

**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**

**Gloria Steinem
Keynote Address, Shirley Chisholm Day**

**Tuesday, November 25, 2008
Brooklyn College, Brooklyn New York**

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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 ones 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.

Abstract: This keynote address, by Gloria Steinem's contextualizes Shirley Chisholm's life within her early upbringing Barbados. She discusses the 1968 Democratic primary in which James Farmer (Congress of Racial Equality) ran against Shirley Chisholm, as well as the importance of her 1972 Presidential campaign. She ends by commenting on the importance of paying tribute to Shirley Chisholm's legacy.

Interview Context

This keynote address took place at Brooklyn College in the Woody Tanager Auditorium during our 2008 celebration of Shirley Chisholm Day. Steinem addressed a standing room only crowd, there is background noise from the audience

Narrator

Gloria Steinem was born on March 25, 1934 in Toledo, Ohio. A feminist activist, organizer and writer whose commitment to progressive issues and ideals spans five decades, she has been a leading figure in the women's liberation movement.

Steinem earned a BA in 1956 from Smith College. After graduation, she was awarded a travel fellowship to India. Upon her return to the U.S. in 1958, Steinem settled in New York City where she wrote articles on politics and culture for numerous publications including *Esquire*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *New York, Show* and *McCall's*. In 1972, she helped to found the still published landmark feminist journal, *Ms.* magazine. An influential international voice on the status of women and other marginalized groups, Steinem is the author of *The Beach Book* (1963), *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983), *Marilyn: Norma Jeane* (1986), *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (1992) and *Moving Beyond Words* (1993).

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).

Restrictions: None

Format: Video recorded, by Marwa Amer on two 40 Minute HD DVCAM tapes.

Transcript: Transcribed by Marwa Amer. Edited for clarity by Barbara Winslow. Reviewed and approved by Gloria Steinem.

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.

Barbara, thank you for that incredible introduction. I mean, you know, I have always wanted to live to be a hundred anyway, but I am going to have to live to be hundred to live up to everything you had to say. And thank you for the kind showing of these photographs. I mean for all of us of an age here, it really brings it back doesn't it? And to think we had to wait almost four decades for what Shirley Chisholm was saying in that clip to even begin to come to true. And the only thing that could be worse than that was if we had lost and we were in this room.

And it's interesting to think back to the days to when sovietized, gosh I haven't heard that in a long time about child care. But Dorothy Pittman Hughes, the first lecture partner I had, who was a child care expert, some of you probably remember her, was often confronted by someone in an auditorium in those days, who would rise up in the back and say to her "Go home to Russia where you belong," and she an African women would just laugh and say, "You think that's where I belong?"

And of course speaking with Flo Kennedy, lots of you remember Flo Kennedy right? Great civil rights lawyer and activist and that was always better. She had even better comebacks because people would often say, a man would rise in the back and say, not like any of the men in this room of course, and say, "Are you lesbian because, or are you lesbians because what else would a white and black women be doing traveling together?" And she had the perfect answer; she always said, "Are you my alternative?" Perfect right?

And I have to say on behalf of Walter Cronkite and the bonnet thing that at the 1972 convention, he said on camera about the challenge, to the delegate challenge that was going on because of the new open process. We were challenging the South Carolina

delegation credentials and he not quite understanding this challenge looked down and said “Well you know next time I’ll be talking about left handed Lithuanians.” And he got so much mail about that, that he actually called me up and took me to lunch and apologized. So I want to say that Walter Cronkite is one of the few people of that era who ever actually apologized and changed his ways.

And thinking about being here, you know I don’t usually write speeches, because I like to be able to look at folks and be more spontaneous and so on. And I actually sat down and wrote this speech and I was telling myself that it was because I knew I had thirty minutes and there wasn’t a Q and A and so I should really behave. But actually I understand that, that’s not it, its Shirley. I am still afraid of Shirley after all these years. And anyone who knew her would understand why. Afraid in the best sense that is, she always wanted you to be your best though.

