Dear Representative Shirley Chisholm...

An Avoice Issue Forum Honoring Her Historic Leadership
Laws will not eliminate prejudice from the hearts of human beings. But that is no reason to allow prejudice to continue to be enshrined in our laws to perpetuate injustice through inaction.

Representative Shirley Chisholm
Congressional Record, Joint Resolution 264
91st Congress, 2nd Session
August 10, 1970
Dear Representative Shirley Chisholm...

An Avoice Issue Forum Honoring Her Historic Leadership

Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.
39th Annual Legislative Conference
September 25, 2009

Moderator
Tiffany D. Cross
Supervising Producer for News & Public Affairs for BET Networks

Panel Participants
The Honorable Barbara Lee (CA-09)
CBC Chair

The Honorable Yvette D. Clarke (NY-11)
2009 Annual Legislative Conference Co-Chair

Ms. Russlynn H. Ali
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education

Rev. LaVerne McCain Gill
Author, African American Women in Congress: Forming & Transforming History

Ms. Shola Lynch
Filmmaker, Unbought & Unbossed: Chisholm ‘72

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Issue Forum Sponsor

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3
Founding Members of the Congressional Black Caucus

Back row (l to r): Representatives Parren Mitchell (D-MD), Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), William Clay, Sr. (D-MO), Ronald V. Dellums (D-CA), George W. Collins (D-IL), Louis Stokes (D-OH), Ralph H. Metcalfe (D-IL), John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI), and Delegate Walter E. Fauntroy (D-DC). Front row (l to r): Representatives Robert N.C. Nix, Sr. (D-PA), Charles C. Diggs, Jr. (D-MI), Shirley Anita Chisholm (D-NY), and Augustus “Gus” F. Hawkins (D-CA)
# Table of Contents

Tribute Letters from Current Members of the Congressional Black Caucus  
In Order of Seniority

Representative John Conyers, Jr. (SC-06) ................................................................. 6  
Representative Charles B. Rangel (NY-15) ................................................................ 7  
Representative Edolphus “Ed” Towns (NY-10) ......................................................... 8  
Representative John Lewis (GA-05) ........................................................................... 9  
Representative Donald M. Payne (NJ-10) .................................................................. 10  
Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC) ...................................................................... 11  
Representative Maxine Waters (CA-35) ..................................................................... 12  
Representative Sanford D. Bishop, Jr. (GA-02) .......................................................... 14  
Representative Corrine Brown (FL-03) ..................................................................... 15  
Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (SC-06) ................................................................. 16  
Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (TX-30) ....................................................... 17  
Representative Bobby L. Rush (IL-01) ...................................................................... 18  
Representative Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (VA-03) .................................................... 19  
Representative Melvin L. Watt (NC-12) ..................................................................... 20  
Representative Chaka Fattah (PA-02) ..................................................................... 21  
Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (TX-18) ............................................................... 22  
Representative Jesse L. Jackson, Jr. (IL-02) .............................................................. 23  
Representative Elijah E. Cummings (MD-07) ........................................................... 24  
Delegate Donna M. Christensen (VI) ......................................................................... 25  
Representative Danny K. Davis (IL-07) .................................................................... 26  
Representative Carolyn C. Kilpatrick (MI-13) ........................................................... 27  
Representative Barbara Lee (CA-09) ....................................................................... 28  
Representative Wm. Lacy Clay (MO-01) .................................................................. 30  
Representative Diane E. Watson (CA-33) ................................................................. 31  
Representative Kendrick B. Meek (FL-17) and Mrs. Leslie Meek ............................. 32  
Representative David Scott (GA-13) ....................................................................... 33  
Representative G.K. Butterfield (NC-01) .................................................................. 34  
Representative Gwen Moore (WI-04) ..................................................................... 35  
Representative Yvette D. Clarke (NY-11) .................................................................. 36  
Representative Keith Ellison (MN-05) ..................................................................... 38  
Representative Henry C. “Hank” Johnson, Jr. (GA-04) ............................................. 40  
Representative Laura Richardson (CA-37) .............................................................. 41  
Representative André Carson (IN-07) ..................................................................... 42  
Representative Donna F. Edwards (MD-04) .............................................................. 43  
Representative Marcia L. Fudge (OH-11) ................................................................. 44  
Senator Roland W. Burris (IL) .................................................................................. 45

## Tributes from Former Staff of Rep. Shirley Chisholm

Ms. Muriel Morisey ................................................................................................... 47  
Ms. Andrea “Tracy” Simmons Holmes ..................................................................... 48  
Ms. Laura W. Murphy ............................................................................................... 50  
Ms. Shirley Downs .................................................................................................... 52  
Dr. Mia Cole .............................................................................................................. 54
Dear Representative Chisholm,

One of America’s great reformers, you dedicated your life to serving the public. From the very beginning, working at a nursery school and as an education expert with the New York City Bureau of Child Welfare, you used your passion for education to push for social change in a world that desperately required reform. Your brilliance in education translated into excellence in public policy when you became my colleague in the House of Representatives in 1969. During your seven terms in office, you continued to teach. In becoming the first black American female elected to the U.S. Congress, you helped teach Americans that this is a country for all types of people. This lesson continued when we were among the cofounders of the Congressional Black Caucus, creating a forum to face the issues impacting black Americans. You also worked to educate Americans on women’s rights, co-founding the National Women’s Political Caucus and supporting the revolutionary Equal Rights Amendment. Even after leaving Congress, you continued your work as a teacher, being named as Purington Chair at Mount Holyoke College and working as a visiting scholar at Spelman College.

I still miss you, my friend and colleague. Your lessons and ideals will impact our society forever.

Sincerely,

John Conyers, Jr.
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley:

Thank you for your friendship, for your contribution to U.S. history and politics, and for your unmatched commitment to public service.

How different would political life in this country be without you? We have come so far because of you.

You changed the trajectory of history by your dramatic move to become the first African American woman elected to Congress, and then, the first woman and African American to run for the Democratic presidential nomination — two groundbreaking achievements empowering our communities to this day.

Since your election to Congress, 27 other African American women have served in Congress, and 6 others have run for the presidency, all of whom have followed in your footsteps.

When we founded the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971, we were a mere 13 members. Now, 38 years later, the caucus has grown to 43 members, and Mr. Barack Obama has become the first African American president. You would be so proud.

Thank you for being a pioneer, who — despite the indignities you endured for first being a woman, and second, an African American born to immigrant parents — overcame challenges to succeed.

Thank you for being a woman of dignity, a woman of grace, a woman of integrity and a true catalyst for equality and real change. Ms. Chisholm, you are an inspiration for not only African Americans or women but for all the American people.

You were a woman ahead of your time. You left a legacy, one that I — and all of your friends here in Congress — cherish and will continue to follow.

And for all these things — and many, many more — I say, thank you.

Sincerely,

Charles B. Rangel
Chairman, Committee on Ways & Means
September 16, 2009

Dear Shirley,

You once said, when asked about your legacy, that you wanted people to remember that you had guts and Shirley, that is something that I do know, I do remember and why it was always an honor to be in your presence.

As someone who has shared your pleasure of representing the hardworking and persevering residents of Brooklyn, I learned so much from you in both your actions and your advice. You never took no for an answer and you kept moving forward even when the door was closed, sometimes slammed, in your face. You did the impossible by becoming the first black woman elected to Congress and made it look easy, but never forgot who you represented, where you came from and how both shaped your outlook on life.

Your friendship to my family was of no comparison and we continue to miss you dearly.

In love and in service,

Your dear friend,

Ed Towns
September 25, 2009

Dear Shirley,

From your days as a teacher to your election as a New York Congresswoman, you have been an example for all Americans to follow. As a student at Brooklyn College, you fought against racism and injustice. As a teacher and later as a New York State legislator, you worked to provide better training for students, and increased funding for schools. As the first African-American congresswoman, you broke barriers and served as a tireless advocate for minorities, women, and children. And as the first African American woman to run for President, you demonstrated your refusal to accept the status quo.

