

The Shirley Chisholm Project
Brooklyn Women's Activism 1945 to the Present
Archives and Special Collections, Brooklyn College,
City University of New York
Brooklyn, NY

Richard Green Interview

Interviewed by BARBARA WINSLOW

Tuesday, March 10, 2008

The Crown Heights Youth Collective

© Barbara Winslow

This interview is part of The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism

The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism 1945 to the Present
 Brooklyn College, City University of New York
 2900 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn New York, 11210

Phone: (718) 951-5000 ext. 6647

Fax: (718) 951-4816

Email: chisholmproject@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Website: <http://shirleychisholmproject.brooklyn.cuny.edu>

About the Project

The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism is an archive and repository of women's grassroots social activism in Brooklyn since 1945 and ongoing in the present. Named in the spirit of Chisholm's legacy as a path breaking community and political activist, the archive follows the many paths she pioneered, by including materials representing the wide range of women's grassroots activism throughout the borough of Brooklyn. The full archive consists of oral history interviews (conducted by the staff of the project), as well as documents, newsletters, personal letters and various other materials, from people who knew or worked with Chisholm. All materials collected by the SCPBWA are housed in the Archives and Special Collections of the Brooklyn College library. If you are interested in visiting the Archives and Special Collections, please call (718) 951-5346 or visit their website at <http://library.brooklyn.cuny.edu/archives> for more information.

Notes on the Oral History Interviews

The oral history collection has two components. The first includes interviews with a variety of individuals who knew and worked with Shirley Chisholm—both her friends, colleagues and political allies, as well adversaries—during her time in the New York State Senate (1964-1968), United States Congress (1969-1983) and her 1972 Presidential campaign. The second phase of the project will begin in 2012 and consist of oral history interviews with Brooklyn women activists, from 1945 to the present.

Researchers

Researchers are encouraged to both read the transcript of the oral history interview and view/listen to the recording of the interview. The transcription of the interview is a near verbatim copy of the interview. The SCPBWA has decided—for the sake of clarity—to edit the transcription for the readers' understanding. While the interview still contains false starts, verbal stumbles, misspeaks, and repetition, it *has been edited for readability*. It is for this reason we encourage researchers to read the transcript and view/listen to the interview when citing interviews for one's personal, scholarly or academic work. It is acceptable for researchers to utilize excerpts or quotations from this interview and in doing so we recognize that it maybe necessary to correct grammar or punctuation. It is important to note then, the nicknames and shortened names used by the narrators in reference to colleagues, friends, organizations or neighborhoods were not altered in the transcriptions produced by the SCPBWA. Therefore you may see variations of Shirley Chisholm being referred to as “Mrs. C”, Wesley McDonald Holder as “Wes” or “Mac”, Bedford Stuyvesant as “Bed Stuy.” The variations of which names used are specific to the individual narrators.

This interview is part of The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism

Abstract

This interview focuses on Richard Green's experiences working with Shirley Chisholm in her Brooklyn Congressional office. Green discusses Chisholm's relationship with her constituents and the community organizations that she worked with. Green worked on Chisholm's Congressional campaign and also documented her daily life through photography. In the interview, Green also discusses the founding of Medgar Evers College and how she was perceived by the Brooklyn community.

Interview Context

This interview took place in the office of Richard Green at the Crown Heights Youth Collective, located in Crown Heights Brooklyn. There is some background noise because the interview took place during the hours of operation at the CHYC.

Narrator

Richard E. Green is a Brooklyn community activist, founder and Executive Director of the Crown Heights Youth Collective. Established in 1978, the Crown Heights Youth Collective was created in response to the need to provide comprehensive services for disadvantaged youth. The Collective serves the diverse African American, Caribbean American, and Hasidim communities of Crown Heights, and during the past 30 years have served more than 100,000 young people. Green worked with Chisholm on her Congressional election campaigns in Brooklyn. As a photographer, he documented the daily life of Shirley Chisholm.

