School Choice
Helped Launch Barack Obama’s Success

The people have spoken. After overcoming unbelievable odds, Hawaii-born and raised Barack Obama will be the next president of the United States, and the first person of color to hold that position — a historic first, and a gratifying one to all those, whatever their political persuasion, who believe in this nation’s promise of equal opportunity for all.

President-elect Obama and our nation face some awesome challenges: the economy, two armed conflicts, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, energy independence, health care, taxes, ballooning entitlements, global warming, immigration, trade, and education are all competing for resources and attention. I wish us all well!

This seems like an appropriate moment to share a couple of “small world” personal links with Barack Obama and his family and use them to point out the value of choice in education.

Barack Obama’s links to Hawaii are many and deep. He was born August 4, 1961, at Kapi’olani Medical Center in Honolulu. His father was a Kenyan who had come here to study at the University of Hawaii. His mother, Ann Dunham, was a Kansas-born U.H. student whose parents lived in Honolulu. After his parents’ 1963 divorce, he spent several years in Indonesia with his mother and new stepfather before returning to Hawaii in 1971 at age 10 to live with his maternal grandparents in Honolulu. He enrolled in Punahou School, a private K-12 institution near Waikiki, founded by missionaries in 1841.

I knew his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, who sadly passed away just two days before the election. Madelyn was a vice president at the Bank of Hawaii. She was a very competent, accurate, and no-nonsense woman who handled several escrow closings on real estate transactions with which I was involved. No matter how complicated the deal was, I always knew that if Madelyn handled the escrow details, everything would be in order.

Madelyn’s boss was the bank’s CEO, Frank Manaut, who served with me as a trustee of Punahou School. It seems likely that Madelyn’s connection with Frank played a role in Barack’s enrollment at Punahou with a scholarship.

At Punahou, Barack had the good fortune to be assigned to the fifth-grade class of a marvelous teacher named Mabel Hefty. My wife Linda, a former Punahou elementary school teacher, knew her well. She recalls that Mabel was an exceptional educator and human being who knew how to combine just the right amount of enthusiasm, laughter, love, high expectations, and discipline to get the most out of each and every student.

Mabel made a big difference in the life of my son, Dr. Chuck Kelley (Punahou ‘76), when he was in her class a few years before Barack.

Another well-known figure in Hawaii, Hokule’a navigator and Kamehameha Schools trustee Nainoa Thompson (Punahou ’72), also credits Mabel Hefty with giving him confidence in school and heading him in the right direction.

Mabel had a special interest in the people of Africa. She went to Kenya several times during her summers and on her sabbatical leave to teach in the public schools of Nanyuki, a small village near Mt. Kenya. There, the classrooms were often open spaces under a thatched roof with a dirt floor and sparse, if any, furniture, textbooks, or supplies. Linda and I helped Mabel by shipping some of Punahou’s discarded textbooks and supplies to the schools in advance of her teaching visits. We also visited the schools with Mabel when she accompanied my family, Linda, and me on a photographic safari in East Africa in 1978.

I feel sure that Mabel’s knowledge and understanding of Kenya was a factor in how she approached “Barry” Obama, as he was called during his Punahou days. He was one of a very few who were admitted to the fifth grade that year, and he was probably considered an “outsider.” Most of the students in his class had started together either in kindergarten or first grade and had already established close friendships. And although his classmates represented a variety of races or often were hapa: a mixture of races, a look at his class photo reveals that Obama’s skin and hair were, indeed, somewhat different from everyone else’s.

Writing in the Punahou Bulletin, Carlyn Tani described Obama’s first days in his new school: “Teacher Mabel Hefty played an important role in buffering the way for her new pupil. She had just completed a sabbatical teaching in Kenya and sought to nurture Obama’s interest in his father’s homeland. She shared her collection of Kenyan art with her students; she would sometimes pull Barry aside after class and tell him stories about her experiences in Kenya.

“That December, Barack’s father returned for a month-long visit and was invited by Mabel to address Barack’s class. A commanding figure, the elder Obama spoke in mesmerizing terms of Luo tribal customs and the country’s struggle against British colonial rule. ‘And he told us of Kenya’s struggle to be free,’ Obama writes (in his autobiography Dreams From My Father), ‘... How many had been enslaved only because of the color of their skin, just as they had in America; but that Kenyans, like all of us in the room, longed to be free and develop themselves through hard work and sacrifice.’”
It is not surprising, after he became a presidential candidate in 2007, that when asked on national television to name his favorite teacher, Obama chose Mabel Hefty, citing her power to make “every single child feel special.”

Since then, Punahou School has been deluged with requests for information about Obama’s student days. The office of the school’s president has told me one person is assigned almost full time to answer those inquiries.

That led Punahou to search for old photos, and one day they called Dr. Chuck Kelley and said, “You were once the photographer for The Oahuan (the school’s yearbook). Is there any possibility you have some old prints or negatives around that include Barack Obama?” Chuck looked through a number of stored boxes, and sure enough, he did have a negative containing Obama’s 9th grade class photo. He donated the negative to the school for its records.

To me, the lesson here is that one of the numerous factors in Obama’s phenomenal path to success was that his family had a choice in where he went to school. Through the generosity of many donors, scholarship funds were available so he could attend an educational institution that matched his needs and challenged him in many constructive ways.

Most American families do not have a choice like that, and their children have no alternative to public schools that far too often fail to offer each child the environment and challenge they need to begin achieving their potential.

In fact, according to a 2001 report by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm), the public high school graduation rate in the United States was only 71 percent – and a shocking 56 percent for African-American students and 54 percent for Latino students. In some places it’s even lower - in Detroit, just one out of four students, 25 percent, graduate! Obviously, America’s public school system is failing, and minority students are the primary victims of that failure. No wonder our country is falling behind most other developed nations in educational achievement.

The expansion of charter schools and giving families tuition vouchers to attend any school they choose, as the government did at the college level with the post-World War II GI Bill (and continues today with veterans’ benefits), is one way to provide families more choices and, hopefully, better outcomes. Unfortunately, vouchers are strongly opposed by the National Education Association and many other unions that were major contributors to Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

Obama’s family was wise to choose a private school for him with a graduation rate near 100 percent. If he will now support charter schools and vouchers, so other working families could enjoy the benefits of school choice as he did, it would certainly be “Change We Need.”

To President-elect Obama, congratulations on your election as the 44th president of the United States. Please accept our condolences on the loss of your grandmother. Our nation has a lot of hope that your leadership will make the positive difference this world greatly needs. “Yes you can!”

And please know that our ‘ohana in Hawaii and across the Pacific will be delighted to welcome you and your staff anytime!