You are one of the founding mothers of contemporary black politics, paving the way for thousands of African American elected officials, including President Barack Obama. This nation will always be indebted to you for making it a more open and inclusive society. Thank you for your committed and dedicated service to our country.

Sincerely,

John Lewis
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley,

You were not only an inspiration to the millions who looked to you with hope and appreciation, you were also a true and loyal friend.

I will never forget your generosity in taking the time to come and speak at an event given for me during my first campaign for Congress in 1980, when I had so few resources or high-profile supporters. You took a chance on me, and every day that I serve I try to live up to the confidence you placed in me all those years ago.

You gave us so much in your “unbought and unbosomed” style. Our hearts swelled with pride as you continually broke new barriers, from becoming the first African American woman to serve in Congress to becoming the first African American to run for the highest office in the land, the Presidency. You were a great role model especially for young African American women, who began to expand the vision of their own futures to include college and professional careers.

Your absence is deeply felt, but your pioneering spirit, your tenacity, and your commitment to those whose concerns became your own, continue to serve as an example to every generation.

Thank you for fighting the good fight when it mattered most. Your courage and your contributions to our communities live on. We will treasure your memory always.

Sincerely,

Donald M. Payne
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley,

This is just one of the “Thank You” letters you deserve from Members of Congress who understand the power of example, especially those of us who arrived after you served. Your legacy lives in the House, beyond your eye-grabbing, modern portrait on the first floor of the Capitol that captures the “unbought and unbossed” slogan you chose so well when you ran for Congress. Your portrait— in bright colors, no less—speaks to the Shirley I knew, who loved politics and was not timid about picking a fight, first and foremost to get justice for women, African Americans, and others who were denied. You also had a tough fight yourself to become the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives. The formidable Brooklyn machine and a lot of men in New York seemed to think that the first African American House seat for Brooklyn (and only the second from New York) should go to a man!

You left the nation with contributions greater than your gifts to the African American women of the House, who are particularly indebted to you, or even the women of both parties, who have benefitted from your courageous example. A picture of you, Coretta Scott King, and me, from my swearing-in as Human Rights Commissioner of New York City, hangs in my office. It reminds me of your leadership at a critical moment in the nation’s history when you insisted that both sex and race discrimination must be fought simultaneously. Your fearless leadership was key in getting the two great movements of the 1960s to work together in a coalition of mutual interests. Because you would not bow to nay-sayers, you were central to the development of African Americans’ understanding that the white women of the feminist movement struggling for freedom and equality for women, and the African Americans of the civil rights movement who had been foremost in carrying these banners for all Americans, were natural allies.

When, years later, I ran for Congress in my hometown, the District of Columbia, your example was in my thoughts. Today, as I fight for voting rights for the people I represent, your fighting spirit continues to inspire me.

Thank You Shirley

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Dear Shirley:

It’s been a long time since you and I had an opportunity to girl chat.

Are you still sitting out on your balcony, flirting with all the good-looking guys who pass by?

My how I envy you. You are living your retirement just as you wanted: you are in Florida and have a lovely condo with a great balcony, surrounded by fabulous weather, a spectacular view, good food and great friends.

You deserve to have a great time in retirement because you have certainly paid your dues: you emerged as one of the most powerful voices in the Congress of the United States of America, never to be forgotten.

Shirley, you took the Congress by storm. The old boys had never seen the likes of you before. You were tough, you were committed, you were articulate, and you were fearless. You stood your ground and you stood on principle.

The self-defined description that you became best known for, “unbought and unbosomed”, was so very true of you and your character – oh how I loved to quote you in my speeches.

I’ll never forget the time we spent together organizing the National Congress of Black Women. C. Delores Tucker worked hard to further develop the Congress and it is still going strong today.

Shirley, I know that you’re constantly complemented and admired and adored by so many. And I’m sure that you are approached time and time again with words of thanks and praise. But we can’t praise you enough. You were our inspiration. You were indeed our role model. You helped us to understand that we could run for office, that we could be leaders, that we could even run for President of the United States of America.

And you had the audacity to run for President of the United States of America, and in doing so, you awakened millions of women and girls across this nation to the possibility of becoming whatever they would like to become.
Well, I guess I could go on and on about you, your contributions, and your leadership to our country and to our world. But enough of that.

I’d much rather talk about how great you look in that last cute suit you bought, and how you enjoyed flirting back with the guys who were always flirting with you.

And most importantly what kind of woman you are! You’re a woman who knows joy and happiness and who also is a serious, committed, intelligent, and effective public policymaker.

Perhaps we will be able to girl chat again real soon. But for now Shirley, I must say farewell. Enjoy your balcony my friend.

Always in my heart,

Maxine Waters
Member of Congress
September 17, 2009

Dear Shirley,

It is my great honor to pen this letter to assist the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Avoice Virtual Library Project in its quest to document your legacy. You served as an inspiration, not only for all African Americans, but also for women and citizens throughout the world.

I frequently tell my colleagues and constituents, “Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth.” It was one of your favorite quotes, and it was one that you embodied to the fullest during your incredible life in service to your country. It was especially evident during the fourteen years you spent in the United States House of Representatives.

You inspired me and so many of my colleagues to enter a life of public service. Certainly, each and every member of the Congressional Black Caucus is indebted to you for the role that you played as one of its founders. We honor you and keep your legacy alive by continuing the tradition that you started. Although I never had the opportunity to work with you as a colleague in the House, I strive to follow your example of leadership through unwavering loyalty and service to your constituents.

With great admiration, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress
September 22nd, 2009

Dear Representative Shirley Chisholm:

As the first trailblazing female Member of the Congressional Black Caucus, and the first African American woman to run for the Democratic nomination for President, I would like to honor you for the path you set and the role model you created for the African American community and for African American women in particular.

My mentor, Gwendelya Sawyer Cherry, who went on to become the first African American female elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1970, could not have been successful without you first creating a pathway and serving as an inspiration to all African American females with an interest in making a lasting political change. Your vision, courage, and fortitude, to stand up not only for civil rights during the turbulent years of the 1960’s, but also to serve as a female Member – a minority within a minority community in Congress, is inspiration that goes beyond words. Certainly, you served as a role model for all of the women currently in the Congressional Black Caucus, which, incidentally, is under the direction of a valiant female Member, Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California.

I always say: when much is given, much is expected in return. And to whom God has given much, much is expected. When you’re born you get a birth certificate, and when you die you get a death certificate, but it’s the dash in between, the dash that is your lifetime, your actions, your good deeds, your career, your fight for justice and equality, that make a difference. Clearly, you, and your life, Shirley, encapsulate this sentiment both in spirit and deed.

Sincerely,

Corrine Brown
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley,

Our nation owes you a tremendous debt of gratitude. You blazed the trail that brought us to this day in our history. During your unsuccessful but historic campaign for President, you set an example that incented African Americans to aspire for the pinnacles of our nation’s government. You made us believe it would one day be possible for people of color to serve as President, in the Congressional leadership and as Committee Chairs. Those goals have been realized and in at least one instance far sooner than many of us ever dreamed.

Personally, I will never forget your accepting my invitation to come to South Carolina in 1972 to crown my tenure as state President of South Carolina’s Young Democrats. You proved to be a remarkable presence and a gracious politician. I learned so much serving in your 1972 Democratic National Convention Whip operation, and I was proud to cast my first vote for a Democratic nominee for President of the United States for you. We celebrated a moral victory although we knew the nomination was beyond our reach.

As a galvanizing public figure, you held a place of honor in most African American homes and hearts. You embodied the realization of the dream for which we fought, and served as a symbol of our future hopes and aspirations. As a Member of Congress, you broke barriers and served as a role model. It was your book, "Unbought and Unbossed" that helped mold my political persona and approach to governance.

You provided the shoulders on which so many Members of Congress stand today. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said “Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve...You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” That sentiment encapsulates your service. You were one ordinary citizen who became an extraordinary force in our country. Thank you for your leadership and the tremendous example you set for us to follow.

