dreams From My Father." Ann's uncle Charles Payne told me he suspected that her mother, Madelyn, played a part in the decision. "Madelyn always had a great concern about Barack getting a good education," he said. "I think that was her defense against his racial mixture — that education was the solution to whatever problems that would bring."

As Obama later described his send-off, an Indonesian co-pilot who was a friend of Ann's escorted him to the plane "as she and Lolo and my new sister, Maya, stood by at the gate."

Ann uprooted Barry, at age 6, and transplanted him to Jakarta. Now she was uprooting him again, at barely 10, and sending him back, alone. She would follow him to Hawaii only to leave him again, less than three years later.

**When we spoke** last July, Obama recalled those serial displacements. "I think that was harder on a 10-year-old boy than he'd care to admit at the time," Obama said, sitting in a chair in the Oval Office and speaking about his mother with a mix of affection and critical distance. "When we were separated again during high school, at that point I was old enough to say, 'This is my choice, my decision.' But being a parent now and looking back at that, I could see — you know what? — that would be hard on a kid."

He spoke about his mother with fondness, humor and a degree of candor that I had not expected. There was also in his tone at times a hint of gentle forbearance. Perhaps it was the tone of someone whose patience had been tested, by a person he loved, to the point where he had stepped back to a safer distance. Or perhaps it was the knowingness of a grown child seeing his parent as irredeemably human.

"She was a very strong person in her own way," Obama said, when I asked about Ann's limitations as a mother. "Resilient, able to bounce back from setbacks, persistent — the fact that she ended up finishing her dissertation. But despite all those strengths, she was not a well-organized person. And that disorganization, you know, spilled over. Had it not been for my grandparents, I think, providing some sort of safety net financially, being able to take me and my sister on at certain spots, I think my mother would have had to make some different decisions. And I think that sometimes she took for granted that, 'Well, it'll all work out, and it'll be fine.' But the fact is, it might not always have been fine, had it not been for my grandmother. . . . Had she not been there to provide that floor, I think our young

lives could have been much more chaotic than they were.”

But he did not, he said, hold his mother's choices against her. Part of being an adult is seeing your parents “as people who have their own strengths, weaknesses, quirks, longings.” He did not believe, he said, that parents served their children well by being unhappy. If his mother had cramped her spirit, it would not have given him a happier childhood. As it was, she gave him the single most important gift a parent can give — “a sense of unconditional love that was big enough that, with all the surface disturbances of our lives, it sustained me, entirely.”

*Janny Scott (jannyscott@gmail.com), a reporter for The New York Times, went on leave in 2008 to write “A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother,” from which her article in this issue is adapted. Editor: Lauren Kern (l.kern-MagGroup@nytimes.com).*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: April 24, 2011**

An article on Page 30, about President Obama’s mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, misstates the title of the book from which the article is adapted. It is “A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother,” not “A Single Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother.”

A version of this article appeared in print on April 24, 2011, on page MM30 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: THE YOUNG MOTHER ABROAD.

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