

Mr. *and* Mrs. Grassroots:

How Barack Obama, Two Bookstore Owners,
and 300 Volunteers Did It

By John Presta

CHAPTER ONE

The Introduction to Barack Obama: 'The First Time Ever I Saw His Face'



My name is John Presta, and I have been a volunteer for Barack Obama for the past ten years, since the year 2000. I reside in Chicago. The 2008 Presidential campaign was my fifth Obama campaign. We were four for five. In baseball, I would be batting .800. Not bad. But that one defeat in 2000, when Obama ran for the 1st Congressional District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, always stuck in my craw. I sometimes think that was the motivation for all of the work that I've done for him since. I did not ever want to feel that way again.

The moment I first saw Barack Obama is frozen in time. I even remember the exact date and the exact time. The date was March 7, 2000, and the time was 6:45 pm. I was standing at the doorway of Bethany Union Church, surrounded by 600 of my closest friends, and I was nervous.

I was not nervous because I was about to meet a future President of the United States. Who could know? No, I was nervous because I was caught up in the moment. I had organized an event with my wife Michelle and our friend Susan Burnet, the East Beverly Association, the Beverly Improvement Association, the League of Women Voters, and the Citizens Information Service. If I had an inkling of the historical significance of all this, I would have really been nervous.

That was not it. It was the excitement of the evening. The months of

planning leading to this evening. And what a crowd.

I vividly recall looking behind me, and I recognized Dan Shomon, Barack Obama's campaign manager in 2000. Dan Shomon was standing next to a rather striking figure that was handsome, well-dressed, smiling, shaking hands with all of those around him. A man who looked you in the eye. A man who was comfortable in his own skin. It was one of those quick glances. I waved rather quickly at Dan, and I remember he called me over. I did not have much time, but I quickly ran over to him. It took me a couple of minutes, but I made my way through the crowd to him.

"John Presta, I want you to meet Barack Obama," Dan said.

"A pleasure to meet you," I said.

And as was always his charming style, Obama said, "The pleasure is mine. I have heard so much about you, your wife and your bookstore." I recall that he looked me straight in the eye. He has that special talent of making you feel you are the only person in the room. That is a gift. Obama is a "What You See is What You Get" politician or, in the current vernacular, WYSIWYG.

I thanked him and led him to the front tables where he would be seated with the other three candidates running for the 1st Congressional District seat.

We saw him again at the St. Patrick's Southside Irish parade on Sunday, March 12th, when he marched with then State Representative Tom Dart and a contingent of southside politicians. We have a photo where he spotted Michelle and me in the crowd, pointed at us, and then hugged us both.

We saw him again the next day, on Monday, March 13th, six days after the forum, at Café Luna in our community, at what was billed as a "Meet and Greet." There was no donation required. A number of elected officials were there, and, frankly, the elected officials outnumbered the "regular folk" like us. It was that evening that I became convinced he would become President of the United States one day. So did Michelle.

Obama had that special something. I saw it as a seven year old when John F. Kennedy was elected as President of the United States in 1960. He was electrifying. He was youthful and energetic and inspiring. JFK got me excited about politics and government. Obama inspired me that evening much like JFK inspired me many years earlier. JFK had this

‘indomitable spirit.’ As I discovered, so did Obama.

How It All Began

Our story starts in late 1999 when, through a series of interesting circumstances, Michelle and I met Dan Shomon, who managed Obama’s campaign for Illinois Senate and was then managing Obama’s campaign for the 1st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. We got involved with Obama’s campaign against an “entrenched” Democratic incumbent Congressman, Bobby Rush. We got involved through our community bookstore, Reading on Walden on Walden Parkway, in the heart of Chicago’s Beverly community on the southwest side of Chicago.

Bookstores were an important part of Barack Obama’s life, such as the bookstore that Michelle and I owned. We were a small bookstore, and when I tell people that we were small, they invariably ask, “What do you mean small? Like two or three thousand square feet?”