With kindest regards, I am

[Signature]

James E. Clyburn
September 10, 2009

The Honorable Shirley Chisholm

Dear Shirley,

As the first African-American woman elected to Congress, you paved the way for me and every other African-American woman who has served as a Member of Congress. I commend you for being courageous enough to stand alone as the sole African-American woman in a predominantly white and male dominated Congress.

In 1968, the year you were first elected to Congress, our nation was facing a number of seemingly insurmountable challenges. Two great American heroes, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated and the Vietnam War was becoming more unpopular. However, these tragic events did not sway you from becoming the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Instead of focusing on the unlikelihood of an African-American woman winning a U.S. Congressional race in a volatile political climate, you worked hard and successfully earned the majority vote of your constituents in the Bedford-Stuyvesant region of Brooklyn, New York.

In 1972, you once again defied the odds by running for President as the first African-American to ever seek a major party nomination and the first woman to ever pursue the Democratic Party’s nomination. Although you did not emerge as the victor in this particular race, I am happy to inform you that your efforts were not in vain.

Today, in 2009, you would be proud to know that an African-American won the Democratic Party’s primary nomination for President and continued on to win the general election as well. The gentleman I’m referring to is President Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the United States. Also, as a result of the precedent you set for women in Congress, a woman has achieved the highest position of leadership in the House of Representatives. Representative Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco now serves as the first woman to be elected as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Since your tenure in Congress, the Congressional Black Caucus has grown substantially in size and has been successful in promoting some of your key policy goals. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus have supported legislation to increase access to quality education, improve our nation’s health care system, and promote peace and justice in the international community. Your legacy will never be forgotten.

Sincerely,

Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress
The Honorable Shirley Chisholm
e/o Congressional Black Caucus Foundation
1720 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC 20036-1903

Dear Shirley:

What can I say to or write about a remarkable woman who was ahead of her time? Simply put, the Honorable Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was a woman of ‘firsts.’

Besides being the first African-American female elected to the United States Congress, Congresswoman Chisholm — who proudly called herself “unbought and unbossed” — was also the first African American major-party candidate, and the first female Democratic candidate, for President of the United States. Her spirited trek led her to achieve the, then, historic feat of receiving 152, first-ballot votes at the 1972 Democratic National Convention.

Because Shirley imagined herself in this role first, she created her own gaping dent in that vaunted glass ceiling. From her early upbringing in Brooklyn and Barbados to her work in the New York State Legislature and, ultimately, the United States House of Representatives, Shirley was the consummate leader. This trait was instrumental in her membership as one of the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Shirley’s character and empathy for the human spirit were unparalleled. From her work to improve the lives of inner-city residents through increased spending on education, healthcare, and other social services to her controversial visit to her political rival and ideological opposite, Alabama Governor George Wallace after he had survived an assassination attempt, Shirley’s leadership, in many ways, remain unmatched.

Shirley’s accolades were innumerable and her respect well deserved. This National Women’s Hall of Fame honoree has rightly been placed on the list of the 100 Greatest African-Americans by scholar Molefi Kete Asante. For these reasons and more, I know that Shirley Chisholm’s legacy will endure for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress
September 10, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm,

It is with great reverence that I write you this letter. Although our terms in the House did not overlap, I, along with my fellow Congressional Black Caucus members, still feel your presence in the Capitol. You have been and will continue to be an inspiration to generations of women and African-Americans who aspire to public service.

I fondly remember your historic campaign for the Democratic nomination for President in 1972. Your campaign motto, Unbought and Unbossed, perfectly captured the characteristics of an effective public servant. Your commitment to never behold yourself to special interests is an inspiration to all elected representatives.

Earlier this year Speaker Pelosi unveiled a portrait of you that now hangs in the Capitol. This portrait will be a lasting reminder of your historic tenure in Washington. Although you have left us, your spirit of fairness and passion for those without a voice will always live on.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

ROBERT C. “BOBBY” SCOTT
Member of Congress
September 9, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm:

During the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 39th Annual Legislative Conference, we pay tribute to the enduring legacy that you and the other founding members of the CBC paved for current members of the CBC.

Your life was historic in multiple ways-
  • As the first African-American woman elected to Congress;
  • As the first African-American to run for the Democratic nomination for President; and
  • As a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, the acknowledged “conscience of the Congress.”

I am ever mindful that I stand on your shoulders.

Thank you for the example you set and for the foundation you provided.

Sincerely,

Melvin L. Watt

Not printed or mailed at government expense
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

September 25, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm,

Your life was quite an inspiration to every American. You were and continue to be a role model for aspiring African-American and female public officials. You were a woman of many “firsts.” It is significant that among the “firsts” in your own life was a solid and strict early education that you once called “an important gift my parents have given me.” This was followed by success in academia — a master’s degree from Columbia University — and ultimately a policy leadership position on the House Education and Labor Committee.

Your career is a testament to hard work, dedication and a refusal to be daunted by a playing field that, for black women of your generation, was not a level field at all. You were always running uphill — and more often than not you were winning. Your 1972 campaign for President defied the pundits and set a marker for ambition and achievement in the early days of the women’s empowerment movement.

We need only to look around us, to Congress, to the White House, to every corner of the nation to see the big footprint you left. In your memory, we are filling them as we strive to fulfill your dreams. Thank you for your service to our country, thank you for daring to dream.

With true admiration,

Chaka Fattah
Member of Congress
September 18, 2009

Dear Shirley,

Your extraordinary life and infinite perseverance have marked your place in history forever. As you said it best, “I am, was, and always will be a catalyst for change.” You displayed remarkable courage and strength, running for the United States Congress during a period in U.S. history that was very unkind to minorities and women. Serving as a vehicle for change you hired an all-female staff during your first term in Congress and you spoke out for civil rights, women’s rights, the poor and you opposed the Vietnam War. You showed the world that no matter what color, gender or perceived disability, we can all achieve our dreams.

Mrs. Chisholm, you are the reason why I have been able to serve in the United States Congress, you are the reason that The United States of America finally has a black President and you are the trailblazer who opened windows and doors for all women and discriminated persons. You saw the problems of the poor every day and supported improved employment and education programs, expansion of day care, income support and other programs to improve inner city life and opportunity. As the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Congress you were a passionate and effective advocate for the needs of minorities, women and children. You single handedly changed the nation’s perception about the capabilities of women and African-Americans.

I praise you for your achievements and I thank you for all the opportunities made available to me because one woman raised her voice and ascended above the constraints of society. We remember you 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; thank you.

Most Sincerely,

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress
September 25, 2009

CBC Foundation, Inc.
1720 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Shirley:

I would like to take this time to thank you for your public service, trailblazing, and dedication to making the United States a more perfect union. I join countless others in exclaiming that you are loved, appreciated, and missed.

In a nation founded in the 1770s, it is truly sad that African-American men did not get the right to vote until the 1860s and women did not get that right until 1920. While it has been incredibly difficult to earn the right to vote, it has been just as difficult for women and people of color to have the opportunity to serve in these institutions. You broke down so many barriers in this pursuit. Your daring and vision allowed my father to seek the presidency in the 1980s and it allowed me to first seek a congressional seat in 1995.

When the Honorable Sonia Sotomayor was sworn in and became the first woman of color to serve in the United States Supreme Court, I immediately recognized you played a role in her making history. I am grateful that my daughter will have you as a role model if she ever chooses a career in public service. I salute you for having been a mighty, phenomenal woman.

As I serve on Capitol Hill, each day I know that you and other pioneering sisters are looking down on us. It is a true honor to join with other CBC members and walk in your footsteps.

In Gratitude,

Jesse L. Jackson, Jr.
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley,

Thank you for your service and commitment to ensuring that all Americans have an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Your fearless determination has helped enable our country to become a place where gender and race are secondary traits to a person’s true character. It was your dedication to a purpose far greater than individual recognition that remains an example for all those who serve in Congress.

Through your groundbreaking success as the first African American woman in Congress, you have taught young girls and boys from all races the valuable lesson of what happens when a dream is NOT deferred. Despite the odds, you made a bid for President of the United States and won 12 states. Your campaign inspired thousands of people to be “unbought and unbosomed.” That same spark of enthusiasm burns today among our young people who recently proved they would not be bought or bossed and rallied together to chart a new future for our country and help elect the first African American President of the United States. Through your example, you passed them a torch with which to run and to share the mission of equality and justice for all.

