

Shirley Chisholm Dies at 80

Written by Robert ID641

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Shirley Chisholm, an advocate for minority rights who became the first black woman elected to Congress and later the first black person to seek a major party's nomination for the U.S. presidency, has died. The Rev. Jesse Jackson called her a "woman of great courage."

Chisholm, who took her seat in the U.S. House in 1969, was a riveting speaker who often criticized Congress as being too clubby and unresponsive. An outspoken champion of women and minorities during seven terms in the House, she also was a staunch critic of the Vietnam War.

Details of her death on Saturday were not immediately available. She was 80.

Chisholm ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, a campaign that was viewed as more symbolic than practical. She won 152 delegates before withdrawing from the race.

"I ran for the Presidency, despite hopeless odds, to demonstrate the sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo," Chisholm said in her book "The Good Fight." "The next time a woman runs, or a black, a Jew or anyone from a group that the country is "not ready" to elect to its highest office, I believe that he or she will be taken seriously from the start."

Chisholm went to Congress to represent New York in the same year Richard Nixon was elected to the White House and served until retiring in 1983. She also was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

"She was an activist and she never stopped fighting," Jackson told The Associated Press from Ohio. "She refused to accept the ordinary, and she had high expectations for herself and all people around her."

Newly elected, she was assigned to the House Agriculture Committee, which she felt was irrelevant to her urban constituency. In an unheard of move, she demanded reassignment and got switched to the Veterans Affairs Committee.

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Not long afterward she voted for Hale Boggs, who was white, over John Conyers, who was black, for majority leader. Boggs rewarded her with a place on the prized Education and Labor Committee and she was its third ranking member when she left.

"My greatest political asset, which professional politicians fear, is my mouth, out of which come all kinds of things one shouldn't always discuss for reasons of political expediency," she told voters.

During her failed presidential bid, Chisholm went to the hospital to visit George Wallace, her rival candidate and ideological opposite, after he has been shot an act that appalled her followers.

"He said, 'What are your people going to say?' I said: 'I know what they're going to say. But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone.' He cried and cried," she recalled.

And when she needed support to extend the minimum wage to domestic workers two years later, it was Wallace who got her the votes from Southern members of Congress.

"She was our Moses that opened the Red Sea for us," said Robert E. Williams, president of Flagler County's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In her book, "Unbought and Unbossed," she recounted the campaign that brought her to Congress and wrote of her concerns about that body:

"Our representative democracy is not working because the Congress that is supposed to represent the voters does not respond to their needs. I believe the chief reason for this is that it is ruled by a small group of old men."

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Chisholm's leadership traits were recognized by her parents early on. Born Shirley St. Hill in New York City, on Nov. 30, 1924, she was the eldest of four daughters of Caribbean immigrants.

She began her professional career as a nursery school teacher, eventually becoming director of a day care center, and later serving as an educational consultant with the city's child care department. She became active in local Democratic politics and ran successfully for the state Assembly in 1964.

She bested James Farmer, the former national chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality, to gain the House seat in 1968.

"I am the people's politician," she said at the time. "If the day should ever come when the people can't save me, I'll know I'm finished."

After leaving Congress, Chisholm was named to the Purington Chair at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass., where she taught for four years. In later years she was a sought-after speaker on the lecture circuit.

"Whether you agree with her politics or not, she had a moral compass," said Shola Lynch, director of "Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed," a documentary on her presidential campaign. "Why I was attracted to her story was because in some ways she's an average American woman who evolved into a a strong and courageous politician."

Chisholm was married twice. Her 1949 marriage to Conrad Chisholm ended in divorce in February, 1977. Later that year she wed Arthur Hardwick, Jr., who died in 1986. She had no children.

"She was a mouthpiece for the underdog, the poor, underprivileged people, the people who did not have much of a chance," 88-year-old Conrad Chisholm told the AP early Monday from West Palm Beach.

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Once discussing what her legacy might be, Shirley Chisholm commented, "I'd like them to say that Shirley Chisholm had guts. That's how I'd like to be remembered."

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