

**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**

**Joyce Bolden  
Interviewed by BARBARA WINSLOW**

**Monday, March 10, 2009  
Home of Joyce Bolden  
Brooklyn, New York**

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This interview is part of the  
Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism 1945 to the Present  
Archive Collection

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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 interview focuses on Joyce Bolden’s experiences, as a staff person in Shirley Chisholm’s Brooklyn Congressional office. Bolden worked closely with Chisholm on day care legislation and community service programs. In the interview she also discusses Shirley Chisholm’s personal clothing style and her experiences doing her hair and make up on occasion.

### **Interview Context**

The interview took place at the home of Joyce Bolden, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NY on March 10, 2009 and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Present for the interview was Joyce Bolden, the narrator; Barbara Winslow, interviewer; and Marwa Amer, audio/video recording. There maybe some background noise from cars, buses and other vehicles passing by on the street.

### **Narrator**

**Joyce Bolden** is a life-long resident of Brooklyn and has been active in her community for more than four decades. In the 1970’s she served as Congressional Aid to Shirley Chisholm in her Brooklyn office, working with her on day-care legislation, community service programs, and housing. Ms Bolden worked with several politicians and community leaders to develop a housing complex for senior citizens. She has served on many community boards and played a significant role in the implementation of day-care and welfare reform legislation. One of the outcomes of her work has been the implementation of a program that provides employment to fathers who utilize day-care for their children.

### **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 40 Minute HD DVCAM tapes.

**Transcript:** Transcribed by Marwa Amer. Edited for clarity by Barbara Winslow. Pending approval by Joyce Bolden.

**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 Winslow: I am Barbara Winslow of the Brooklyn College School of Education and the Women Studies. I am recording the memories that New Yorkers and others have about Shirley Chisholm and Brooklyn women's activism and its long-term significance. If you choose to take part in this project I will ask you a series of open-ended questions about your life and memories. The interview may be audio taped, videotaped or both. The interview will approximately take one-to-two hours. There are no anticipated benefits to participation and the risks associated with oral history are likewise not known to be significant. However, you can withdraw from the interview at anytime without prejudice prior to the execution and delivery of a deed of gift. You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions in the deed of gift. During the interview, you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event you choose to withdraw during the interview any tape made of the interview will either be given to you or destroyed. Subsequent to the provision of the paragraph below, upon completion of the interview the tape and content of the interview belong to Barbara Winslow and the information in the interview can be used by Professor Barbara Winslow in any matter she will determine, including, but not limited to future use in presentation and publication. I agree, Barbara Winslow that I will not use or exercise any of my rights to the information in the interview prior to the signing of the deed of gift. The deed of gift will be submitted to you for your signature before the interview or if you choose after the interview. Restrictions on the use of the interview can be placed in the deed of gift by you and will be accepted as amending Professor Winslow's right to the content of the interview. Upon signing the deed of gift a recording will be kept in the possession of

Barbara Winslow in the Brooklyn College library archives. If you have questions about research projects and procedures you may contact Professor Winslow at 2403 James Hall, Brooklyn College, (718) 951-5000 ext. 6478. If you feel that you have not been treated according to the description that I have outlined or that your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project you may contact Professor David Balk, Chair of the Committee on the Rights and Welfare of Human Subjects at Brooklyn College. You are Ms. Joyce Bolden and you understand what I have just read to you?

**Joyce Bolden:** Yes.

BW: Okay, could you please provide us with a brief biographical sketch about your life here in Brooklyn or your life?

**Bolden:** Or my life, (laughter) my wonderful life. I've lived in Brooklyn all my life actually and I have lived here in this apartment for over forty years, which I love very much. I love the Crown Heights community of which I have been very, very active in a lot of events and political affairs and political elections, and particularly that of daycare and I've worked on some welfare reform legislation and daycare legislation. I am the mother of three children. Unfortunately I have lost one child, which to me is the most painful experience in my life—the loss of a child. He was 31 years of age and it took me quite some time to come to terms with dealing with that, but as time passes on the healing is better—so I am okay with that. I just made seventy years old, which I am very proud of and a lot of us don't live that long. My mother unfortunately was only here for 26 years and my son, as I mentioned he expired when he was 31. So I feel very privileged to be here for seventy years and have had the opportunity to experience many—many things

in my life, which have helped me to grow and mature to be the woman that I am in my life that I am today.