President Barack Obama was sworn into office on January 20, 2009, as the 44th President of the United States. I wish you could have been there to see one of America’s proudest moments. Americans from all backgrounds, religions, and races crowded the United States Capitol to see the inauguration of the first African American elected to the highest office in the land.

Even with this long-awaited triumph, we must not rest contented. At this time in history, we face one of the greatest social struggles of our nation. Home foreclosures have exceeded 300,000 in the last six months, 47 million people currently lack healthcare insurance, and 2.5 million children live in poverty. These trying conditions have caused many families to lose hope that a life without struggle is possible for them.

The Congressional Black Caucus will continue to push for hope and fight for those whose voices too often go unheard. Our agenda is still strong and our message is clear. We must do all that we can to ensure that America remains a land of opportunity now and for generations yet born. We stand on your shoulders, Shirley, and we pray to do you proud.

Sincerely,

Elijah E. Cummings
Member of Congress
September 11, 2009

My Dear Shirley,

Although you may not know this, I count myself among the many women who have been inspired by the barriers that you have broken down by virtue of your life and your service. I count my first entry into politics, a telegram sent to the U.S. Virgin Islands delegation to the 1972 National Democratic Convention, which as I recall read: “Make sure you cast our votes for Shirley Chisolm, don’t embarrass the Virgin Islands!”

Despite my being a little nobody at the time, I understand it created quite a stir. Your having made the Virgin Islands your part-time home was always a source of pride for all of us who live there. You have been more than a role model, you have set a high standard for all of us in public service. I strive every day to meet that standard, to match your determination, to dare to speak truth to power and to remain “unbought and unbossed.”

Thank you for your remarkable life and legacy.

Sincerely,

Donna M. Christensen
Member of Congress
September 16, 2009

Dear Honorable Shirley Chisholm,

With profound respect and admiration I write to express my gratitude to you for paving the political path for legislators such as Barbara Jordan, Geraldine Ferraro and Maxine Waters as the first black woman elected to Congress in 1968.

Moreover, thank you for being *a voice in the wilderness* advocating on the behalf of women’s rights and leadership in the formulation of legislation to benefit those in poverty and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Your legacy—from the classroom to congress and a presidential contender—will continue to live on in the lives of generations to come . . . .

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Representative Danny K. Davis (IL-07)
September 25, 2009

Dear Shirley:

As the first African American woman elected to Congress and the first African American woman to seek the Democratic nomination for President, you are a source of inspiration and motivation for me. I am impressed by your stature and your stance on many issues. I am encouraged and empowered to work hard and to do my best.

Your passion for our people and your selfless commitment to service were always evident. You fought tirelessly for the poor, for women, and for minorities. “Unbought and unbossed,” you lived to help “the least of these” and worked to ensure that those who were disadvantaged, disillusioned, or disenfranchised had equal access to opportunities.

My path in life has mirrored yours. I, too, grew up in a home where I was fortified by my faith and my family. I pursued a career in education and went from the classroom to the State House and then to Congress. Although I began my first term in Congress almost 15 years after your departure, I was—and still am—honored and humbled by the opportunity to walk the same hallowed halls. We will always share a special bond, forged by the blood of our ancestors, our sense of sisterhood, and our commitment to our constituents, our community, and our country.

Today and always, I embrace your spirit, your service, and your strength. It gives me the power to explore the possibilities and achieve my potential. I celebrate your vision. Thank God for your life, your leadership, and your legacy. You showed me and other women that we can fly as high as we dare to dream. Know that you will live forever in our hearts and minds.

God Bless You!

Sincerely,

Carolyn C. Kilpatrick
Member of Congress
Dear Shirley,

Years ago you said to me “No matter what you do in life, use your power judiciously. Use it with humility...but use it.” Those words have shaped my journey in life. Now, as Chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, I feel that your legacy has come full circle.

It has been 40 years since you and twelve other members came together to form the CBC in January of 1969. The goals set 40 years ago by you and the other founders of the CBC were simple, yet profound – “to positively influence the course of events pertinent to African Americans and others of similar experience and situation, and to achieve greater equity for persons of African descent in the design and content of domestic and international programs and services.” Forty years later, the Congressional Black Caucus remains just as necessary and relevant. We witnessed one of our own ascend to the highest position in this land in our President Barack Obama. You paved the way for this historic moment in our nation’s history.

Years ago in 1972, you laid the groundwork for this groundbreaking achievement when I was a student at Mills College in Oakland where I met you. You encouraged me to register to vote and to get involved in politics, and I ended up working on your Presidential campaign. Your words were inspiring – and you charged me and others to continue to fight for justice and equality for all.
Today, we continue to stand on your shoulders. My CBC colleagues and I continue to lead the Congress on each and every issue with intelligence, commitment and power, and continue to be the conscience of the Congress and the voice of the voiceless.

You once said – “The hour has come in America that all of us in this room can no longer be the passive recipients of whatever the politics of a nation may decree for us as citizens within this realm. But if we have the courage of our convictions, if we desire to make a contribution to make this nation to bring about the fulfillment of the American Dream so that it is meaningful for every segment in America, we will forget what the world will say whether we were in our place or out of our place.”

I want you to know that we still hear you – calling us to service. In your spirit we will continue to speak up and speak out for all people and we promise to always fight the good fight. You were truly unbought and unbossed and a catalyst for change. Your legacy lives!

I miss you!

Love Always,

[Signature]

Barbara
“...in spite of hopeless odds...to demonstrate the sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo.”

A pioneer and trailblazer, Shirley Anita Chisholm became the first black woman elected to Congress, in 1968, representing New York’s 12th District. Within one year of her election, she helped establish the Congressional Black Caucus as one of its founding members, in 1969.

Throughout her Congressional career, Representative Chisholm vehemently championed the cause of the underprivileged, and steadfastly promoted the advancement of women and African Americans.

In 1972, Shirley Chisholm became the first major-party black candidate for President of the United States as well as the first woman to run for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Her dedication and unyielding determination are her legacy to all women and to the history of all African Americans. She exemplified brilliance; her commitment to the African American community is truly laudable. Her tenacity and resolve to make things different, helped pave the way for our first African American President, Barack H. Obama.

Representative Shirley Anita Chisholm, we, the current members of the Congressional Black Caucus honor you and thank you.

Wm. Lacy Clay
Member of Congress
September 25, 2009

Dear Shirley,

You are gone, but not forgotten. Your motto of “Unbossed and Unbought” has fed the political aspirations of African American women to reach for all that is possible.

If you were here today, you would be beaming from ear to ear knowing that you helped to pave the way for the first African American President of the United States.

As a leading lady in a time when women in America were still working to gain equal footing in all aspects of American life, you represented the future even at that time.

Your gracefulness and perseverance in a “man’s world” has inspired women of all ages to aspire to even greater heights. As the first African-American female member the U.S. House of Representatives, you graced the white male dominated halls of Congress with your keen insight, integrity and sense of right and wrong.

Shirley, the intimate talks that we had in New York and in Washington, D.C., displayed the real passions of your life—training young people for success, organizing political movements and understanding the arena in which we all work. Thank you so much for being a legacy!

You may not be here in body but you are certainly here in spirit. Each day, as we walk the halls of the U.S. Capitol, we can view your portrait displayed in one of its halls. In those moments we are reminded that you lived as a shining example and that you are missed.

Sisterly,

Diane E. Watson
Member of Congress
September 25, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm:

It is hard to express how grateful I am for all you’ve done for our country. Although it’s been nearly five years since your passing, I still remember it as if it were yesterday. At the time, my wife Leslie and I brought our children to your funeral to pass along your history as a visionary and trailblazer and, even today, we still discuss your legacy. Today, we honor you as a pioneer not only for African Americans and women, but for all Americans.

You are an inspiration to me and especially my wife, who is a proud descendant of Caribbean immigrants. You are also a role model to many of my constituents of the 17th District of Florida who are of Caribbean ancestry.