Interviewer

Barbara Winslow is the founder and Project Director of the Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism 1945 to the Present. A historian, Professor Winslow teaches in both the School of Education and the Women's Studies Program at Brooklyn College. She is the author of *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* and coeditor of *Clio in the Classroom: A Guide for Teaching U.S. Women's History* along with Carol Berkin (Editor), Margaret S. Crocco (Editor). She also serves on the Advisory Board of the North Star Fund a foundation serving grassroots activist organizations in New York City and on the Leadership Council of the Organization of American Historians.

Restrictions: None

Format: Recorded, audio and video, by Kemile Jackson on one 40 Minute HD DVCAM tapes.

Transcript: Transcribed by Marwa Amer. Edited for clarity by Barbara Winslow.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms: Please include in your citation, a credit to The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism 1945 to the Present and the Brooklyn College Archives and Special Collection.

This interview is part of The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism

Barbara Winslow: Today is Monday March 10th, 2008 and I am Barbara Winslow here with Richard Green at the Crown Heights Youth Collective in Brooklyn, New York.

Before we begin I would like to remind you that you are in control of this interview. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions that you are uncomfortable with. If you choose to end the interview, the tape will be destroyed or given to you, and it will be as if you never participated in the project. Do you understand?

Richard Green: Yes, I understand. Understood.

Winslow: How did you know Shirley Chisholm, in what capacity, and for how long?

Green: Well, I knew Mrs. Chisholm many years in Congress. And I had the golden opportunity to have a close up working relationship with her during her campaign, in her last campaign for Congress. And this campaign—well, beyond the campaign we worked together in her office and then the campaign came and then that led to us having a real day-to-day working relationship. And that lasted for a good, old almost, perhaps six months during the campaign period, but we worked together probably for about a year.

Winslow: The last campaign being 1981?

Green: I shouldn't have said the last campaign. It would have been the campaign in 1976. That wouldn't have been her last campaign. That would have been...she ran against, at that time she ran against Sam Wright, but it was a very heated campaign here in Brooklyn.

Winslow: Why was that so?

Green: Well because both were Central Brooklyn figures, both were very strong political figures. So it became a very heated—to say the least—campaign for the Congressional seat.

Winslow: He was a Republican?

Green: He was a Democrat.

Winslow: So it was the primary?

Green: Yeah, it was the primary; it was a very heated primary. As you know in Brooklyn the primaries, it's actually like the general election. But Sam Wright and she had a very, very elongated, animated campaign for that Congressional seat.

Winslow: Did you work on any of her campaigns, which sent her to Albany or to Washington prior to '72?

Green: No. I was just a supporter from a distance—an admirer. I was at that time—as a matter of fact I was in college at the time still. I was away from the city. But Mrs. Chisholm was a real, you might say, stellar giant in our lives, especially Political Science majors. We saw that as the clarion call that there was a time changing and that we would have an opportunity as young people coming out of school to actually participate in electoral politics. Mrs. Chisholm being a woman, as well as from the Central Brooklyn community, she gave us all of the most important ingredients that cause for challenge. And at that time coming out of the sixties into the seventies, we saw ourselves challenging the system in order to change it. Not so much challenging it from a radical challenge, but challenging it utilizing electoral politics. And Mrs. Chisholm was the standard bearer for this moment in our history.

Winslow: When you worked on her campaigns what tasks did you do, when you say you were a campaign worker? Did you leaflet, stuff envelopes, what did you do?

Green: All of the above. My main task was I did photographs. I am a photographer. My main task was always following Mrs. Chisholm at events, sort of memorializing the

things that she was doing through still photography. Wherever she went, whether she was out campaigning we followed her and took pictures. And these pictures would then later be used in either literature or whatever. We had documentation of her moving around central Brooklyn.

Winslow: And this is '76 on?

Green: Yeah.