BW: How did you meet Shirley Chisholm?

**Bolden:** Ahh, well that is part and parcel of my involvement with my community affairs and I was involved with the political club that Shirley Chisholm was affiliated with. And that's how I was introduced to Shirley.

BW: What was the name of the political club, do you remember?

**Bolden:** It escapes me right now; I know the name of it-it'll come back to me. It was a political club right here in the Brooklyn area of course. And so with that involvement there was a campaign for her Congressional office at the time, which I became involved with. And then the campaign for her at the time that she ran for the President of the United States and so after that was when I had began actually working for her in her office.

BW: Chisholm, like you was a tremendous advocate of childcare, daycare. Could you talk about areas where you worked together in this area?

**Bolden:** Oh yes, she was very interested in childcare and at that time there was pending legislation under President Nixon and she was very involved in the legislation and I, as a new mother was involved with the daycare and that's how I also became involved and had the opportunity to represent her at various daycare meetings and developing knowledge of course with the legislation that was pending, which was helpful. So that is how I became involved with her, with the daycare legislation that was related to Mrs. Chisholm as she was working diligently on that legislation.

BW: Were these meetings that you attended in Brooklyn mainly?

**Bolden:** Yes, mainly in Brooklyn.

BW: And were they community, union, can you remember or describe any of the meetings?

**Bolden:** Well there were day care; community and I don't recall if any were union. Maybe one or two meetings were union meetings.

BW: The legislation that Chisholm authored when Nixon was President and Nixon vetoed it, would have expanded—would have given federal monies for childcare...

**Bolden:** Yes.

BW: Across the country?

**Bolden:** Across the country yes, yes.

BW: You worked in her office correct?

**Bolden:** Yes.

BW: Beginning in 1968 or?

**Bolden:** Yes. I worked in her office in 1970; I think it was approximately 1970 through 1973.

BW: And what were your responsibilities?

**Bolden:** My responsibilities at that time were clerical, then daycare and community meetings. I was also a part of what was started at that time was the—I sat on the committee of what was called the Brooklyn Women's—it wasn't called the Brooklyn Women's organization. But at that time, before Congresswoman there were two, one was Carol Bellamy and Elizabeth Holtzman, are the two notable politicians that we worked with. I was on a committee and we used to meet at Brooklyn College and we talked about forming the women's organization NOW.

BW: The National Organization for Women?

**Bolden:** Yes, yes. Which Mrs. Chisholm was also involved with, which was really very interesting because at that time women were just about trying to establish their own identity in terms of women's lib (liberation) organizations. So that was part of my responsibility, to meet with those groups as well.

BW: So who else worked in her office while you were there? And tell us what the office was like?

**Bolden:** Well it was a very small intimate office and because her Administrative Director, who was Mr. Wesley 'Mac' Holder, oh he was quite-quite a personality. He was in the office—in the Brooklyn office and Victor Robles and Arlene Dorin and myself. The office was very small, so it just took on...we took on whatever activities and things that needed to be done with campaigns, so it was very involved and very interesting, because it was quite a learning process for me also. I learned so much working with Mrs. Chisholm and being involved in the political arena at that time because it was—at that time Central Brooklyn we had the largest number of elected officials in the country and at that time I think we had the second largest black population in the country also. So it was very interesting, there was a lot of movement with the black politicians and Mrs. Chisholm was the forerunner of so many of them and her office was the meeting place for a lot of discussions and meetings that were to take place because a lot of people respected Mr. McD. Holder very much. He was her political leader and advisor, so people met with him if they were interested or he was interested in supporting a prospective politician at the time.

BW: When she was in Congress how often did she come back to Brooklyn?