As the first African American woman elected to the United States Congress, you charted a new course for Black Americans and paved the way for dozens of leaders who followed in your footsteps, including my mother, former U.S. Representative Carrie P. Meek. As a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), you championed civil and woman’s rights during a time when these causes were not fully embraced by the political mainstream.

You pushed our country to reach its full potential. Today, we owe you a debt of gratitude for breaking down barriers and blazing a trail for us to follow.

Your life will never be forgotten.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

REP. KENDRICK MEEK and MRS. LESLIE MEEK
Dear Shirley,

As an inspired American citizen, I write this letter with the utmost respect and admiration for your dedication and service to our country. Ever since your barrier breaking election to the United States House of Representatives in 1969, you remained dedicated to the cause of creating a better America. You are truly an inspiration that ignited a movement of passion and love for our country that is exemplified throughout every African-American leader of today. As a result of leaders like you, I often find myself proudly reminiscing on how our country has come so far in creating an America that elected our nation's first African-American president. The patriotism that you consistently displayed throughout your life for our country is an honor that I model every day.

You were never afraid to enter the depths of the unknown to stand for every American regardless of color or creed. Your decision to run for President in 1972 has paved the way for the future of African-Americans aspiring to become elected officials within our country. I will continue to carry the torch that you have handed down as I move forward as a Representative of the United States of America. I salute you for your patriotism, dedication, and consistency while being a leader for African Americans across the globe.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

The Honorable David Scott
Member of Congress
Dear Representative Chisholm:

Embodying the very best in what is expected from a public servant, you paved the way for many who have followed behind you. With great courage, conviction, commitment and compassion you were always unwavering in standing behind your principals. And, perhaps most remarkably and importantly, these strong stands were always made using sound political strategy.

Tirelessly advocating for economic justice, civil rights and women’s equality, you were an undeniable force. Your progressive approach attracted many people who had never been part of the political process before – blacks, feminists and young people. In doing so, you provided a strong, outspoken and needed voice for causes that had long been without one.

Throughout your life, you were willing to push the limits and take risks in order to make our country a better place for everyone without concern about success or failure. While there were some significant wins alongside the losses, what is most important is that you were always trying to make a difference.

I thank you for the honesty, integrity and unbending spirit that helped pave an easier path for women and minorities to be elected to political office.

Very truly yours,

G. K. Butterfield
Member of Congress
Dear Rep. Chisholm:

I remember once hearing a story recalled by a reporter who is no longer with us, named Andrea Hall. She told of you signing an autograph for her with the simple words “Aim High.” I don’t know what others thought of it at the time, but I was so inspired by those two words – Aim High – that I adopted the motto myself. Whenever a young person asks me for my autograph, I think that is a really appropriate way to inspire them, too.

Though we never met, you are my political godmother. As a teenager and young adult I watched you change the course of history with a style that let everyone know you would not allow their attitudes about gender or race limit you.

Seeing your fierce commitment to justice and equality—the hallmarks of your life—has served as a template for my life and my career as an elected official. Watching you consistently stand up for the poor, for women, for people of color and against war taught me one person can make a difference in the lives of many. Seeing your determination in the face of opposition showed me perseverance can overcome entrenched attitudes.

Since I first began serving in the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1989, I have been guided by the principle you set in being “UnBought and UnBossed.” When you think of those politicians who have compromised the system with sloppy ethics and been rendered ineffective, for those who have been jailed and embarrassed, I thank you for leading the way and inspiring me to chart my own course. I can walk with my head high as you did, knowing that I am respected by my constituents because I act on the convictions of my heart, always doing what I believe is right even if it’s not popular.

Thank you for blazing a trail with dignity, grace and grit that showed a young woman from Wisconsin and generations of women beyond you what it takes to leave the world a better place.

Sincerely,

Gwen Moore
Member of Congress
September 21, 2009

The Honorable Shirley Chisholm
House of Representatives
U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ms. Chisholm,

I had the distinct honor and privilege of making your acquaintance on a number of occasions in our beloved Brooklyn, NY. This is Congresswoman Yvette D. Clarke writing and I currently represent many of the beloved communities of Brooklyn that you previously represented. It is the very place where your career and legacy of service to our nation began. I am humbled and honored to represent a significant portion of the communities that you once served. I am grateful to have this opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the very first African-American woman to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. Your accomplishments and your voice have been an inspiration. I count myself blessed to have inherited and embraced your great legacy of courage, dignity and service to community, particularly to those who are viewed as the least, the lost and the last in our civil society. As a Black woman of Caribbean decent, like yourself, I want you to know that I have received the torch that you passed on and carry it proudly in the fight that continues for equality, justice and equality for all.

As the first African-American elected to the House of Representatives, you were a passionate and effective advocate for the needs of women, children, and minorities and you have revolutionized the nation’s perspective on women and African-Americans. I am extremely proud to continue your legacy as a Caribbean American woman, unafraid to fight for equality and justice for all.

You were a social reformer and a crusader for women’s rights. You shattered stereotypes when you entered an arena dominated by Caucasian men. Your legacy gives us all a reason to endeavor to make a difference and serve to inspire every person who is perceived to be ‘different.’ Because of you, your personal sacrifices and self-less passion for our collective humanity, we all have reason to believe that we can persevere in the face of adversity. You have paved the way for generations to come and your contributions will be printed indelibly into the fabric of our great nation.

Thirty-seven years ago you challenged your party and your country to think more boldly than it ever had before about what the occupant of the White House should look like. And now, decades later, your presence is still being felt. Your trailblazing candidacy paved the way for the historic presidential campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, a woman who now serves as Secretary of State for our great nation and a Black man, who is now Commander. Because you
had the audacity to run the race, you blazed a trail for Barak Obama to become the first African American President of the United States.

Your life was one of historic firsts, and you inspired millions of people around the country and around the world. You continue to be an inspiration to all of us who think we can always do better, we can always fight the good fight, and because of you, we never have to settle for the status quo...we honor today and always.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Viole D'Clarke
2009 ALC Co-Chair
Dear Representative Chisholm:

As I walk the hallowed halls of the Congress, I look for inspiration from the leaders who became legends – leaders like you. You may have represented the good folks of Brooklyn, New York; they were family to you. But your voice was the voice of American communities without an advocate; the poor, the children, the challenged, the elderly, and the discriminated against. We miss you, and that clear, courageous distinct speech of yours. More importantly, we miss all your voice came to represent.

You came from those communities. You served as the director of a child care center, then a New York assemblywoman, and then a savvy Congresswoman who fought for the rights of everyone. I thank you for providing a stellar example of living the truth you so adamantly believed in: that the political body should represent the entire face of America.

It really wasn’t so very long ago that you walked among us – an articulate, intelligent, tenacious, just, and brave soul – who came to be the first Black Congresswoman in America. And, then in 1972, courageously became the first Black American to make a serious bid for the Presidency of the United States of America.

You began your race for the Presidency as an unknown, an outsider, an underdog at a time when our hearts still ached from the assassinations of Malcolm and Medgar, Martin, Bobby, and President John F. Kennedy. It was also a time when the voices of America’s young began to be heard – because of an unjust war in Asia – and felt – when the 26th amendment gave them the right to vote. It was during that time of political upheaval that you encouraged the Black community, and women across America, to join the political arena, make their voices heard, and turn their numbers into votes. You had the foresight to know that in order to transform the status quo our voices must be heard and our votes must be counted in order to make our Democratic Party take notice. You challenged our Party to open up the process, “what goes on behind the scenes and deals that are made is not democracy. At what cost do we compromise?” You were right.

Congresswoman Chisholm, you once stated, “I am, was, and always will be a catalyst for change.” You fought tirelessly for change in the 21st century. I’ve often thought of your legacy, and those wise words. I smiled up at you when I heard our 44th President, Barack Obama tell us, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” You were right again.
You knew your quests were long shots. And yet, you encouraged us, “Don’t let the enthusiasm
die... [The presidential bid] was a learning experience. I am not bitter. I am not disheartened,
because WHEN there is a next time, I believe it will be better.” You asked then, “Are Black
people politically sophisticated enough to see that, although I may not win, that I am paving the
way for the future people who will run?” You were right still again!