Winslow: Who else...how large was her staff? Who else was there? This is the Brooklyn staff?

Green: Yeah this is the Brooklyn office. My sister worked in that office Maria Green, Victor Robles. And then the giant in that office that was behind the whole scene-the kind of glue that kept us all together the great MacD. Holder, Wesley MacD. Holder.

Winslow: When did she have her break with MacD. Holder?

Green: I would assume after that campaign if my memory serves me correct. But that campaign was Mac Holder's. I guess that might have been his swan dance that campaign, because that was a major, major, major one. As I said again the challenge was that these were both; there was a daughter of Brooklyn and a son of Brooklyn both running. And, both had legitimacy within the central Brooklyn community, both had a strong following. And they were not that far apart in terms of their sentiments to Brooklyn, the people they served. So it came down to very, very strong campaign on the part of Mrs. Chisholm in order to present herself as being the better of the two candidates that we would have to choose.

Winslow: How did she raise money for her campaigns?

Green: She raised it the old fashioned way. She had folks who did their luncheons or coffee sessions. The first time I got a view of people doing things right in their own living rooms; small donors, just making small donations. People that believed in what Mrs. Chisholm stood for made small donations. It wasn't like she had major sources, it was just the little people in Brooklyn Central that believed in her and gave her their support.

Winslow: And what was she like with her constituents? Describe how often she met with them, how she met with them, what she did?

Green: Every time Mrs. Chisholm was in Brooklyn she was somewhere. I remember she liked to go into the housing complexes: The Marcy Houses, the Tompkins Houses, and she went a lot into the churches. She sort of nurtured her constituents. Everyone who came to see her in her office was very special. Her office was right here in Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration, on Fulton Street. And you walked downstairs Mrs. Chisholm was stopped by people, who just would walk up to her with a small issue or major issue. And, Mrs. Chisholm would take time out of whatever she was doing to focus in and listen. She had a very, how you might say, sensitive, compassionate attitude towards her constituents and I think that's what made her a cut above special because it's almost like she took each of her constituents and nurtured them in her arms, and gave them the kind of tender loving care that they deserved as human beings. As well that they are the ones who elected her and sent her to office, so her job was to keep them happy and she never lost sight of that.

Winslow: Do you know what community groups she was more active with or worked with in Central Brooklyn?

Green: I know she worked very closely with the various Democratic clubs. The agents themselves right now I would say—if my memory serves me—a lot of the tenants' associations, a lot of the block associations. Whenever she would have a key meeting or there would be a gathering of some kind, it would be mainly the blocks and what have you. The very grassroots agencies. Not the more organized power bases, but the more grassroots day-to-day folks. PTA's—she was very big on education, so it would be a thing where teachers and others in that venue would come up and be supportive of what Mrs. Chisholm stood for, but at the same time it would be sort of expected the kind of reciprocation from Mrs. Chisholm, which they got.

Winslow: And what do you know about her role in the formation of Medgar Evers College and her relationship with Medgar Evers?

Green: That is a great question because...the reason why I am saying that is because we have been exploring that more and more lately. I went over the listing and I didn't see her signing off on it, but maybe because of her being in Congress she did not sign off on that initially.

Winslow: You mean she was in Washington as apposed to Albany because Albany...

Green: Yeah.

Winslow: Had to sign off on that?

Green: Yeah, at that point in time...because if you remember Medgar came about in the early seventies and Mrs. Chisholm had already went to Congress, I think she went to Congress in 1970.

Winslow: '68.

Green: '68 was her first and '70 being her second term in Congress.

Winslow: Right.

Green: She helped birth Model Cities. Meaning in Albany she worked with the Model Cities piece and then when she went to Washington she maintained that. And the things that came out of Model Cities the inner city schools here, meaning Medgar Evers College and other institutions that grew out of the model cities, the jobs for youth, the LRU all those programs were Mrs. Chisholm's pet programs that she maintained when she went down to Washington. It gave us an opportunity to have someone down there, on the floor of Congress that was lobbying to keep these programs going because of their importance in inner cities, not only the inner cities of Brooklyn, but the inner cities throughout the nation.