But we are here today to honor this very history making women, who indeed is so history making that I think there is a danger that we may feel that she is unlike us, that she is completely different, that she is even a miracle. After all, she put herself forward for what is arguably the most powerful position of leadership on earth. And perhaps even more miraculous she did this despite the fact that no one that who looked like her had ever occupied or even sought that position before. We are gathered only five days after she would have been 84 and I say that with great sorrow to show what a loss she was, she is to us. And this is also of course the 40th anniversary of her election to Congress and the 36th anniversary for her candidacy for the Presidency. Yet the truth is when I sat down and started to think about coming to see all of you and be together in this room I found myself imagining, not only Shirley Chisholm, the elegant, smiling, very

grown up and self-willed women I knew, but instead a little girl named Shirley Anita St. Hill who came into my imagination.

A child who was born here in Bed-Stuy then sent, when she was only four years old sent to live on her grandmother's farm in Barbados together with her three sisters who were even younger. It must have seemed a terrible irony to their young parents who had left the islands at a time of great famine for the promise of a better life in America. In fact life in this wealthy country still in the Depressions turned out to be tough enough to make the island a refuge for 6 years of their daughter's lives. And they were right to do the painful thing and send their daughters to Barbados, not only because that could give them sun and green fields and beaches as a replacement for bricks and concrete and worry, but also for two even more important reasons. First Shirley and her sisters would be with their maternal grandmother, a role model of strength and love and refuge. A woman the grown up Shirley would often cite as a major influence in her life even though she only lived with her until Shirley was 10. As Shirley said her grandmother was her first black female role model of strength.

And second there was the cultural of Barbados itself, one in which the everyday figures of respect and authority were also of African descent. This island population was composed of indigenous groups whose general agricultural life had been decimated by the arrival of Europeans and enslaved cargos stolen from their own lives and cultures mostly in West Africa. Somehow despite the violence and the servitude, the sheer numbers of surviving so called Irawak Indians plus many more West Africans eventually evolved into a majority representative government with a minority white presence at the top that was mainly titular. Even before that was, even before this sub continent of ours

had fought a revolution for our own self-government. Barbados came first, indeed Barbados was part of the inspiration for the US Constitution, just as the Iroquois confederacy here was a direct inspiration. So as a little girl Shirley saw authority figures of African descent, but mostly male and in the European patriarchal ideal imposed on the reality of families that were often female headed. Membership in the British Commonwealth brought the odd exception of British Queens whose likeness were literally everywhere from coins to the school heads.

For many reasons Barbados had literacy and life expectancies rates that were as high and very often higher than in the United States and a crime rate that was definitely lower. When Bajan's migrated to the United States they earned more than the average African Americans whose family had been here for generations and the same as the average European American. Indeed had this had not been a racist society they probably would have earned more than the average European American, since immigrants from Barbados were often even better educated than their white counterparts.

I say all this because as, Shirley Chisholm would often explain in later life, "more is caught than taught." True she had never seen a women or an African American in the White House, but she had see the intimate model of her grandmother running a farm with accepted command. The daily role models of teachers and police and other authority figures who looked like her and one has to say given Shirley's regal bearing and habit of speaking of herself in the third person, for which she would later become famous, perhaps a little bit of those British queenly images also often rubbed off.

So I imagine a little girl from age four to ten, straight backed, bone thin, dark skinned and serious yet with a smile that was wide and sunny whenever it came. I see

her running on sun worn dirt roads looking out across an ocean that linked her to other continents including this one and including one that had once been her own. I see her walking to school in a well-worn uniform that was always washed and starched and coming home to her grandmother who was the embodiment of confidence. From her Shirley learned early that she was not more important than anyone else, but she was not less important either. Of course Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm like each one of us in this room today was also a unique combination of millennium upon millennium of environment and hereditary combined in a way that could never have happen before in quite the same way and could never happen again in quite the same way.

Everyone who has ever been a baby knows there is a person already inside that baby we are not blank slates. Yet we are also the only creatures born into the world at such an undeveloped state of brain growth that we are also uniquely subject to this world. Perhaps the single most important quality of Shirley's upbringing was that it seems to have honored and supported what was already within her. This early life helps to explain the young women who achieved so much at public high school in Brooklyn, that she was offered scholarships at both Oberlin College and Vassar College. When those scholarships couldn't meet her additional financial needs she came here and excelled at Brooklyn College.