So thank you, dear Congresswoman – for all you’ve taught us. You were indeed “unbought and
unbossed.” You were and will always be an inspiration to me, and to anyone who forges ahead
against all odds. You knew long before most of us that someone must make the journey; clear
the path; climb the ladder – so that others might follow.

In gratitude,

Keith Ellison

KEITH ELLISON
Member of Congress
September 25, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm:

As we celebrate this 39th Annual Legislative Conference of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, we thank you for your contributions to the American people and renew our challenge to be engineers of social change in our communities.

Your election to Congress and campaign for the Presidency broke barriers for subsequent women and African-Americans to become a part of the political discourse. You were an advocate on behalf of your community while engaging Americans from all walks of life in a way that has inspired contemporary notions of progress and change.

Nearly 40 years after the founding of the Congressional Black Caucus, we continue to strive to balance the scales of justice. Then, and now, the members of this organization face adversity while working to advance the common good. However, we are guided by the courageous example of your career, which moved beyond rhetoric toward service that effectuated meaningful change. Thank you for giving us the honor of upholding your legacy.

With warmest regards,

Henry "Hank" Johnson
Member of Congress
Dear Representative Chisholm:

You blazed the path that I was able to follow to my current position in the House of Representatives today, and for that I will always be grateful.

My mother is Caucasian and my father African American, so both were disowned in the 1950's by their families for their marriage. This led to my father joining the Army, attending Northwestern University and later, my family moving to California.

Based on challenging personal family experiences and witnessing the civil rights movement firsthand, at the age of six, I decided my first choice of profession would be public service. In 1968, you became the first black woman elected to Congress, and an inspiration to little girls and boys everywhere in overcoming barriers. Your trailblazing work on behalf of society's vulnerable members, the dispossessed and the poor, has set the standard for those who follow you.

Because of your hard work, I had a path to follow that would one day lead to the House of Representatives. You were the conscience of the Congressional Black Caucus, and your dream of “a nation in which all racial stocks and classes can exist in their own selfhoods, but meet on a basis of respect and equality and live together, socially, economically, and politically,” is one that I strive for as well.

In closing, I would like to thank you again for making a difference in the lives of every American through your extraordinary service to our country.

Sincerely,

Laura Richardson
Member of Congress
September 14, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm,

It has been forty years since you were first elected to Congress, yet today your story of courage and perseverance continues to inspire generations of African Americans across this great nation.

Though your political career ended long before mine began, I have been impacted by your influence since my youth in Indiana—beginning with my late grandmother, Congresswoman Julia Carson. As only the second African American woman elected to Congress in Indiana, she saw you as a pioneer and an inspiration. Throughout her career, she not only looked to you as a model of how to represent the African American community but also as a shining example of the unyielding advocacy that every United States Representative should aspire to achieve. As she fought to protect the homeless and improve struggling communities, she looked to your steadfast determination and honesty for guidance.

These were lessons that she passed onto me. She imparted that I, like you an African American from humble beginnings, could rise above my circumstances to achieve my dreams. She strived endlessly to see that I was ingrained with the lessons of my predecessors and that like you, I truly understood the importance of integrity and the pursuit of what is right and just. I owe much of where I am today to these valuable lessons.

Upon taking the oath of office last year, I was proud and humbled to join the ranks of this institution that has been shaped by great Americans like you who courageously fought for equality and freedom above all else. Today, as Congress continues its work to provide health care to all Americans, keep families in their homes, and expand educational opportunities, I continue to look to this history for guidance. It is my sincere hope that all Members can look to your memory and by following your example leave a more prosperous nation for generations to come.

Sincerely,

André Carson
September 16, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm,

I am honored by the opportunity to pay tribute to your inspirational life and political career that shattered social and political barriers in this country. For African Americans and particularly for women, you paved the way for countless individuals including President Barack Obama, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, and myself, the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives from the state of Maryland.

Throughout my life, your leadership and perseverance served as a personal reminder that no obstacles are insurmountable. When I was a young girl, I kept a photo of you by my bedside. In 1968, you transformed political and social convention single-handedly by becoming the first African American woman elected to Congress. Then in 1972, you again proved the depth of your inner strength – which you summarized in your memoir The Good Fight as a “sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo” – with your candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. You inspired me.

As part of a new era of a rising generation of women and African-American leaders indebted to your legacy, I thank you for helping shape the lives of future generations by fundamentally changing the past.

Sincerely,

Donna F. Edwards
Member of Congress
September 16, 2009

Dear Congresswoman Chisholm,

I would like to take this opportunity to honor your distinguished service to our Nation.

When we first met, I was struck by how such a petite woman could have such a bold and commanding presence. You were outspoken, fearless, and absolutely brilliant. Everything about you was a change from the status quo. In a male-dominated political landscape, you triumphed over adversity and showed young women that we, too, could serve as elected officials. Moreover, you demonstrated that African American women could persevere and achieve greatness in Congress and any other careers pursued. With pride, I tread your path and wear the badge of Congress.

Through the years, I followed your career with great enthusiasm. Ever the intellectual, you handled complex policy matters with skill and remained responsive to your constituents. You never shrank from difficult decisions in your efforts to protect and promote the public interest.

Your dedication to the community and tenure in Congress were a great inspiration to me, as I embarked upon public service. I am proud to have known you personally, and your legacy encourages me daily. Rest assured that your example will be long be lifted as one of unwavering dedication to the public good, triumph over adversity, and hope that what is dreamed can, in fact, be realized.

Most Sincerely,

Marcia L. Fudge
Member of Congress

MLF:ams
September 16, 2009

Dear Representative Chisholm:

One of the greatest responsibilities entrusted to Congress is to ensure that every American, regardless of color, gender, or creed, can enjoy the infinite opportunities our country has to offer.

The responsibility is great; however your life's work proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the American people chose well when they chose you to represent them in the United States Congress. A champion of education, healthcare, and other social services, you never hesitated to be a voice for those who had no voice.

You lived as a woman before her time, fighting for the staples that make our nation the best in the world and living a life that boldly represented the spirit of America.

The first African American woman elected to Congress, a founding member (and the only woman member) of the Congressional Black Caucus, and the first African American to make a serious bid for the Democratic nomination for U.S. President, your trailblazing simultaneously opened doors for women and African Americans across our nation.

As the only African American currently in the Senate, not a day goes by that I do not consider those who had to come before in order for me to be where I am today. Because of your tireless efforts, I now have an opportunity to speak for the American people.

Representative Chisholm, you are a great American Icon who has forever revolutionized the definition of a modern day hero. Your recognition today is well deserved and greatly needed; therefore, it is with great pleasure that I thank and honor you for your service and sacrifice.

Sincerely,

Roland W. Burris
United States Senator
As there were no black Founding Fathers, there were no founding mothers—a great pity on both counts.

Representative Shirley Chisholm
Congressional Record, Joint Resolution 264
91st Congress, 2nd Session
August 10, 1970
September 15, 2009

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm was smart, loyal, funny, irreverent and irrepressible. The contribution she made to the quest for social justice is chronicled in the public record. But when I think of her I usually remember off-the-record moments,

When I interviewed for a job as a legislative assistant, I felt the interview was going well. We talked about my qualifications for the position. Ms. C. noted that her sister's name was Muriel. It was a gratifying blend of substance and chat. As the interview was ending, I said, "My stepmother, Patricia Garland Morisey, said to tell you hello."

"Pat! Pat! Your stepmother is Pat!" Ms. C. was delighted to learn that my stepmother was among the outstanding Black women working for social justice in New York.

Mrs. C made me feel great about myself and my family. I would have fond memories of that day even if she had never hired me.

Her loyalty to staff knew no bounds. One day a colleague confronted Mrs. Chisholm on the House floor complaining bitterly about something her staff had done. The culprits were me and Shirley Downs. We had told other House staffers Mrs. C's position on a matter coming up on the floor, if my memory is correct. But we hadn't actually cleared it with her in advance. When Mrs. C got back to the office she reported that, "Congressman ____ was really upset about what we did. I acted like I knew what he was talking about. I told him that you acted with my full authority, of course," she said. "But -- what did you do?"