**Bolden:** Well she would come back to Brooklyn every weekend because she was then married to Mr. Conrad Chisholm at the time. And unless there were meetings and of course legislation that was pending in Washington and she would have to stay in Washington, but she was here just about every weekend.

BW: And what would they do on the weekends?

**Bolden:** Well I can't account for everything she did on the weekends, except for that she was very involved with a lot of the community affairs and the churches, which she did attend a lot of the meetings or Sunday service at a lot of the churches because they were very involved. And you know Mrs. Chisholm she was respected by so many people, so therefore a lot of people were after her for a lot of things and then there was the Shirley Chisholm Community Action Organization of which I was a part of also. So we were very involved with the children and doing volunteer work with the children, and so she would come back for those meetings as well.

**Bolden:** Could you tell us about your personal relationship with Mrs. Chisholm and I am thinking in terms of your thoughts about her clothes, her dress her style. She dressed impeccably and you knew—I didn't know her personally, I met her briefly once—but you know that she cared a great deal about her public persona?

**Bolden:** Oh yes, most definitely and I had the privilege to make her up on a few occasions.

BW: So you have to tell us about that

**Bolden:** (Laughter) Yes, I had the privilege to make Shirley Chisholm up on a few occasions. Of course as you said Mrs. Chisholm—she dressed impeccably she was beautifully conservatively dressed, dressed for the occasion. She was very elegant and

everything that she wore and of course going to functions she was just like a princess—you know the way she dressed, the way she carried herself—which I admired so much. I respected her so much because she was so articulate and so well educated and she had a wonderful sense of humor, which would keep you laughing at times. So I just enjoyed being around her and like I said I had the fortunate opportunity because I was into modeling also at the time and I was doing makeup and she allowed me to come in and make her up on a few occasions. Mr. McD. Holder didn't agree with it all the time, but anyway she wanted to be made up a little differently so I did do that a few occasions because Mrs. Chisholm did eventually—they bought a house right across the street from me. So that they would come over sometimes, I would prepare dinner for her and for Conrad or they would take dinner home which was convenient for her. So we had a very nice relationship and I was very, very—I feel very privileged to have been a part of her life and a part of her political life because it helped me to grow and to develop into my political awareness and also as a woman.

**Winslow:** Did Mrs. Chisholm ever talk to you about the issues of women's appearance when they are in the public eye? Especially an African American woman who is in the public eye?

**Bolden:** Well in terms of her talking to me about a problem as such or comments about her being in the public eye with her dress and her hair—no she didn't discuss it at length. But there were times she would make comments about the way she looked because you know Mrs. Chisholm was very small and she was very short and of course she did take the time to put a relaxer in her hair. Which she thought would be much more—would help her to look better, more appealing and after she was elected she did wear wigs. And

she did feel a little bit uncomfortable or people made her feel a little bit uncomfortable when she started to run for the President's office, being the first African American woman and the first woman to run for the Presidency of the United States. So there were various and sundry comments made about that, so being in that position, yes people are going to make their comments and I think that she might have been a little bit sensitive to that, yeah.

**Winslow:** Can you comment on her relationship with her husband Conrad Chisholm?

**Bolden:** Well Conrad was very, very protective of Mrs. Chisholm. In that he was there for her all the time, he took care of her personal needs and he looked after her. He prepared dinner for her, he would drive her everywhere that she went; she never drove herself that I know of because I would always see her seated in the back of the car. As a matter of fact because if I were with them, I would be seated in the front of the car.

**Winslow:** She didn't have a driver's license.

**Bolden:** She didn't have a driver's license? Oh I didn't think so, she had never driven. He drove her everywhere she went, he was just very fond of her being who she was at the time and he was very happy with being Mr. Chisholm. So he was there for her all the time, so that's why she was able to move about as comfortable as she was not having a drivers license—I didn't know that—but not driving because he took her everywhere that she had to go.

