From the Green Lounge to the White House

By Robin I. Mordfin
When Barack Obama arrived at the Law School in 1991, faculty and students alike sensed that he had a bright future ahead of him. As the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review, he was clearly an accomplished scholar with a fine mind and his choice of careers. And once he began teaching, his strong oratorical skills and his ability to communicate complex ideas made his political ambitions appear credible.

Craig Cunningham, ’93, one of the President’s first students and a supporter of his teacher’s political ambitions, felt that Obama was brilliant, talented, and had the potential to be a great leader. But Cunningham was also concerned about Obama’s political future.

“I did expect him to run for office, because I would hang around after class and we would talk about the state senate,” Cunningham explains. “But after he lost the congressional race to Bobby Rush I thought he was moving too fast, that he should slow down and not run for a different office for a while because he was trying to do too much at one time. And Chicago politics were not going to allow him to do that. I was worried. And I was really surprised when he told me he was going to run for U.S. Senate.”

Douglas Baird, the Harry A. Bigelow Distinguished Service Professor of Law and former Dean, shared Cunningham’s concern that winning the seat was a long shot for Obama.

“I remember having a cup of coffee with him when he said he was thinking of running for the U.S. Senate, and I looked at him straight in the eye and said, ‘Don’t do it, you’re not going to win.’”

The future President came to the attention of the Law School when Michael McConnell, ’79, a professor at the Law School at the time who is now a federal judge on the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, told then-Dean Baird about an impressive editor at the Harvard Law Review who was doing an excellent job editing McConnell’s submission. Baird reached out to Obama and asked him about teaching. Having already made plans to write a book on voting rights after graduation, Obama refused the offer. So Baird took a different approach and offered him a Law and Government Fellowship, which would allow him to work on his book and would perhaps lead him to develop an interest in teaching.

Obama accepted the offer and began the fellowship in the fall of 1991. At that time, he also practiced civil rights, voting rights, and employment law as well as real-estate transactions and corporate law as an attorney with Miner, Barnhill & Galland, a position he held until his election to the U.S. Senate in 2005.

Though the intended voting rights book ultimately shifted focus and became Dreams from My Father, Baird’s plans for moving Obama into the classroom played out as expected. By 1993, Obama was teaching Current Issues in Racism and the Law—a class he designed—and added Constitutional Law III in 1996.

“In Con Law III we study equal process and due process. He was incredibly charismatic, funny, really willing to listen to student viewpoints—which I thought was very special at Chicago,” says Elysia Solomon, ’99. “There were so many diverse views in the class and people didn’t feel insecure about voicing their opinions. I thought that he did a really good job of balancing viewpoints.”

“When I walked into class the first day I remember that we—meaning the students I knew—thought we were going to get a very left-leaning perspective on the law,” explains Jesse Ruiz, ’95. “We assumed that because he was a minority professor in a class he designed. But he was very middle-of-the-road. In his class we were very cognizant that we were dealing with a difficult topic, but what we really got out of that class was that he taught us to think like lawyers about those hard topics even when we had issues about those topics.”

Over time, Obama developed a reputation for teaching from a nonbiased point of view. He was also noted for widening the legal views of his students.

“I liked that he included both jurisprudence and real politics in the class discussions,” says Dan Johnson-Weinberger, ’00. “Lots of classes in law school tend to be judge-centric and he had as much a focus on the legislative branch as the judicial branch. That was refreshing.”

From 1992 to 1996, Obama was classified as a lecturer. In 1996, after he was elected to the state senate, he became a Senior Lecturer, a title customarily assigned to judges and others with “day jobs” who teach at the school.

While the comments the administration heard from students about Obama were that he had a marvelous intellectual
openness and an ability to explore ideas in the classroom, he was not the subject of enormous student discussion.

“Most students were not that focused on Barack during the years I was there,” says Joe Khan, ’00. “For example, every year the professors would donate their time or belongings to the law school charity auction. Professor Obama’s donation was to let two students spend the day with him in Springfield, where he’d show them around the state senate and introduce them to the other senators. People now raise thousands of dollars to be in a room with the man, but my friend and I won the bid for a few hundred bucks.”