The irreverence surfaced one afternoon when she took a call from President Carter. We had been meeting in her private office but she motioned me to stay while she took the call. I listened to her respectful responses as the President pressed for her support on some pending legislation. "Yes, Mr. President, I understand this is a very important matter. Of course I will give your views a great deal of thought." But the entire time she was making faces. The substance of the conversation was important and her comments were genuine, but she couldn't resist a playful impulse to roll her eyes as though she wasn't taking the President seriously. She could be so mischievous!

Her willingness to work with Republicans was legendary. She had an especially good relationship with the ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee. They instructed their staff members to work together to forge agreements where possible on pending matters. The theory was that if both Rep. Al Quie and Shirley Chisholm supported something it was a sure winner in the full Committee.

In one of my favorite moments Ms. C countered people who said she was skinny. "I'm not skinny," she said. "I'm svelte."

Submitted by Muriel Morisey, former Senior Legislative Assistant to Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.
September 12, 2009

I began working for Congresswoman Chisholm in August 1970. The staff affectionately called her Mrs. “C.” Indeed, she seemed to love it as much as we all did. Those of us on her staff, all of whom for a time were young women, maintained a sisterhood, committed to helping Mrs. C carry out her legislative and policy making agenda. She was a wonderful boss and a tremendous inspiration to all of us, not just the masses of people who would rally to attend whatever event she happened to be addressing.

Hired as the case worker in her Washington, DC office, I became quickly immersed in the problems besetting her constituents in the then-12th Congressional District of New York, more specifically, the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. Bed-Stuy’s greatest claim to fame at the time was that it was the poorest district in the United States. Shirley Chisholm did not let this fact deter her from providing the best constituent services that she could to her district.

Although very feminine and dainty in appearance, Shirley Chisholm had a quiet, steely resolve and when she set her mind to a particular goal, there was no diverting her attention away from that goal. She had two favorite sayings, sayings that she almost always used when autographing her photos or other memorabilia presented to her for that purpose: “Look only to God and your conscience for approval,” and “Aim high,” sometimes alternating by using “Always aim high.” Arguably, these words served as the fuel for her personal engine that propelled her throughout her lifetime and her career to be certain, she not only “talked the talk,” she, did indeed “walk the walk!”

An early proponent of early childhood education, she became a forceful and indefatigable advocate for establishing early childhood education programs in schools and neighborhoods throughout the country, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. That history has shown she was on the right path in her advocacy for making affordable, early childhood education a cornerstone for children everywhere, is but one of many fitting legacies to her. Later in her legislative career, Mrs. Chisholm would achieve another first by being named to a seat on the powerful and influential House Rules Committee.

Of the many memories I hold of her, perhaps the most significant is the role that she played in mentoring and nurturing so many young, talented women and men who would eventually grow into important public policy positions in government agencies, public policy organizations, universities, and on Capitol Hill. Indeed, one is the current Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, the Honorable Barbara Lee.

We also had some wonderful young men and women who served as research assistants and/or summer interns in our Capitol Hill office. Two in particular stand out for the subsequent contributions they are making in the judicial and legislative arena. The Honorable Marion Humphrey, who joined the staff as a research assistant while matriculating at Princeton University, is now a circuit judge for the Sixth Judicial District for Pulaski and Perry counties in Arkansas. The Honorable Bevan Dufty came to Washington, DC, as a summer intern from Cal Berkeley and stayed in DC for the next several years during which time he rose to serve as legislative director to then-Representative Julian C. Dixon (D-28th CA), was elected several years ago to the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco, CA.
Another member of the Chisholm staff was the Honorable Thaddeus Garrett, Jr., a Republican! We loved him just the same!! Thad had worked for Ohio Republican Congressman and Education and Labor Committee member, William “Bill,” Ayers. When Mr. Ayers was defeated for re-election in 1970, Mrs. Chisholm subsequently hired Thad, who served as her senior policy advisor. He would go on to serve as Chairman of the Howard University Board of Trustees, as a special advisor to the Dole/Kemp presidential campaign, as a special advisor to former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and a senior political advisor to the elder George W. Bush’s presidential campaign. Thad sadly passed away in 1996 at the tender age of 51.

That steely resolve cited earlier in this remembrance, served as a great catalyst for her 1972 presidential bid. It was an exciting and exhilarating time for her entire staff. After the attempted assassination of then-Alabama Governor George Wallace, all of the presidential candidates received Secret Service protection. Our daily routines did not change too much, except that when Mrs. C was in the office, so too was the Secret Service detail.

Now if I’ve left the impression that our work was all work and no play, but that was not the case at all! We would get together with other offices on our corridor and throw end of session parties. Party affiliations aside, we were all glad to celebrate the end of late nights and long days – at least until the next session began. At Christmas time, we always threw a huge party with Mrs. C playing Santa Claus. She would not only give gifts to her staff, she made sure that if they had children, the children received gifts too!

I had the privilege of working for Mrs. C for eight and a half years. They were some of the best years of my Capitol Hill experience. I retired in June 2001 after nearly 34 years of working for this august body. For the last nineteen years of my career, I served as Chief of Staff to the Honorable Julian C. Dixon (1934-2000). I consider the years I spent as one of the “Chisettes,” as some of the finest of my career.

A Fond Farewell,

Andrea “Tracy” Simmons Holmes
A beautiful lady’s secret
by Laura W. Murphy

The late Shirley Chisholm taught me a lot about being a woman. At the impressionable age of 22, I had the opportunity to work for her as one of her legislative assistants from 1977 to 1979 while she was a member of the United States House of Representatives. During her 14 years in Congress, Shirley Chisholm gave dozens of women the opportunity to hold professional positions on Capitol Hill when most of her male colleagues in Congress would only give secretarial or clerk positions to women like me. People would stare at her when she walked down the hall, because invariably a large entourage of professional staff women followed her wherever she went.

The women who passed through her office called themselves “The Chis-ettes.” And we referred to Mrs. Chisholm fondly as “Miss C.” We loved her because she embraced us and encouraged us and she dared to tell men and all Americans that women were in the halls of power and were here to stay. But, if you read her obituaries from the major newspapers around the country, you get the impression that she was an “in your face” firebrand feminist. Those of us who knew her well also knew that she had class and manners. While she could raise her voice with passion and conviction, she did so in a way that never undermined her appealing femininity.

It enraged me that during his lifetime, comedian Red Foxx would call “Miss C” ugly. Yes, she had a broad nose. Yes, she wore oversized glasses topped off by a toothy grin. Yes, she wore a wig that gave her big hair. No, she did not have the shape of Pamela Anderson or Halle Berry. Notwithstanding the American standard of attractiveness, when you were in the presence of this woman you felt something else: beauty. She had a personality that just sparkled and the wits and brains to match. She was charismatic. She always did her homework before she spoke and rarely spoke in anger. She respected her listeners even if they were the most racist or sexist men on the planet.

And what really surprised me as I followed her around was that she was quite flirtatious. She could whisper things in men’s ears that would put them at such ease that she could find out what made every one of her colleagues tick. She laughed at their jokes, even the ribald ones. She touched their arms when she spoke, but never doing so in a way that was sexually suggestive. She moved with grace when she walked and she was one of the best dancers I’ve ever seen. She was a femme fatale, but not a hussy.

Shirley Chisholm was a very smart, endearing, classy outspoken and determined lady who taught me two pivotal life lessons: 1) I could be a “feminine feminist” in a man’s world and still earn the power I needed to get the job done; and 2) beauty comes in many forms and when we limit our concept of beauty to appearance, we are really missing the boat.

Thank you, Shirley Chisholm, you will always be beautiful to me.

In addition to working for Rep. Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), Laura W. Murphy worked for Rep. Parren Mitchell (D-MD), California Speaker Willie L. Brown, DC Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly and was Director of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office from 1993 to 2005. She is now President of Laura Murphy & Associates, a government relations and public affairs consulting firm.  www.lwmurphy.com

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Representative Shirley Chisholm with Laura W. Murphy in 1978
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Memories of Shirley Chisholm.

