



Emily Wax-Thibodeaux

Washington, D.C.

National reporter covering breaking news and social movements.

Style

Obama's link to Hawaii not ignored by islanders

April 30, 2013

By Emily Wax

It's a bright Sunday morning and Gloria Borland is rushing her 10-year-old to hula class at Halau O 'Aulani, a Hawaiian cultural school in Arlington. Musicians in Tiki shirts and Texas set up their steel guitars, and students with plastic frangipani flowers in their hair pull on yellow cotton skirts.

Borland's daughter skips over to join a circle of dancers as her mother collapses into a chair, her arms filled with notes on President Obama's formative years in Hawaii and several biographies stuffed with crinkled Post-it notes that read, "WRONG — IT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN HAWAII."



When it comes to Obama, Borland wants the world to understand one thing: The president is a native son of Hawaii. She spent the past six years making "Barack Obama: Made in Hawaii," a two-hour documentary that she hopes will set the record straight as Obama's legacy begins to take shape.

"President Obama is not an angry black man from Chicago. I mean, give me a break, he's a Hawaiian, with a Hawaiian temperament," says Borland, who was raised in Hawaii around the same time as Obama and now lives in Dupont Circle. Along with Washington's 10,000-strong Hawaiian community, she believes the 44th president's public narrative fails to highlight just how deeply Hawaiian culture has influenced both his personality and his policies.

"She is so passionate, on a serious mission. And we're really proud of her," says Wendell Yee, 65, who unpacks his ukulele and smiles gently as he watches Borland shuffle through her notes. "This really needed to happen."

The president's competing biographical narratives are apparent in the wrangling over which state will get to host Obama's official presidential library when his second term ends. Will it be the sun-dappled Polynesian island where he was born and raised, graduating from Honolulu's prestigious Punahou School? Or the chilly metropolis on Lake Michigan where he worked as a young community organizer and later served as a senator?

For Borland, what does it feel like to be obsessed — *possessed* — with the belief that an important part of history is being ignored? For the Hawaiian community in Washington it's a little like this: "Did you know, that Obama's daughter is named 'Malia'? Malia is a common Hawaiian name," says Borland, her voice rising. "Go to any school in Hawaii, any classroom, and you'll find a girl named Malia."

Borland's own pre-teen daughter, Imiloa, has been her secret weapon in getting exclusive interviews with Obama's childhood friends. She recites facts even quicker than her mother. "Did you know most kids' books on Obama leave out his Hawaiian story?" she asks as her mother exhibits Obama's page in a book called "U.S. Presidents" that makes no mention of Hawaii. Borland finds such omissions "flabbergasting," and points out that they are not confined to children's books. The Obama biography video shown at the Democratic National Convention in 2008, for example, doesn't even mention Hawaii.

"There's so much information that's wrong. It's all stereotypes and I didn't want him to be misunderstood," says Borland, who's in the final stages of finishing her film. She says the documentary is educational rather than political. Funded mostly by her late parents, it cost about \$300,000 to shoot, a figure that includes 42 interviews and 15 trips to Hawaii to talk to close friends and family of "Barry," as Obama is known in Hawaii. Borland, a media entrepreneur, has made the documentary her full-time job.

Like Obama, Borland comes from a fairly complex multiethnic background — known as "hapa," or mixed race on the island — that took her around the world during her childhood. Her African American father was originally from North Carolina, joined the Navy and was stationed in Japan, where he fell in love with her Japanese mother. They got married at a time when interracial marriage was a felony in about half of the country, Borland points out. They moved to Hawaii, which has no majority race (many people who live in Hawaii jokingly call themselves "chop suey") in 1967, when Borland was in sixth grade.

It's important to point out that neither Obama nor Borland has actual indigenous Hawaiian ancestors. But like many people who have lived on the island, they say their identity was shaped by Hawaii's multiethnic culture, where most families have members with various shades of skin and ethnic

backgrounds. "Back then, it was really hard for mixed-race couples on the mainland," said Borland. "And in a mixed place like Hawaii, where 75 percent of the population are hapa — Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Portuguese — my parents felt really comfortable."

Of course, every presidential campaign spins its candidate's story, said John Hudak, a fellow and presidential scholar at the Brookings Institution. So Bill Clinton was not a Rhodes Scholar from Yale. He was the boy from Hope, said Hudak. Jimmy Carter was a peanut farmer, not an engineer.

"We like to relate to our presidents — and it's hard to relate to Hawaii," said Hudak. "So despite realities, Americans don't think of Hawaii as a tough place, but as a paradise and that's one of major reasons we think of Obama as from Chicago. It's a narrative of plight, grit."

The "birther" controversy added to the confusion about Obama, said Robert Perkinson, a professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii. "At the same time, a lot of people put Obama in a box as the first black president, which he is," said Perkinson, who is heading efforts to bring Obama's library to the island. "But in truth he's also the country's most cosmopolitan — that global part of his story doesn't get distilled into sound bites."

Borland says growing up in Hawaii was freeing and allowed her ambitions to flourish. "I always found the 'one drop of blood rule means you're black' so stifling. I was like, 'Don't pigeonhole me. I may look black, but I was raised with a Japanese mother eating Japanese white rice,'" she said in her apartment filled with Japanese and Hawaiian art and furniture and pictures of her daughter surfing. She came to the District in the 1970s to work for Hawaii's Sen. Daniel K. Inouye(D) and later hosted a PBS program about black entrepreneurs that aired nationally. "Hawaii didn't have the 'one drop' rule," she said. "If you are raised in an environment where everyone is

a different color, you have a different sense of self-esteem. You are not boxed in.”

Her film about Obama also debunks stereotypes about Hawaii itself, said University of Illinois at Springfield computer science professor Ronald P. Loui, who went to school with Obama and was born and raised in Hawaii. It emphasizes, for example, the fact that Hawaii has a large military population. “People from Hawaii are not just a bunch of yo-yo liberals smoking pot. We really care about national security. And Obama actually hung out with lots of military brats,” said Loui, who donated \$2,000 to help Borland finish the film.

After hula class at Halau O 'Aulani, there's a Hawaiian potluck lunch. Its principal, Ku'u lei Stockman, says most mainlanders don't know that in the 1970s Hawaii became the first state in the country to provide near-universal health care, which heavily influenced Obama as a child.

"Or remember the 'beer summit' — when Obama asked the police officer and professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. to drink a beer at a picnic table and talk over that arrest," coos Darlene Kehaulani Butts, who is on the board of governors in Hawai'i State Society of Washington. “That was soooo Hawaiian: We call that ho'oponopono, or the ability to sit down and talk things out.”

The table is filled with a mix of Hawaiian parents who chime in with other examples, all echoing Michelle Obama's famous quote, “You can't really understand Barack until you understand Hawaii.”

Then the mood turns serious. They urge Borland to eat more. She will need her strength, they say, to finish a film they all think needs to be made.