

Shirley Chisholm: Choosing Challenge

Shirley Anita St. Hill was born in Brooklyn, New York, to immigrant parents. She had three younger sisters. Her father, Charles Christopher St. Hill, was born in British Guiana and arrived in the United States via Antilla, Cuba, on April 10, 1923, aboard the *S.S. Munamar* in New York City. Her mother, Ruby Seale, was born in Christ Church, Barbados, and arrived in New York City aboard the *S.S. Pocone* on March 8, 1921. He was a worker in a factory that made burlap bags and she was a seamstress and did domestic work.

Early Life

At age three, Shirley was sent to Barbados to live with her maternal grandmother, Emaline Seale, in Christ Church, where she attended the Vauxhall Primary School. She did not return until roughly seven years later when she arrived in New York City on May 19, 1934, aboard the *S.S. Narissa*. As a result, she spoke with a partial West Indian accent throughout her life. In her 1970 autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed*, she wrote: "Years later I would know what an important gift my parents had given me by seeing to it that I had my early education in the strict, traditional, British-style schools of Barbados. If I speak and write easily now, that early education is the main reason."

Beginning in 1939, Shirley attended Girls' High School in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, a highly regarded, integrated school that attracted girls from throughout Brooklyn. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from Brooklyn College in 1946. There, she won prizes for her debating skills. She was a member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

Political Career

Chisholm was the only new woman to enter Congress in 1969. Her welcome in the House was not warm, due to her immediate outspokenness. "I have no intention of just sitting quietly and observing," she said. "I intend to focus attention on the nation's problems." She did just that, lashing out against the Vietnam War in her first floor speech on March 26, 1969. Chisholm vowed to vote against any defense appropriation bill "until the time comes when our values and priorities have been turned right-side up again." She was assigned to the Committee on Agriculture, a decision she appealed directly to House Speaker John McCormack of Massachusetts. McCormack told her to be a "good soldier," at which point Chisholm brought her complaint to the House Floor. She was reassigned to the Veterans' Affairs Committee that, though not one of her top choices, was more relevant to her district's makeup. "There are a lot more veterans in my district than trees," she quipped.

From 1971 to 1977 she served on the Committee on Education and Labor, having won a place on that panel with the help of Hale Boggs of Louisiana, whom she had endorsed as Majority Leader. She also served on the Committee on Organization Study and Review (known as the Hansen Committee), whose recommended reforms for the selection of committee chairmen were adopted by the Democratic Caucus in 1971. From 1977 to 1981, Chisholm served as Secretary of the Democratic Caucus. She eventually left her Education Committee assignment to accept a seat on the Rules Committee in 1977, becoming the first black woman—and the second woman ever—to serve on that powerful panel. Chisholm also was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1971 and the Congressional Women's Caucus in 1977.



Chisholm continued to work for the causes she had espoused as a community activist. She sponsored increases in federal funding to extend the hours of daycare facilities and a guaranteed minimum annual income for families. She was a fierce defender of federal assistance for education, serving as a primary backer of a national school lunch bill and leading her colleagues in overriding President Gerald R. Ford's veto on this measure. However, Chisholm did not view herself as a "lawmaker, an innovator in the field of legislation"; in her efforts to address the needs of the "have-nots," she often chose to work outside the established system. At times she criticized the Democratic leadership in Congress as much as she did the Republicans in the White House. She was an explorer and a trailblazer rather than a legislative artisan.

"She was our Moses that opened the Red Sea for us," Robert E. Williams, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Flagler County, said of Chisholm in an interview with *The Associated Press*. William Howard, Chisholm's longtime campaign treasurer, expressed similar sentiments. "Anyone that came in contact with her, they had a feeling of a careness," Howard said, "and they felt that she was very much a part of each individual as she represented her district."

In 2004, she said about herself, "I want history to remember me not just as the first black woman to be elected to Congress, not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and dared to be herself."

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirley_Chisholm;
<http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-%28C000371%29/http://www.biography.com/people/shirley-chisholm-9247015#political-career-and-african-american-firsts>; <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/congress/p/shirleychisholm.htm>