Winslow: She was also very proud of her sponsorship of SEEK?

Green: Yeah, SEEK was that brainchild which was again her connecting this with education. It was like having a teacher in Congress at all times, having a professor in Congress, whose major input would always be around education. She always pushed education agendas, which was a good piece especially at that particular time in our history.

Winslow: How would you define her as a legislator, in what you know of her history?

And you came back to Brooklyn, when did you come back to Brooklyn again?

Green: I came back to Brooklyn on and off from about '75, '76. As a legislator in Washington, I mean we knew her bills got through, we knew she had such a schedule, I remember her always back and forth. Even during the campaign period, Mrs. Chisholm was back and forth; sometimes she would go down in the morning and come back up in the evening, to be on the floor to vote for a bill. She would always have that were-with-

all that even though she was holding down Brooklyn— which she did very well—she had that responsibility in Washington and she always found herself managing both worlds sometimes, whether sometimes I think she would even go down by car and back up or by plane, but she was back and forth always so I know she did her piece on the floor. Being that the kind of person that she was she would always have a tremendous attitude about not missing votes because she was that kind of precision kind of individual.

Winslow: Did she ever talk to you about her campaign, 1972?

Green: Not directly, but you know a lot of the things that she mentioned about herself after '72, after that campaign for President grew out of her, sort of took her onto another plane in how she ran her Congressional seat. That she has put herself now in a position where she was like that fountain of hope, fountain of faith, or fountain of strength for the other legislators, we always talk about the Chisholm Cubs that began to come. So that campaign of 1972, as I said before, was sort of a lightning bolt for the others, whether the people came from other areas, whether it was a Barbara Jordan and others. The impotence of her Presidential run, even though we would think that the Congressional seats that we were able to garner, the Assembly seats or the Council seats may have not been, of course, not as major as a Presidential run, but what that Presidential movement did for the Chisholm Cubs who came after her and for the community as a whole, took us to a whole other level politically. And how Mrs. Chisholm would always almost, we almost like saw her as the best President we never had. And she acted like she had been in that glory moment and you could sense that her glory moment was the fact that she stepped out and ran that campaign for President. And it was a legitimate campaign in the sense that she had all intentions to do what had to be done to win that election. As we

know she fell short and things happened that didn't happen, the votes that she had expected, the support she had expected didn't happen. But I think that it was a major victory for Mrs. Chisholm and for the Chisholm Cubs that came behind.

Winslow: When she would speak, I mean she was really known for childcare and education, those were two key things, but she was very well known for speaking on issues like abortion of course, civil rights. And did she speak about those issues in this community? And also your thoughts on what you remember if she ever spoke about the Black Nationalism that emerged: Black Power?

Green: Well Mrs. Chisholm's whole thing was she...let's take the last one first. We began to see Mrs. Chisholm, as the, not so much as the antithesis to the Black Nationalist movement at that time, but Mrs. Chisholm offered us an option to that whole movement. Mrs. Chisholm's option was that we could attain the status in the society through electoral politics. Which at that time if you really think about it, we had not had that many high visible examples of electoral politics as being a method of us getting to that promise land of civil rights. And it had been after Dr. King had left and Malcolm had left, Medgar, all these leaders had been assassinated, whether the strong nationalists, whether the civil rights...so Mrs. Chisholm offered us the option that it wasn't all bleak. That we had the leadership that had left, that there was still a lot of living left for us to do in terms of movement and that was through electoral politics. Now on the other side of it, she was the example that we sort of needed, without her actually stepping out and raising a clenched fist. Mrs. Chisholm's clenched fist was that she backed down from no discussions. I remember when Jimmy Carter was running for President and he made way here to Brooklyn. And we met... as a matter of fact, she met him right here at Brooklyn

