

A Brief Biography of Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005)



The eldest of four daughters, Shirley Chisholm was born in 1924 in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Her father—a factory worker from Guyana—and her mother—a seamstress and domestic worker from Barbados—emigrated to New York during the famines of the 1920s. In 1927, Shirley and her sisters moved to Barbados to live on their grandmother's farm, where they remained until 1934.

Back in New York, Shirley went on to graduate from Brooklyn College, where she won prizes in debating, and to earn a master's degree in elementary education from Columbia University. Shirley began her career as a nursery school teacher, moved on to direct several day care centers, and came to be known as an authority on early education and child welfare.

Shirley got her start in politics as an educational consultant in the day care division of the city's Bureau of Child Welfare from 1959 to 1964, where she was a staunch advocate for early schooling. During that time she became active with organizations including the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League and the League of Women Voters. Shirley also challenged the balance of power within Brooklyn's Democratic Party establishment, and began to establish a reputation for being a maverick who was unafraid to confront inequity and the status quo.

Shirley's belief that serving people was more important than bowing to politicians won her a seat in the New York State Assembly in 1964 and then the U.S. House of Representatives in 1968, where she was the first black woman elected to Congress.

Shirley immediately challenged the seniority system in the House after being placed on the Agriculture Committee, an assignment she considered completely unrelated to her urban district. Though the House Speaker told her to "be a good soldier" and accept the assignment, Shirley confronted the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and was eventually reassigned to the Veterans Affairs Committee, and later to the Education and Labor Committees.

In her first statement as a Congressperson before the U.S. House of Representatives, Shirley made clear her commitment to the needs of children and the disadvantaged, and proclaimed her intent to "vote No on every money bill that comes to the floor of this House that provides any funds for the Department of Defense."

During her fourteen years in the House, Shirley fought for the rights of women, Native Americans, Haitian refugees, migrant farm workers, and the poor. She

worked on behalf of Black colleges and took stands on issues including the Vietnam War, compensatory education and minimum wage for domestic workers. Shirley was an early member of the National Organization for Women, a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus, and a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, Michigan Congressman John Conyers introduced legislation for a national holiday in King's honor. When those efforts were stalled in Congress, Shirley joined forces with Conyers to resubmit the measure every legislative session until it passed in 1983.

In 1972, Shirley became the first woman to campaign for the Democratic nomination for President. She shocked the country when she paid a hospital visit to rival candidate George C. Wallace, the Alabama governor who built his political career on segregation, after he had been wounded in an assassination attempt in 1972. "Black people in my community crucified me," she recalled. "But why shouldn't I go to visit him?...He said to me, 'What are your people going to say?' I said: 'I know what they're going to say. But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone.' He cried and cried and cried."

Though Shirley did not win a single primary during the 1972 presidential election, she captured over 150 votes on the first ballot and later said her campaign had been a necessary "catalyst for change." Shirley went on to serve for ten more years in the House and retired in 1982 after seven terms in Congress.

Shirley kept active in politics following her retirement by co-founding the National Political Congress of Black Women and serving as its chairwoman from its founding in 1984 until 1992. Shirley also lectured, taught at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and wrote two books, including her autobiography, "Unbought and Unbossed," which was the campaign slogan she used in her first race for Congress.

Shirley married twice, but had no children. Her 1949 marriage to Conrad Chisholm ended in divorce in February, 1977. Later that year she married Arthur Hardwick, Jr., who died in 1986. Shirley moved to Florida in 1991 and died at the age of 80 on January 1, 2005 at her home in Ormond Beach.

Asked how she hoped to be remembered, Shirley once commented, "I'd like them to say that Shirley Chisholm had guts. That's how I'd like to be remembered."

Questions

1. How did Shirley Chisholm begin her career? What issues was she concerned with at this time that eventually led her to politics?
2. The reading says that Chisholm was "*a maverick who was unafraid to challenge inequity and the status quo.*" Define each of the underlined terms. Describe in your own words the type of politician Chisholm strived to be and provide examples from the reading to support your response.

3. What do you know about what was going on in the U.S. at the time Chisholm was elected in 1968? What challenges and opportunities do you think she faced as a black woman in the U.S. Congress at that time?
4. Chisholm once said that *"Racism is so universal in this country, so widespread and deep seeded, that it is invisible because it is so normal."* What do you think she meant? Give examples of ways that racism was "invisible" and "normal"? Do you think this statement still holds true today?
5. Chisholm also said, *"Of my two 'handicaps' being female put more obstacles in my path than being black."* What obstacles do you think Chisholm faced as a female politician in the 1960s and 1970s? Why do you think her gender was more of a challenge than her race during that time?
6. What are some of the issues that Chisholm focused on during her years in Congress? Choose one to research, and write a paragraph describing how that issue impacted the country during the 1960s and 1970s.
7. Why do you think it took Chisholm and others 15 years to pass legislation establishing a holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?
8. Why do you think Chisholm paid a visit to George C. Wallace—an avowed segregationist? What do you think this says about her character?
9. Looking back on her campaign for the Democratic nomination for President, Chisholm said,
"The United States was said not to be ready to elect a Catholic to the Presidency when Al Smith ran in the 1920's. But Smith's nomination may have helped pave the way for the successful campaign John F. Kennedy waged in 1960. Who can tell? What I hope most is that now there will be others who will feel themselves as capable of running for high political office as any wealthy, good-looking white male."
 - Do you think that Chisholm helped to pave the way for other women and black people to run for high office?
 - Do you think that a candidate from one of these groups could be elected as president in the near future?