**Winslow:** Did he go to Washington?

**Bolden:** He went to Washington every now and then yes, but he stayed here most of the time.

**Winslow:** Did you know her second husband James Hardwick?

**Bolden:** No, I did not know him. I didn't have a relationship... I didn't know him, nor did I have a relationship with him like I had with Conrad.

**Winslow:** What did or how did things change after '68 when she is elected to Congress? In terms of, did Mrs. Chisholm change at all? Did your responsibilities in the office change at all?

**Bolden:** Well I think only in terms of-as far as her changing her time was more consumed, she was more consumed by people who were interested and whatever they had that they deemed their problem. Or whatever politicians that were interested in running for office or being a part of or maybe some group or people that she had become involved with that she wanted to see them in certain areas. She was very involved, I know that at that time that Mrs. Chisholm was in Congress and even before then there was new legislation for African American people at that time to get involved in the...anti-poverty programs, which she was very, very involved with. And she was somewhat annoyed because she found that it was good in one sense and then it wasn't so helpful because African Americans needed time to develop proposals for various programs, which were going to be very helpful within the community and that did not happen because they had short time to develop the programs and submit proposals and before they could even get programs started sufficiently, they were right back again writing proposals for the next budget.

**Winslow:** What did you do for her Presidential campaign?

**Bolden:** Oh various and sundry things. It was-that was unlimited. I mean I was there at Vanderbiety's; Vanderberty at that time was the State Senator whose office spearheaded

a lot of the campaign, especially in certain areas because there were campaigns all over. And I was very involved in her campaign from licking envelopes to...

**BW:** Did you go down to Florida for example, for the Florida primary or California?

**Bolden:** Ah no, not at that time because she needed us here in Brooklyn. I didn't go to Florida.

**Winslow:** Did you go to the Convention?

**Bolden:** I went to the Convention; we were all over Manhattan with Harry Belafonte and a lot of the people in show business who were involved, who did fundraising for her. Yes that much I did, yes. I didn't go to Florida.

**Winslow:** But did you go to the convention?

**Bolden:** Yes.

**Winslow:** The convention was in Florida? The nominating Convention was in Florida. Did you go to that?

**Bolden:** No, I didn't go to that.

**Winslow:** You were not involved with that?

**Bolden:** No, I was in Washington for a lot of things, but no I didn't go to that.

**Winslow:** I know Ruby Dee and Harry Belafonte and Ossie Davis were big supporters.

What other celebrities helped Mrs. Chisholm out in this campaign? Do you remember?

**Bolden:** David Fox, Ruby Dee, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, there are so many names I just can't recall right now.

**Winslow:** Yes.

**Bolden:** We're talking about over-almost forty years ago and I can't recall a lot of the names right now, yeah. But there were so many people—a lot of people in the theatre,

who came to Harry Belafonte's apartment on West End Avenue, where a lot of meetings were held there and gatherings were held there. And oh my goodness!

**Winslow:** What do you think was her reaction when she did not get the nomination?

Did she change much; did you see a change in her at all?

**Bolden:** No, no.

**Winslow:** Because she stayed on in Congress.

**Bolden:** I think from a reasonable standpoint, I think that Mrs. Chisholm was well aware of the time in which we were living and I don't know whether she really, she looked forward to hoping to make the kind of impact that she wanted to, but she also understood some realities about what was happening in our country at the time. And least of all did a lot of people think that a woman and especially an African American woman would be able to make that point at that time. But she felt that she led the way, she planted the seed so that maybe the next time she could do that or someone else could do it.

**Winslow:** How do you think Chisholm is—just from of course your vantage—remembered in this community? Crown Heights, Bed Stuy the community she originally represented?

**Bolden:** Oh she is revered in this community and in many other communities, not only by the African American Community, but by the white community as well. Of course at that time also there were very liberal—white liberal groups who were very interested in seeing African Americans make inroads. Not just in politics, but just to makes some inroads and other contributions to our society and Mrs. Chisholm is revered and remembered with a lot of love. And also with a lot of courage, she was a woman with a lot of courage. Which I admired in her also because how many people would have taken

the steps that she had taken knowing and understanding the kinds of things that she might have been subject to at that time. It was not an easy time.