Mrs. C or “Chizzie,” as we affectionately called her, was fun, funny, and totally believed that every human being had a right to develop to his or her fullest potential. She was a fiery speaker who raised the issues and banner of all those who were poor, dispossessed and had no opportunities.

She believed her job and that of her staff was to do “the true, the right, and the beautiful.” We were to work, not only for her and the people of her Congressional District, but for all those who had no voice or power. She was the first black woman to serve in Congress and focused on the problems and concerns of African Americans and women; however, she was very conscious of all those who had little or no representation. So, we were also responsible for looking out for the rights of citizens who were Hispanic, American Indian, from the District of Columbia or the territories, gay, and disabled. Although she came from Brooklyn, she was also concerned about poor whites and people of color in rural areas.

A former day care teacher and director, she was a lady, whose shoes and bag always matched, but many of the members of her staff were children of the 60’s. Some of us dressed very colorfully. I sometimes wore a purple and green striped dress with purple boots and one green stocking and one purple stocking. Her first press secretary had a big afro and wore love beads. That was ok as long as he kept a tie in the drawer. She really did not care how you looked, how young or old you were, or your color. What mattered was did you work hard, did you care, and did you give your all for the people we were trying to help.

Everyone in her office from the lowest intern to the receptionists and secretaries were allowed and encouraged to attend any hearing and floor debate they wished as long as they got their work done. They could also work on speeches, Congressional Record inserts, Dear Colleague letters, and amendments. Mrs. C. wanted everyone to learn and develop. Interns and members of her staff went on to become legislative directors of advocacy and policy groups, staff directors for other members of Congress, business leaders and elected officials in their own right. She believed part of her mission was to provide an opportunity for staff to grow and learn.

She had a huge number of interns who wanted to come and work for her. There was very little money so most worked without pay. One young woman worked as a waitress so she could come in and volunteer for Mrs. C. Another young man sold all his worldly possessions to come and be her intern. They were devoted to her and she to them. Indeed she felt that young people were the hope of the future and she spent a great deal of time outside of the office speaking to young college students. She felt they were the agents of change.

Staff and interns were also to work with anyone and everyone. Divine wisdom was not found in a small box in the corner of our office. Rather you talked to and listened to everyone—including conservative Democrats and Republicans. It was a matter of courtesy, inclusiveness and good government. If you consulted and worked with others you would find areas of agreement. This did not mean you gave up your principles, rather you worked together even when you had very different views in some areas. The goal was always to find common ground.

For example, Mrs. Chisholm had come to Congress the same year that Louise Day Hicks did. In fact, they sat next to each other on the Education and Labor Committee dais. Congresswoman Hicks was from Boston and was elected on an anti-busing platform. They did not agree on busing, but they did agree on issues such as day care and minimum wage. Well, when Congresswoman Hicks ran for Mayor of Boston, again on an anti-busing platform, she flew in from Boston, just after she had voted in the mayoral election, and sat down next to Mrs. C. She said, “Shirley I haven’t had a chance to read the day care amendments that you provided me.” Mrs. C said, “that’s ok you can just read them as you go.” That day I crouched on the floor between them and functioned as staff for both Mrs. C and Congresswoman Hicks. And she voted with us on every single issue.
We also made a point of asking to receive all the legislative memos of both the Democratic Study Group and the Republican Conference and worked very closely with Al Quie, the ranking Republican on Education and Labor and his staff. Many people today may be surprised that this level of cooperation and respect was possible. But I can tell you that when we worked for the extension of minimum wage for domestic workers, we had the support of all of the women in Congress, both the Republicans and the Democrats. And we were able to get the support of Republicans as well as Democrats for issues such as childcare, equal credit and bilingual education.

Mrs. C was also very brave and fair. When riots broke out in prisons and the inmates took over Mrs. Chisholm was called in by the prisoners to hear their complaints. When conflicts arose between blacks and Hassidic Jews in Brooklyn she went to the street barricades to talk to people. She was trusted by all sides to listen and fairly represent each side’s views. She was born to do conflict resolution.

The bravery and tolerance extended to the campaign for president. When she decided to run she got death threats and there was a man with a knife that got very close to her. That’s why, when George Wallace was shot she went to the hospital to see him. She did not make a big show of it. She went privately and quietly. When she entered the room, he said “Shirley Chisholm what are you doing here?” Her response was, “there but for the grace of God am I.”

This ability to be empathetic was very much at her core. Even when she profoundly disagreed with people, she did not personalize her feelings. The other person who is like that is Nelson Mandela. He, of course, was in a far worse situation in South Africa. But it was still pretty bad here in the US. People forget that during the civil rights era there were riots, burning buildings, beatings, murders and hangings. Many, many people know of the terrible hangings, “the strange fruit” that hung from trees and the physical abuse that black marchers experienced in the South. Mrs. Chisholm was aware of this and the beatings that young gays experienced on the streets of northern cities; the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II; the confrontations that Hispanics experienced when they dared to vote; and the terrible legacy American Indians experienced when their children were sent to special Indian boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their native tongues and were given new, non-Indian, names.

Shirley Chisholm wanted to encourage people to channel their anger, rage, disappointment and frustration about abuses and the lack of opportunities by becoming politically involved. That I believe was the heart and soul of why she ran for President. She wanted to teach people that you could fight City Hall. Indeed you could become City Hall. The key was to get involved. Her campaign was an empowerment mission for people who were outside of the political process. They would learn about politics and how to play the game. Their voices could and would be heard.

One additional historical note. The young man from her staff that she took to the 1972 Democratic Convention, who led her floor effort, was Thad Garett. Thad was a Republican from Ohio whose family had been Republican since Reconstruction. He had been a member of her staff for some time and worked on such issues as the frequency with which young blacks in the military were thrown in the brig. After his stint with Mrs. Chisholm he went to the White House to work for President Gerald Ford. And as an AME Zion preacher, he also married Mrs. Chisholm to her second husband.

I worked to get President Obama elected. I believe very strongly that he is part of her legacy. He also profoundly believes that the views of everyone are valuable and that everyone should become politically involved and invested in the political process.

Shirley Downs, Former Legislative Director of the Office of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.
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In Memory of Shirley Chisholm......

In the mid 70’s I had an overwhelming desire to work for Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. I would sit on the floor in front of her office in the Cannon House Office Building for hours hoping and praying for the opportunity to work for her. Finally, Carolyn Smith called me into her office and asked me to get Mrs. Chisholm’s lunch from the cafeteria. I continued to get Mrs. C’s lunch every day for several weeks and slowly began to hang out in the receptionist area answering telephones and sorting and distributing mail. Shortly thereafter, I was hired as a secretary/receptionist and went on to become a legislative assistant in the Chisholm office.

Mrs. C had a tremendous impact on my life, and it’s to her credit that I have achieved my life’s goals and aspirations. She was a brilliant educator and a master strategist. She taught me, mentored me and coached me by insisting that I strive for excellence and “aim high.” I once asked Mrs. C why she always signed photos with “aim high”. She smiled and replied “the best that one can do is to aim high.” I remember writing memos to Mrs. C on legislative issues and the educator in her would surface. She would make corrections and in some instances, she would insist that I rewrite the memos. While she always knew the answers to any legislative issue, she would make me research the issue and bring the answer back to her. Under her guidance, I developed skills, competencies and confidence.

She was so incredibly funny and had an infectious laugh and a warm and endearing smile. Mrs. C was always a lady and she carried herself with the utmost respect and dignity. Her staff was a “family” that provided support, encouragement and a lot of love.

As I reflect back on her life as the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives and her run for the President of the United States, she made an indelible impact on many legislative and social issues, and it’s because of her contribution that this country is in a better position today.

Submitted by Dr. Mia Cole, former secretary/receptionist and legislative assistant to Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.
The booklet is a production of the Avoice Virtual Library, a project of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc. For more information on Rep. Shirley Chisholm or the Avoice Project, visit www.avoiceonline.org.