College. There was a big gathering at the College that day, but Mrs. Chisholm wasn't in the audience, Mrs. Chisholm was the person who introduced Brooklyn to Jimmy Carter. And I remember how because I was right there with her at the time. And I remember how President Carter sort of said, well this is the ring that I come to kiss in Brooklyn, I have to kiss this ring of the great political leader of Brooklyn. And just the way her grace and the way she carried herself, it made us all—even if it wasn't the super nationalist—it made us all proud to know here was a woman from our very mists, from our very community, lived right on President Street, who carried the torch for us and carried the torch so well. And she didn't carry it with rhetoric, she carried it with action, that Unbought and Unbossed speech was sort of her every day living. That campaign I remember was a lot of twisting and turning and pulling and Mrs. Chisholm always stayed her course. She never got caught into the fray when the arguments and the discussions started, she never got caught into that, she would just stay in her course and allow them to come up to her level and not let her go down to the others level.

Winslow: Did you know Conrad (Chisholm), her husband?

Green: Yes I knew him, not as well as her because he was a very behind the scene kind of person.

Winslow: And her sisters?

Green: Not directly again. Just in passing, either you know in the office or at times whether it be at events or what have you. But Conrad I met him a few times. As a matter of fact, the day Mrs. Chisholm finally was moving off President Street, I remember it was a Saturday and we helped her. You know we were there to help her move the things and pack the vans and stuff.

Winslow: Excuse me, was she moving out of Brooklyn then? Or just to a different address?

Green: I think to a different address in Brooklyn, I knew she was moving off of President Street and it's been a while now. I don't think she was moving out of Brooklyn at that time because she went to Buffalo after she retired from Congress. She might have moved somewhere else in Brooklyn, but I know she moved off of President Street, that I remember.

Winslow: And all you campaign workers helped her move?

Green: Yeah we helped her move, you know it was like a thing, where Mrs. Chisholm was sort of like a motherly or big sister kind of feeling beyond just, she was just this Congresswoman. You know Mrs. Chisholm she kind of made you feel personable towards her, she was a personable individual. Even the last time I got to see her, I thought it was actually in the early nineties and she gave me an award, her day care center Shirley Chisholm Childhood, I am trying to remember the name of the group, but it was part of her. And she came down to the event at Restoration in the auditorium and I remember being behind the stage, it was just, it was like maybe 15 years later but we warmed right back up and started a conversation, you know it was like real personable as always. She had been out of politics now and she was this private citizen, but she still maintained her same exuberant spirit that she had at that time.

Winslow: Can you remember anything about—did she have any sort of hobbies? Any sort of interesting personality traits, quirks?

Green: Loved to dress, she dressed always meticulous. If you noticed her earrings were always there she always dressed, so I guess fashion was probably one of her hobbies. But

that I always remember, so meticulous, her nails and her dress and everything was always matching. Even at 9:30, 10 o'clock at night, we were going still to another event that Mrs. Chisholm would always look like she just started the day. She was always committed to her work so I don't know what she did on her down time.

Winslow: I heard she loved to dance.

Green: You know who can tell you a lot about that, Bill. Bill Howard because he was one of her dance partners, they would go out and he would always, in fact Bill would always talk about how Mrs. Chisholm would always wait for him as her partner to dance, so make sure when you speak with him he's going to talk about her dancing.

Winslow: What haven't I asked that you could help us with?