It helps to explain her excelling in education as a profession, one of the few fields open to an educated black women in the 1940s. Plus not only studying for a Masters Degree in Early Childhood Education at Columbia University and eventually running two childcare centers. But also becoming one of the few women in her local political organization the 17th Assembly District Democratic Club. There she experienced

condescension from African American male leadership and also learned that because of the racial gerrymandering of her congressional district, there were more African Americans in Bed-Stuy than there were residents of all races in many, many major cities. Yet they had no representation at all in Congress. It helps to explain why when disagreements with the male club leadership became too great in 1960 Shirley did a very Shirley thing. She formed an alternate organization, The Unity Democratic Club. Then in 1964 she ran and won an election to the New York State Assembly becoming its only woman and one of only eight African American members.

However, I don't mean to imply and Shirley would never imply that she or anyone of us in this room can accomplish such feats alone. We are communal creatures and by definition every movement is only composed of many people moving. If it had not been for the long civil rights struggle that had achieved the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for instance there would have not been the motivation to redraw the gerrymandered Brooklyn Congressional districts. Had it not been for the court case brought by Andrew W. Cooper, an African American businessman, who went on to write for the *Amsterdam News*, publish his own newspaper and inspire generations of young journalists with his motto "speaking truth to power." There would not have been a 1967 court case, ironically called *Cooper vs. Power* that created the Congressional District in which Shirley was to defeat other African American candidates and make history as the first in Washington.

There inside her was a straight-backed little girl from Barbados, inside that forty-four world, underfinanced female candidate, there was that little girl, whom pulled up in a sound truck outside housing projects and announced to all within many blocks, "Ladies

and gentlemen, this is fighting Shirley Chisholm coming through.” There was a confident student in a starched uniform inside the candidate who dressed with an elegance not typical of the 1960s, as if to say this shows my respect for myself and for you. There was someone who knew the importance of prolonging in the Bajan accent, a candidate who addressed the crowds of Hispanic voters in fluent Spanish.

And there was the spirit of her grandmother within in the candidate whose opponent in the general election was James Farmer a principal in the civil rights movement and cofounder of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality who ran on the Republican and Liberal lines. Remember those were the days when the Republican Party was centrist. He made the whole election turn on the issue of gender, on the so-called “unnatural matriarchy,” within the Black community. Perhaps under the influence of Patrick Moynihan’s idea that only patriarchy was normative thus showing he only knew the European model, not the matrilineal one of balance that been normative in West Africa. Farmer argued that, “Women have been in the drivers’ seat too long,” that the district needed “a man’s voice in Washington.” Chisholm countered that quote, “There were Negro men in office before I came five years ago, but they didn’t deliver, I’m here because there was a vacuum.” Her freshman class in Congress included such prominent African men as Louis Stokes, of Ohio and Bill Clay of Missouri, but Chisholm was the only new elected woman of any description to enter Congress in 1969.

No wonder she so often said that in her personal experience being a women in politics had been even more difficult than being an African American in politics. This was the brave and inspirational woman who entered my life when I began to read about her singular presence in Albany and wonder who is this woman and then to support her in

her race for Congress. This was the Congresswoman who became a key founder of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971 along with Congresswoman Bella Abzug and Patsy Mink. Having climbed a tenuous ladder herself she not only didn't pull the ladder up behind her, she strengthened it and she extended it. This was the exacting women who made me feel that I should mind my "p's" and "q's" and perhaps rethink my blue jeans at NWPC meetings. If you note in photos of our founding press conference that I was wearing a dress it was entirely due to Shirley Chisholm. This was the woman who then had the courage to declare her own Presidential candidacy in the explosive year in 1972 and for whom I deserted Senator George McGovern for whom I had campaigned in the previous election. Thus annoying his campaign because they had to spend money identifying our slate. Which you saw on the picture Barbara held up, as pledged to Chisholm and not to McGovern. Of course our Chisholm slate lost, as we knew it would, but it was worth every bit of effort to everyone one of us on it.

