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Kenyan Multimedia Reporter for Presidential Debate Has Harvard Ties to Obama

SEPTEMBER 27, 2008 BY **ADMIN**

OXFORD,

Miss. — Africa Radio Group reporter and Harvard Law graduate Maina Kiai had an unusual day ahead of him when he woke up Friday morning, the day of the presidential debate at the University of Mississippi.

“The bus (for international journalists) was late in Memphis, and when I went to get some papers and came back, the bus had left,” said Kiai, who also reports for the Nairobi Star and the Web site AllAfrica.com.

“I was frantically trying to figure out what to do, and the hotel put me in touch with a cab driver.”

But the daylong cab bill isn't the only interesting perspective one gets from Kenyan-native Kiai; he's also a human rights advocate who attended Harvard Law School in the late 1980s with Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama.

“There was another Kenyan there (at Harvard) I knew, and I saw Obama on a list somewhere,” Kiai explained of his first Obama-related encounter. “We said to each other, ‘That sounds like a Kenyan name,’ so I sought him out.”

Kiai and Obama, who were both smokers at the time, met in the smoking room at Harvard Law and would discuss everything under the sun, including Obama's first trip to Kenya, which took place the summer before he entered Harvard.

“Obama was always very thoughtful and a good listener. He was exceedingly charismatic; everyone wanted to be around him, hang out with him. There was no doubt in my mind that he was an American with a Kenyan background. He is clearly a bridge,” Kiai said.

When asked about Obama's personal character and campaign abilities, Kiai was enthusiastic to endorse his law school acquaintance.

“He's a very good organizer; and just the fact that he is a genuine person and a good speaker — not just those alone — make him a good candidate. It's not just in his character. He was a community organizer in Chicago, and it took a lot of guts to do that. He's a determined man.”

Kiai's life also reflects determination. He grew up in the little village Nyeri, 100 miles north of Nairobi. His family followed the traditional Kenyan lifestyle by herding cattle, picking tea leaves and seeing poverty firsthand. After attending high school in Kenya and graduating with a law degree from the University of Nairobi, Kiai boarded a plane, for the first time in his life, to travel to the U.S. and attend Harvard Law.

It didn't come without challenges, though, Kiai said.

“It was a huge culture shock,” said Kiai, who taught himself to type after paying “way too much money” for others to type papers for him.

“It was a brilliant experience,” Kiai said of Harvard. “You grow and learn, and the facilities blew my mind.”

Although Kiai has had close relations with Obama, his main priority in Oxford this weekend is to cover the debate and try to relay a message back to his home country about a democracy and the Western world.

Campus Briefs

MAY 22, 2017 BY **MICHAEL NEWSOM**

OXFORD, Miss. — The University of Mississippi campus entrance at Chucky Mullins Drive will remain closed through the summer so a roundabout can be built where Hill Drive and Hathorn Road meet. The work there to install a roundabout will lead to improved traffic flow on the south side of campus, but until the work is complete

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MAY 20, 2017 BY **BRETT BAREFOOT**

OXFORD, Miss. — Gifts to a new scholarship endowment in the University of Mississippi School of Business Administration will honor the life of the late Robert Julian Allen III, a successful entrepreneur who had a strong interest in giving young people opportunities to manage or own a business. The Robert Julian Allen III Memorial Scholarship

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Though Kenya was colonized by the British and sees an assortment of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Indians and Arabs, the political woes are Kiai's focus as a human rights advocate and reporter for multiple media outlets.

"I'm doing a study on the campaign; there is something we can learn. It's a historic moment for the world," he said. "We (Kenyans) want leaders who care for the people instead of themselves. So far, we've not been very lucky. We're a republic and a democracy in crisis. It is deeply flawed, and it's been an unhappy marriage so far."

However, Kiai is inspired by the youth he saw in the Ole Miss Grove Friday afternoon during the Rock the Debate festival.

"It's so good to see that, no matter what party they support. I'm hoping within the white community, they will vote despite of his race."

This is Kiai's first trip to the South and, with reservations concerning racial tension from the university's very public civil rights past, Kiai said he is pleasantly surprised.

"Ole Miss is a brilliant campus; it's really nice. The energy here is electric."

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