“No, small. Really small,” I would say. The space that we rented was less than 800 square feet. Less than half of that space was selling space. Less than 400 square feet of selling space, but we packed them in: books, magazines, sidelines, enthusiasm, and excitement. I suppose we symbolically packed them in, too. We generally stocked more books than stores five times our size. A customer and friend, Stan Plona, who was a publisher’s representative for the University of California/Princeton Fulfillment Services, Inc. for many years, told us about a new store that opened in The Plaza in Evergreen Park. He told us, “They have a nice store, but you definitely have more books and more of the right books. Kind of a cold reception there, not like you guys. You are warmer and friendlier.”

We were an ordinary bookstore, run by ordinary people, that made extraordinary achievements. We believed in ourselves, and we believed that books are not luxuries, but essentials. We believed that books have transformative value and that books teach valuable lessons about life, such as being in physical health, spiritual health, and financial health, and how those three are intertwined. Physical health leads to spiritual health and can often lead to financial rewards.

Our bookstore was a tremendous community resource. We would get streams of telephone calls asking questions about books, the community,

events and anything else that might be on their minds, or just what is going on. We would also be “directory assistance.”

“What’s the phone number of that flower shop next to you?”

Sometimes we would get telephone calls about safety issues. “Is this community still safe?” “Have you heard about this incident?” Or we would receive questions about a rumor circulating in the community.

Michelle and I have had an impact on the lives of so many people during our time on Walden Parkway. We were involved with Mayor Daley’s Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy, known as the CAPS program, from its inception in 1992. We led marches against crime and drugs in the community with our neighbors and friends. We helped to organize the successful Beverly Hills/Morgan Park Garden Walk, sponsored by the East Beverly Association. We sponsored our Book Discussion Group at the local library. We sponsored exciting author events. We were the first ‘Obama for Illinois’ volunteer group, and we were a model for grassroots volunteerism that helped to elect Barack Obama to the United States Senate. We were known throughout the community as the Beverly Area ‘Obama for Illinois’ volunteers. The Obama for Illinois website listed us as a place to pick up yard signs and obtain campaign materials.

We paid our bills on time, and Michelle kept a cleanly organized bookstore. Our reputation was that we had the knack to have the “hot book” in stock, and we always seemed to have a sense of when something was hot. We would get several frantic telephone calls, usually from a cell phone.

“You got any ‘*Marley and Me*¹’ left. You know. The book about the world’s worst dog.”

“Yes,” I would say.

The caller would say, “Great. I have been looking all over. How many you got buddy?”

“How many you want?” I would say.

“Hold me three copies. I’ll be there in a half hour.”

Our sales per square foot were well above average. Do not ask me what. I know they were good. We only had less than 400 square feet of selling

1 Grogan, John. *Marley & Me: Life and Love with the World’s Worst Dog*. New York: Morrow, 2005.

space, but we “packed a wallop.” We were a small, cozy bookstore, but without the comfortable seating. That would eliminate several hundred books and, at that size, we would have less than 400 square feet of selling space.

We simply took bookselling to a different level because we possessed high energy and a positive spirit. We made “bookselling” fun, and Michelle made bookselling even more fun, not only for me, but also for our customers. Every book that we sold brought us great joy, not only because of the money it brought, but because of the deeper implications that book will have to the customer.

Where will this book take them? *Oh, The Places You’ll Go*.² The journey and adventure of reading a book is still a thrill for me. Will this book transform this person’s life? Will a discovery be made that will allow this person to fulfill a dream or maybe start a dream? Or lead someone to the White House? Wow, the places we’ll go.

Powell’s Bookstore in the Hyde Park community was a store that Barack Obama frequented. He became friendly with the bookstore owner at Powell’s, Brad Jonas. Women and Children First was another bookstore that had significance in his rise. Obama’s favorite bookstore to shop and browse was 57th Street Books in Hyde Park. When his book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*,³ came out in 2006, he did his first book signing at 57th Street Books to a ticket-only, packed crowd, a scene that was repeated at many more bookstores throughout Chicago and the suburbs.

