



"I'm an ardent Republican, but I too was enthralled by the vivid sincerity, humility, and passion that Senator Obama radiates when he speaks. I was honored to meet him. I've got this picture of myself with the Senator hanging up on my wall."

OBAMA

Encourages Students to "Dream Big"

One thing that you might want to know about United States Senator Barack Obama is that he wasn't always a great student. He reminded Punahou seniors during his visit to campus on December 17, 2004 that he is, in fact, an example of a young man who did not reach his full promise until after he left Punahou.

Two decades later, an electrifying keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention and a subsequent landslide victory in last November's elections for an Illinois Senate seat launched Obama into the national spotlight. He is the only U.S. senator of African-American descent and only the third since Reconstruction.

Obama's triumph is the crowning achievement of an impressive career in public service for the young legislator. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Columbia University in 1983 and later received a law degree from Harvard Law School, where he served as the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review. He was named senior lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School in 1992 and elected to the Illinois state senate in 1997. Obama also chairs the \$50 million Annenberg Challenge, a foundation dedicated to reforming public schools.

Not surprisingly, over 400 students, administrators and faculty packed Thurston Chapel to see and hear the charismatic Punahou alumnus with the winning smile. More students listened through the chapel doors and waited for a chance to meet Obama. Fourteen students representing grades 6-12, selected to pose questions to the senator, lined the front row pews during the informal session.

In his opening remarks, Obama recognized his former teachers and coaches who supported him during his school years. He lightheartedly recalled his first public speaking opportunity as a fifth grader in a chapel Christmas celebration that

helped him to establish "a direct line" from Punahou to the Democratic National Convention, drawing laughter from the crowd. He spoke of the challenge in coming to Punahou as a 10-year-old, trying to figure out how to fit in.

"There was something about this school that embraced me, gave me support and encouragement, and allowed me to grow and prosper. I am extraordinarily grateful." He specifically cited the focus at Punahou in "instilling values," recalling his eighth grade ethics class in which was required to think about basic human values. These discussions, he said, taught him and his classmates to create an "infrastructure" upon which they could build as they progressed throughout their lives.

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The engaging senator told his young audience that the important things are not always what they learn in class, but how they negotiate their lives and confront what they feel is right. He also reminded them that "to whom much is given much is expected" and of the importance of becoming lifelong learners. "Your task is to recognize that you are extraordinarily



Hundreds of students, faculty and staff filled Thurston Chapel to welcome U.S. Senator Barack Obama '79, who returned to campus to speak with students on December 17, 2004.

privileged, and that means that you have to take some responsibility in making this world a better place."

Student questions touched on politics, public service and personal satisfaction. The opening question asked the senator to comment on the difference between his vision of one America and reference by John Edwards, the recent Democratic candidate for vice president, to "two Americas." Obama explained that one is the ideal of what America

should be while the other represents the reality which has not always matched the ideal. He spoke of the consistent efforts throughout American history to narrow the gap between the ideal and the reality and noted that the "value of the ideal is to know what it is you are shooting for."

When asked about the sacrifices and satisfactions of a life in public service, Senator Obama said that in growing up he came to realize that the things "that are most important

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“Dream Big”



“When Senator Barack Obama spoke, I really started thinking about pursuing public service. Being involved in the Luke Center helps with that, but Barack Obama helped me realize that public service is something everyone can make a big difference in. I want to make a difference and I know that anyone can if they put their mind to it.”

“Senator Obama served as a symbol of achievement. While he talked, all I thought was, he has done so much and now he is passing on his knowledge to better our generation.”

“Meeting Barack Obama was the opportunity of a lifetime. His insightful and guiding words made a lasting impression and were truly inspirational. He taught me to dream big, as dreams are the intangible foundations upon which futures are built.”

“Barack Obama is the perfect role model for Punahou students because he’s a prime example that we can accomplish anything if we put our all into it, even if the odds are against us.”

in life had to do not just with me thinking about me but with me thinking about the world outside of me. Most of us aren’t significant by ourselves; most of us gain significance only because we are involved in some larger project...It is hard to find your individual potential or sense of self-worth unless you are also concerned about the collective potential and self-worth of others.”

Quoting from the senator’s convention address, “Hope, in the face of difficulty was...God’s greatest gift to us,” a student asked where Obama found hope and how it inspired his life. His response touched on his own religious faith that was grounded in basic human knowledge of what is good. “There

is something in the human spirit that can’t be conquered. It is celebrated in our religious faith but also through our art, through our music and through our writing.”

In response to other questions, the senator reflected on balancing his aspirations and his service with time for his family and to tend to himself, keeping healthy and fit and finding time to read and learn new things. He encouraged students to try and cultivate a sense of lifelong learning because “there is so much out there that you can be curious about and learn about.”

The final question: “If you had one piece of advice for students, what would it be?” “Dream big dreams” is my best advice, the senator offered. People usually sell themselves short, especially in this culture...When ambitions are all geared towards material goods and money, I think it displays a poverty of ambition. The world is big out there and everybody here could be doing so much in whatever field is interesting to you.

“If you’re into medicine, your dream should be how to cure AIDS or cancer; if you’re interested in the law, you should aim for the Supreme Court; if you’re into music, you should want to have hit #1 on the Billboard charts or write a

symphony. The world offers so many opportunities, and I think all of you have so much potential and so much talent; it’s just a matter of digging deep. Once you have dreamed those big dreams, you’ll have to work hard to achieve them. There’s nothing wrong with hard work.”

President Jim Scott articulated well the feeling that pervades the Punahou community about Obama’s success. “As a son of Punahou, Senator Obama has become a source of genuine pride for his former Punahou schoolmates and teachers,” said Dr. Scott. “He is also inspiring a new generation of young people – through his noble and articulate vision and through his life of public service.”