“I knew he was ambitious, but at that point in time at the Law School there were so many people on the faculty that you knew weren’t going to be professors for the rest of their lives,” Solomon explains. “We had [Judge] Abner Mikva and Elena Kagan and Judge Wood and Judge Posner. There is a very active intellectual life at the Law School and this melding of the spheres of academics and the real world is very cool. It’s what attracts teachers and students to the school.”

Unsurprisingly, though, he was of greater interest to the minority students on campus. “I don’t think most people know his history,” Ruiz says, “but when he became the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review it was a national story. I remembering reading the story and thinking I gotta go to law school!”

“We African American students were very aware of him because at the time there really weren’t a lot of minority professors at the Law School,” Cunningham explains, “and...”
we really wanted him to be a strong representation for the African American students. We wanted him to live up to the pressures and reach out to other ethnic minorities. And we were also very excited about possibly having an African American tenure-track professor at the Law School.”

But a tenure-track position was not to be, although not because of a lack of interest on the part of the Law School. It was apparent that while Obama enjoyed teaching and savored the intellectual give-and-take of the classroom, his heart was in politics.

“Many of us thought he would be a terrific addition to the faculty, but we understood that he had other plans,” explains David Strauss, Gerald Ratner Distinguished Service Professor. “Although I don’t think any of us imagined that things would work out the way they did.” And while students like Cunningham wanted him to continue to a

continued on page 6


Our Small Corner of the Obamaverse

By Alison Coppelman

On January 10, 2008, Marsha Nagorsky, ’95, the Law School’s Assistant Dean for Communications, got an e-mail from the Daily Herald, a suburban Chicago newspaper. The Herald was doing a story about Barack Obama and wanted to photograph a classroom that he had taught in. Nagorsky was confused at the time—she remembers thinking that it must be a slow news day if anyone was interested in photographing a Law School classroom for a story about a Presidential candidate. Little did she know then that she would field more than 100 such requests before President Obama was inaugurated just over a year later.

Both the Law School and, more generally, the University of Chicago have been home to influential and transcendent figures over the course of the past century. When Barack Obama announced his candidacy for President of the United States on a cold February day two years ago, the University—an institution that counts Nobel Prize winners, Attorneys General, CEOs, and quite a few celebrities among its ranks—prepared to receive the press inquiries, requests for interviews, random questions, and persistent phone calls about the former Senior Lecturer in Law that began during the Democratic primary and continued unabated through Inauguration Day. It turns out that all the preparation in the world doesn’t make you ready for the onslaught a presidential campaign brings.

As Law School liaisons in the University’s News Office, Sarah Galer and her colleague Julia Morse were responsible for fielding a majority of the e-mails and phone calls that streamed in from all corners of the world during Obama’s historic run, from China to Chile to the Philippines. Galer admitted that there was some anxiety about what the onslaught of media attention would bring and how it would reflect upon the University and Obama himself. The Law

continued on page 7
tenure-track position, others were expecting a promising and accomplished political career.

“I was into state politics while I was at the Law School, so I am one of the few alums who knew the President as both a legislator and as a teacher,” notes Johnson-Weinberger. “I thought he would continue as a successful politician. But I never would have guessed that he would be our President.”

During his tenure in the state senate, Obama continued to teach at the Law School, some nights traveling straight up from evening sessions at the State House to his classroom.

“But the students never thought of him as a part-timer,” Strauss adds. “They just thought of him as a really good teacher.”

In 1996, Obama ran for, and won, the Thirteenth District of Illinois state senate seat, which then spanned Chicago South Side neighborhoods from Hyde Park–Kenwood to South Shore and west to Chicago Lawn. Then in 2000 he ran for, and lost, the Democratic nomination for Bobby Rush’s seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

“He was very demoralized at that point and would not have recommended a career in public service to anyone,” Ruiz says. “He had suffered a setback, he was facing a lot of struggles in Springfield, and it was a hard lifestyle traveling back and forth to Springfield. We sat at lunch and he talked about how if he had joined a big firm when he graduated he could have been a partner. We did a lot of what if. But then he decided to run for U.S. Senate. And the rest is history.”

And history it is. Since he first came to the attention of Douglas Baird, Barack Obama has gone from being the first African American president of Harvard Law Review to being the first African American President of the United States. He came to the Law School and taught hundreds of students to think like lawyers and the students helped him to sift and think through myriad complex legal issues. In other words, even as President Obama left a lasting impression on the Law School and its students, that same environment helped to shape the man who became President Obama.