

Shirley Chisholm

By Stella Crouch

Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was the first to do many things during her life, most famously becoming the first woman of colour elected to congress and the first woman of colour to run for the nomination in a major party (Democrat) for President. She was elected to represent New York's twelfth congressional district which includes several neighborhoods on the East Side of Manhattan, the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, and western Queens, as well as Roosevelt Island. She went on to serve seven terms during her career in the U.S. House of Representatives. "Unbought and Unbossed" was her iconic motto and the title of her autobiography published in 1970.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 30, 1924, Chisholm was the oldest of four daughters. She was of Guyanese and Bajan descent. She graduated from Brooklyn Girls' High in 1942 and from Brooklyn College in 1946, where she was very active on the debate team. Although some professors and friends encouraged her to consider a political career, she replied that she faced a "double handicap" by being both Black and a woman.

After college Chisholm worked as a nursery school teacher. During this same period she married Conrad Q. Chisholm, a private investigator. She earned a master's degree from Columbia University in early childhood education in 1951. Chisholm officially entered politics in 1953 when she joined Wesley "Mac" Holder's effort to elect Lewis Flagg Jr. to the bench as the first black judge in Brooklyn. She continued to work in child care and education and by 1960, she was a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Chisholm began to more vocally advocate for human rights and join organizations such as the NAACP, The League of Women Voters, the Urban League and the Democratic Party club in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Chisholm was a member of the New York State Assembly from 1965 to 1968, sitting in the 175th, 176th and 177th New York State Legislatures. By May of 1965 she had already been honored in a "Salute to Women Doers" affair in New York. Her successes in the legislature included getting unemployment benefits extended to domestic workers and campaigning for more affordable childcare.

In 1968, Chisholm ran for the U.S. House of Representatives from New York's 12th congressional district, which as part of a court-mandated reapportionment plan had been significantly redrawn to focus on Bedford-Stuyvesant and was thus expected to result in Brooklyn's first black member of Congress. As a result of the redrawing, the white incumbent in the former 12th, Representative Edna F. Kelly, sought re-election in a different district. Chisholm announced her candidacy around January 1968 as well as debuted her slogan "Unbought and Unbossed".

During the June 18, 1968, Democratic primary, Chisholm defeated two other black opponents, State Senator William S. Thompson and labor official Dollie Robertson. In the general election, she ran against James Farmer, the former director of the Congress of Racial Equality. Although running as a Liberal Party candidate he held much Republican support.

Chisholm labeled Farmer "an outsider" during the campaign because he lived in Manhattan. She once reportedly said in a campaign "he doesn't live on the same side of the bridge as you and I." Among her many tactics, she spoke in Spanish to Spanish speakers, a language she had developed fluency in as a schoolteacher. Farmer did far less campaigning than Chisholm potentially because he didn't believe she could win. She proved the world wrong on November 5th, 1968 when she became the first woman of colour elected to Congress and the only woman elected for the first time that year.

Within a couple of weeks of the election, the national black weekly Jet magazine put Chisholm on the cover. Chisholm was assigned to the House Agriculture Committee. Given her urban district, she felt the placement was irrelevant to her constituents thinking it was all a part of her attempts to suppress her power and voice.

Chisholm only hired women for her office and always made sure at least half of them were women of colour. Chisholm said that she had faced much more discrimination during her New York legislative career because she was a woman than because of her race and that one of her greatest hopes was for women to one day be elected at equal rates as men and that it would shake up the "boys club" that was, and still is Congress.

In 1971, Chisholm joined the Congressional Black Caucus as one of its founding members. In the same year, she was also a founding member of the National Women's Political Caucus. In May 1971, Chisholm, along with fellow New York Congresswoman and activist Bella Abzug, introduced a bill to provide \$10 billion in federal funds for child care services by 1975. A less expensive version of the bill introduced by Senator Walter Mondale, a white man, eventually passed the House and Senate as the Comprehensive Child Development Bill but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon in December 1971. The reasons signed were that it was too expensive, would undermine the "institution of the family" and would further encourage women to enter the workforce and "steal" jobs from men.

Chisholm officially announced her most ambitious run yet. On January 25th, 1972 in a church she announced her run for President of the United States. She called for a "bloodless revolution" at the upcoming Democratic National Convention. Chisholm became the first woman of colour to run for a major party's nomination for President, making her also the first woman ever to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Her campaign was greatly underfunded, only spending \$300,000 in total. She also struggled to be regarded as a serious candidate instead of a symbolic political figure. She was ignored by much of the Democratic political establishment and received little support from her colleagues.

Chisholm was blocked, unsurprisingly, from participating in televised primary debates and speaking to many newspapers, and after taking legal action, was permitted to make just one speech. Still many people, predominantly students, women, LGBTQ+ people and people of colour followed the "Chisholm Trail." She entered 12 primaries and garnered 152 of the delegates' votes which was approximately 10% of the total. After her loss she went on to continue serving in Congress. From 1977 to 1981, during the 95th Congress and 96th Congress, Chisholm was elected to a position in the House Democratic leadership, as Secretary of the

House Democratic Caucus. Chisholm ended up serving seven consecutive terms from 1969 to 1983.

After leaving Congress, Chisholm made her home in suburban Williamsville, New York. She resumed her career in education, being named to the Purington Chair at the all-women Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. This meant she was not a member of any particular department but would be able to teach classes in a variety of areas of study which she quite enjoyed. She traveled extensively and gave lectures during her later life. She told students to avoid polarization and intolerance: "If you don't accept others who are different, it means nothing that you've learned calculus." In 1990, Chisholm, along with 15 other black women and men, formed the African-American Women for Reproductive Freedom organization alongside Byllye Avery and Dorothy Height.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton nominated her to be United States Ambassador to Jamaica, but she couldn't serve due to poor health. In the same year she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Chisholm died on January 1, 2005, in Ormond Beach Florida, after multiple strokes. She is buried Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo New York, where the legendary statement is inscribed on her vault, "Unbought and Unbossed". Her work and presence are still alive through her writing, activism, speeches, the Shirley Chisholm Center for Research on Women at Brooklyn College and in the minds of those she continues to inspire.

Citations:

-A Look Back On Shirley Chisholm's Historic 1968 House Victory

<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/06/664617076/a-look-back-on-shirley-chisholm-s-historic-1968-house-victory?t=1630100767298>

-Chisholm tribute airs clash over abortion rights in poor communities

<https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2012/12/07/chisholm-tribute-airs-clash-over-abortion-rights-in-poor-communities/>

-Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005)

<https://www.biography.com/political-figure/shirley-chisholm>

-Shirley Chisholm For President

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/shirley-chisholm-president>

-Shirley Chisholm blazed the way for Kamala Harris to be Biden's VP pick

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/08/01/shirley-chisholm-black-women-biden-vp/>

-Shirley Chisholm (U.S. Congresswoman)

<http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/biographies/shirley-chisholm>

-Shirley Chisholm

<https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/shirley-chisholm/>