

Unlocking the Legacy of Women's Activism

The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism—1945 to the Present continues to expand. And Barbara Winslow, the director of the project, couldn't be more pleased about the new directions it has taken. An associate professor in the School of Education and the Women's Studies Program, Winslow focuses her research on the intersection of class, race, and gender issues in social protest movements. Her first book, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*, tells the story of an important suffragette, peace campaigner, international socialist, and feminist. But the Chisholm Project is more about present-day America, she explains.

Inspired by Assistant Professor of History Philip Napoli's oral history project, "In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn Vietnam Veterans," [See page 6], Winslow conceived the Chisholm Project during her 2006–07 sabbatical. Housed in the Shirley Chisholm Center for Research on Women, the project is also creating an instructional webpage to provide materials to educators interested in developing curricula about Chisholm and other Brooklyn activists.

A daughter of immigrants from Barbados, Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) graduated from Brooklyn College in 1946. As a member of the New York State Assembly from 1964 to 1968, she coauthored legislation that instituted SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), a program that provides funding and guidance to disadvantaged youth. In 1968 she was the first African American woman to be elected to Congress. Her fourteen-year tenure as a Congresswoman for Brooklyn's 12th District was punctuated by several milestones, including the founding of the Black Congressional Caucus. She wrote two books, *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970) and *The Good Fight* (1973). A daring political pioneer, Chisholm's improbable quest for the White House in 1972 was a forerunner of Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns.



As Winslow was hatching the project, a crucial fact came to light: When Chisholm was elected to Congress, her district was 70 percent women. "This changed the scope of things substantially," Winslow says. It meant that Chisholm was the product of a very particular environment and that there were other women activists like her. "The project needed to include them and collect their documents and artifacts," she says.

While Winslow was trying to get funding for the project, the Ford Foundation suggested that she establish partnerships with organizations in Chisholm's district, especially Medgar Evers College, where Winslow has also taught. Medgar Evers President Edison O. Jackson promptly convened a meeting with the college's Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences and gave Professor Maria De Longoria reassigned time to work with Winslow.

"This spring Brooklyn and Medgar Evers cosponsored a conference in which we brought together Chisholm scholars as well as Brooklyn activists to present their research," Winslow says. More than two hundred participants attended the event, including a sizable number of elected officials, and scholars and students from both institutions. "We'll continue to have joint public events and conferences."

Late last fall, Winslow secured a \$200,000 grant from the Westchester Jewish Women's Fund to start the Chisholm Archive, to help collect printed material and artifacts about Chisholm's life and to interview people who knew her, such as her campaign managers and assistants, as well as constituents who were close to her.

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"With the help of Archivist Anthony Cucchiara and Associate Librarian Marianne LaBatto we're going to be filing, classifying, and storing all the stories on Chisholm from the *New York Times*, news footage on her, and materials that former Chisholm aides and assistants have been kind enough to donate," says Winslow.

An educator who develops social studies curricula for elementary and secondary classes, Winslow plans to use multimedia technology to introduce the story of Chisholm's role and of women's political activism in the history of Brooklyn and the nation. "Although the actual archival material in the College library will be accessible for researchers, we're working together to make sure it's also available online," Winslow notes with pride.

The project has developed collaborations with the Weeksville Heritage Center, the Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Rutgers University Library, which houses an archive of Shirley Chisholm's papers. "Our hope is that by March 2009—straddling Black History and Women's History months—we will have one of the most thorough Chisholm archives, live or online," Winslow says.

It's an ambitious project, and Winslow believes the late Congresswoman wouldn't have had it any other way. "But the project is more than teaching about Chisholm's life and legacy," Winslow says. "It's to inspire school kids and give them a sense of the importance of political activism and of being engaged in your community."