And this was the woman from whom I received what I still consider to be my greatest honor in political life because she was able to get on the ballot in only six states. Though she ran a national Presidential campaign, she was blocked from the series of debates during the Presidential primaries, despite the concept of equal time, which then we had and now we have lost. Indeed I believe right wing radio is campaigning right now in a 100 percent fear that we might return to equal time. As my friend Flo Kennedy said, "She was not blacked out or blocked out, she was whited out." She in fact, Chisholm had to bring legal action in order to get on television at all. And even then she wasn't allowed into the debates themselves, she was allowed only one speech. Some of us remember this and I hope maybe it is here in the archives.

And the still unmatched moment of pride in my life was that she asked me to write it. Of course it was always her message and it was only my listening to her speech that made me able to do it. Nonetheless I'll never forget watching television hearing Shirley speak words that I had worked so hard to make worthy of her and of the historic occasion. I remember sensing my own tears and the thought if only this moment had been the result of all these years it would have been worth it. And as some of you here will understand, Diane, oddly this same 1972 effort was to become the cause one of my most painful moments 22 years later when I read an account of the campaign in Paula Giddings important book, *When and Where I Enter*. It said that Shirley felt I had not supported her whole-heartedly that I should have campaigned for her even the in states where she was not on the ballot.

I accepted this sadly. After all she had also taken Congressman Ron Dellums to task with much more toughness than she did me, even though he had defied the Black Congressional Caucus to support her and only supported Mc Govern at the very end when he had to. So though I have worried about it in my mind for years, none the less I just chalked this up to the queenly and lonely heart of my friend Shirley Chisholm who had been forced to go at it alone so often that even a hug could sometimes hit a bruise. Now that I have seen *Unbought and Unbossed*, the wonderful documentary thanks to Shola (Lynch), I finally after all these years have come, I think to understand I am so grateful for this documentary. It's like solving a puzzle because in one of her last interviews Shirley said, "Out of all those women that was in our cause, Gloria Steinem was the only one who really kinda held on, but she could not even go all the way." She said quote, "Shirley Chisholm is good for the cause and everything, but I think George

Mc Govern is great." "I mean that kind of double strategy you know." Now what I actually said was "George Mc Govern was the best white male candidate," never able to resist a wise crack and I did not understand that it had been heard differently all those years ago. Seeing that small but crucial difference at the bottom of a misunderstanding, made me learn and I hope each one of us in this room learn how important it is that we talk to each other about any misunderstanding. Small though it maybe in a long friendship I did not have the sense to just bring it up and now its too late and I can't. I do so here only as an object lesson to myself and to all of us never ever give into silence. Still the last memory I have of Shirley Chisholm is a wonderful warm girlfriend kind of memory and though Shirley didn't put her hand on her hip when she said girlfriend, it was a verbal hip.

We can remember her each time we celebrate this first ever year in which a women and an African American were on the ballot in every state and this almost miracle of an African American in the White House. Shirley, now we can see that widening the leadership talent pool benefits every single American. We can remember never ever to speak of race and sex as if they were mutually exclusive categories. Thus rendering invisible the third of females in this country and a majority of women in the world. We can explain always the presences of racism represses every women because the restriction of our freedom and our bodies, as the means of reproductions is redoubled where ever there is instance on maintaining on a visible difference and thus restricting females. We can remember that today, November 25, is the United Nations day for fighting violence against women which is the most prevalent kind of violence in the world by far and that normalizes all other kinds of violence. It was marked on this day because as we are

remembering we should also remember that it was this day in 1960, that of the brutal assignation of the three Mitabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic on orders of Trujillo. On December 20 we can also tell our friends about the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women that was adopted on that day by the UN General Assembly.

But everyone here will come up with ways to pay tribute to Shirley that I can't even begin to image. Just remember whatever else we do to nurture the unique person inside every child. We have no idea what might be possible if even one generation of children were to be raised with out violence and with respect for the uniqueness of each one. Support the next Shirley Chisholm. She would want you to.