Green: Well if you look now, you have to make Mrs. Chisholm contemporaneous and in making Mrs. Chisholm contemporaneous as we see what happens today in politics, as we see this present election that we are involved in now. That both the candidates in the Democratic Party embody what Mrs. Chisholm started out. This is her moment in history that she initiated, as Dr. King said, "He would not only get to the mountaintop, but he wouldn't get to go into the promise land." In these folks having such a high level of visibility, Senator Clinton and Barack Obama, their at the mountain top now and actually I can say almost went into the political promise land who ever ends up in the White House, next year in January. They have raised the level of a black and a female, in both of those candidates are embodied Mrs. Chisholm. And her seriousness about her candidacy, I think I have seen the most serious of the candidates in this primary than I have ever seen over the course of time the others that came before—woman or black. So if we make her contemporaneous I think that would be what I would like to bring into the

general discussion. That the power of Mrs. Chisholm's movement back in the 1970s, in the early seventies when she started this whole movement is manifesting this afternoon and in so doing I think this—whether it was planned this way or not—but this testament to Mrs. Chisholm could not be more timely. Because for a long time I think Mrs. Chisholm's impact had been forgotten.

Winslow: I want to focus on that for a second. Why do you think that is true? Why do you think that is?

Green: Well I don't think the world realized the impact of the statement that Chisholm made. It hadn't been told, I can mention Chisholm in my own classes and I'll see the response that I get from my students. What happened is that society played a part in that to sort of downplay the impact of Chisholm's political moment, in the political limelight because it was just completely out of time, out of place. So that was a kind of ironic piece of memory, political memory that the society chose at that moment to brush aside. And what you saw beyond that was just the result of that brushing aside. We didn't have the luxury of technology at that time to really be able to spread Mrs. Chisholm's message out there. The media that choose to cover her did it in a limited way, so therefore what we see today is a result of a whether I would say a conscious or unconscious moment to kind of negate that, that didn't really happen lets move that out of the path of history, but now 30 years—almost 40 years later we are bringing it back to life again. And now we have the great moment in our own history of the technology, so what happens, what I would like to hear, the two Democratic candidates that are running now paying homage and credence to who was their Abraham—their political Abraham. Who was that individual who we all say is our, whether it's a black candidate or a white candidate, it's a candidate

that would not normally be out there, who would be their guru and I think Mrs. Chisholm would be that individual. So bringing her contemporaneous now I think it's a good moment and it couldn't have been better timed than right now and where students in the future now will be able to link what is happening now in terms of the political scene now to its genesis. And by so being able to do so you're able to get the fullness of those young people who are going to be going after elected offices. They're going to be able to go back and study the run of Mrs. Chisholm. Go back and study her ethics, go back and study her commitment to what she stood for. Without having—imagine if Mrs. Chisholm had the luxury of the technology that we had today back in the time when she ran. How she would have been able to bring this whole country, like you see what happens now, she would have been able to wake this whole country up. We have now advanced ourselves politically by about 20 years and we are going to jump start this thing to where we are today, but I think that is more important than anything else I liked to see. That the next time you go down to Rutgers and look at her papers, that you have seen thousands and thousands of hits of people to come by and see what she was doing. We should be able to get that same archives, some of that archives right here at Brooklyn College, Medgar Evers and the other Central Brooklyn institutions. Where we could make this happen, where the students would know and the scholars would know, you know what people are doing. I know somebody was doing a dissertation the other day; he came and interviewed me the other day about Chisholm, which was very interesting. He was doing a dissertation on Brooklyn central politics and he came and we spoke about Chisholm. It is coming alive and as I said again, I have to commend the efforts on the part of you and this institution and what we are doing here at Medgar. That we are going to rekindle the

flames and the spiritual flames that Chisholm had brought to the political arena, to say that you know her campaign was run with such grassroots, she had no major money. Even her Congressional races didn't have major financing that was one of the things that we always had to be scraping and moving and doing things. You know carpools and all kinds of little things to save money; we would volunteer at the polls. People would be paid by the other groups to poll watch during Election Day. We would all volunteer; Chisholm's volunteers would come out from early, early morning and work the whole shift of the poles being open. And we did it just because that was our person that was running and know that she didn't have it, where the other candidates would have the were with all to pay their people.

Winslow: I think that's good, thank you.