**Winslow:** Is there anything else we should ask you that we haven't?

**Bolden:** If I didn't respond to whether or not she was involved in the community, she was very involved in her own community. As I mention the Shirley Chisholm organization which she was very, very involved with and there were many of us within the community and the surrounding community that were very involved and we volunteered a great deal and gave a lot of our time to the children in the community.

**Winslow:** When she was elected 70% of her district's electorate were women?

**Bolden:** Yes.

**Winslow:** I get a sense that there were just many, many women's organizations and basically these women's organizations were the backbone of what became her electoral district.

**Bolden:** Oh yes.

**Winslow:** Did you get a sense that it was really women campaigning for Chisholm?

**Bolden:** Most definitely.

**Winslow:** Can you describe what you can remember at all? Of what it was like out campaigning whether it was at a church group, handing out leaflets, a fund raising supper or something like that?

**Bolden:** Well it encompassed a great many things, because as you pointed out that there were a lot of women who were involved in that time and that was also during the time of the women's movement that Mrs. Chisholm was so involved with. So therefore she was at the churches, she was at functions. They don't seem to do the kind of things the way

they did then, as they do know. Maybe it's because I am not as involved, but there was so much involvement and the women they just—where ever she went she was revered and they just loved her because she was the forerunner of a lot of things that pertain again not only to black women.

**Winslow:** Did Brooklyn College students support her? Did the faculty or the students at Brooklyn College Support her in like '68, she runs again in '70, runs for President in '72? Do you remember that at all?

**Bolden:** I do not remember a lot of it specifically, but they did support her as well did Medgar Evers and they were a new college at that time.

**Winslow:** I think she played a role in...

**Bolden:** She did, yeah. She played a role in a lot of things that have developed within our community. Yes, yes.

Winslow: And let us end with, would you talk about—I mean I see your life long activism as part of Mrs. Chisholm's legacy, but how would describe her legacy?

**Bolden:** Well I think just that for anybody who's known of her and about her, remembers that what she gave, the impact that she made to the community, to black women, to women in general and I think that they would want to be a part of that. I am so happy to see that there is a program that you have started to at least remember Shirley Chisholm and to talk about the things that are so important and things that she gave. So I'm just happy about that, I am happy to be a part of what you are doing and I feel so privileged, I feel so privileged to be a part of this time being spent to talk about her. Unfortunately I wish that I could remember so many more things.

**Winslow:** I think that's good. Thank you. I think that's very good. I think that we got some very wonderful things.

**Bolden:** Oh good, okay.

**Winslow:** Do you have any comments on her book *Unbought and Unbossed*?

**Bolden:** Yes, I would just like to say that I was just so happy to see that when she came up with the book, that I was there at the time that she finished the book and she had published it. Because I think it was so important for elected officials and people in general to know about how Shirley felt about running for political office and for her title, *Unbought and Unbossed*, was just so significant to what should have-what should be said about running for office and her life in general, which was very significant and interesting because she has lead a very interesting life and family life. So I would just like to say that about her book; it covers those aspects of her life.

**Winslow:** Tell us more about your work with Mrs. Chisholm and daycare?

**Bolden:** Well my involvement with Mrs. Chisholm and daycare afforded me the privilege to be involved with her and with other groups and organizations throughout the city. Where I would go around and talk to people in various daycare organizations and later on it helped me with my own daycare to talk about day care. Daycare was so important at that time when the daycare legislation, when she wrote the daycare legislation in 1972. But through my involvement with Mrs. Chisholm, it helped me tremendously to develop in my knowledge of daycare and my involvement with daycare. And I just wanted to give her tribute—pay tribute to her for that also.

**Winslow:** There are two childcare centers named after her in Brooklyn.

**Bolden:** Yeah, yes I know.

**Winslow:** Is there anymore that you would like to add?

**Bolden:** No not right now.

**Winslow:** Okay, thank you.