The Book and The Candidate

The book that bonded us with Barack Obama was *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.⁴ I had always believed that the book should and would find an audience. I just did not know when. I believed in the strength of Obama’s book. While I believed in the strength of his book, I also believed in the strength of the man. It was

2 Dr. Seuss. *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*. New York, NY. Random House Children’s Books. 1990.

3 Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006 (hereafter referred to as Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*.)

4 Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Times Books, 1995 (hereafter referred to as Obama, *Dreams from My Father*.)

truly worthy, but it turned out that the book did indeed eventually find its audience through a series of circumstances that are incredible and now part of our American History. In large part, that is the nature of this book. How books connect, transform, and have an 'indomitable spirit.' While my book will focus on Obama's first book, this book will also focus on the importance of books in our everyday lives and why books have transformative value. Another focus of my book is the importance of independent booksellers to a community and the many contributions booksellers have made over the years. To state that independent bookstores are the foundations of their communities is no exaggeration.

I could not separate the book from the man. The book and the man took parallel paths. The book would be down, and the man would be down. The book would be up, and Obama would be up. Then the book would be re-issued, and the book would skyrocket, and so would the man. To this day, the book and the man have never returned to earth. They are in a different orbit.

And with Barack Obama as President of United States, historians will find the connections of a book, two bookstore owners, 300 friends and customers who volunteered to help elect him to the United States Senate. This is the story about how Obama's book and Obama the candidate were both launched onto the national scene in 2004.

A bookstore like Women and Children First in Chicago, owned by Linda Bubon and Ann Christopherson, was at the forefront of a key moment in the campaign for United States Senate when Obama received one of the most important endorsements in December 2003 from Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky. The Evanston Democratic Party, which endorsed Obama, is capable of delivering a large plurality of votes for candidates it gets behind. This endorsement strengthened and encouraged Obama because it meant his support was building slowly but surely.

Another significant bookstore located in Obama's Hyde Park community, Powell's Bookstore, and a bookstore owner, Brad Jonas, played a key role in the promotion and marketing of Barack Obama through the book, *Dreams from My Father*.

Our story is as much about the book, *Dreams from My Father*, as it is about Barack Obama. It is about our never giving up on Obama's book or Obama the candidate. After Dan Shomon told us, "Well, he's an author you know," Shomon ordered 20 copies. Shomon later commented, "I was wondering how many copies I would have to buy to get your support." None. That is not how it worked with us.

Before the election on March 21, 2000, Michelle and I both read the book and liked it. We started to feel a connection and closeness to Obama. I was especially touched about the relationship with his father. I felt empathy toward him.

When Obama lost the race to Congressman Bobby Rush on March 21, 2000, we ordered a dozen copies of *Dreams from My Father* and I asked Shomon to have Obama sign them, and he did. We placed the signed copies on the shelf, and you would have thought that they would have flown out of the store.

But, they did not sell at all. They just sat on the shelf. Michelle removed them, dusted them, and put them back on the shelf. Through the remainder of the year 2000, that is how it went.

And through the year 2001, Michelle removed them, dusted them, and put them back on the shelf.

And through the year 2002, Michelle removed them, dusted them, and put them back on the shelf.

And through the year 2003, Michelle removed them, dusted them, and put them back on the shelf.

Then on March 16, 2004, Barack Obama won the United States Senate Democratic primary. The next day those copies sold. All of them. If we had several hundred more, we would have sold them, too.

We never stopped believing in the book or the candidate.

This is the story of a book that would not die.

This is the story of a candidate that would not die.

The book and the candidate sold slowly, gradually, incrementally and, then all in one swift moment, sold and resonated suddenly.

Such was the rise of the book and of Barack Obama.

Change comes slowly, gradually, incrementally, and suddenly.

Those words, "President Barack Obama," make it a little easier to forget the pain of that defeat back in 2000. Well, a lot easier. I hardly

ever think of that time except for the lessons it taught.

And those words. “President Barack Obama.” I will simply never grow weary of those words.

Enjoy our story. It is something that Michelle and I, our 300 volunteers and our community will not soon forget.

Change comes slowly, gradually, incrementally, and suddenly.