



# Shirley Chisholm

## HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

**Listen to the story:** <https://jonincharacter.com/shirley-chisholm/>

**Shirley Chisholm was a remarkable leader and public servant who became the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress, and later ran for President.**

Shirley Anita St. Hill was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1924 to immigrant parents from Barbados. That's an island nation in the Caribbean Sea.

Her dad, Charles, was a baker's helper, and her mom, Ruby, was a seamstress and a domestic worker. Shirley was the oldest of four girls. By the time she was three years old, she was telling the neighborhood kids what to do, what games to play, what rules to follow. She was strong-willed and loved to talk.

Shirley's parents worked very hard at their jobs and raising their family. But life in New York City at that time wasn't easy. They were having a hard time giving their children everything they needed to have a good life. It was even hard to put enough food on the table. So, they had to make a tough decision. When Shirley was almost four, she and her sisters were sent to live with their grandmother on a farm in Barbados so their parents could save money while working back in New York City.

Leaving her parents was hard for Shirley at first, but living in Barbados turned out to be a wonderful experience. She worked on the farm, played on beautiful beaches, and went to a one-room schoolhouse where she got an excellent education. She studied reading, writing, math, history, and even needlework. And she learned so much from her grandmother on the farm. She learned to love her heritage. Shirley later said that her time in Barbados gave her a solid foundation for life. By the time she was ten years old, her parents were in a better place financially, so Shirley and her sisters moved back to Brooklyn.

As a teen, Shirley went to one of the top high schools in New York City called Brooklyn Girls High School. She studied Latin, Greek, history, and science. Shirley was smart, but she also had drive and determination, qualities that served her well throughout her life.

After high school, Shirley went to Brooklyn College where she encouraged other girls to get involved in student government. Shirley believed that being smart wasn't enough. You had to get involved in serving the larger community. You had to use your voice.

Shirley went on to get her Master's Degree and become a teacher. She believed education was the key to changing lives. She taught in her community, worked as a school administrator, and even earned her master's degree from Columbia University. But while a teacher is one of the





most important jobs out there, she knew there was another way she could make a greater impact on her community of Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn.

In 1964, Shirley ran for the New York State Assembly and won. She was an unstoppable force. She was only the second Black woman to ever hold that position. And she got there with 70% of the vote.

For the next four years, she got straight to work. She created programs that helped young people get into college, because she knew how much going to college led to her own success. She pushed for more funding for the schools in her area. And she helped domestic workers when they were out of work. A domestic worker is someone who works in another person's home, like a cleaner, a nanny, or a cook. They often go unnoticed when it comes to employment laws.

Shirley's mom was a domestic worker and because so many people, especially women, in Shirley's neighborhood were domestic workers, she understood how vital they were to keep society going. So, she fought hard for their rights. She'd say, "We cannot build a strong society if we leave anyone behind. Education, opportunity, and dignity must be for everyone."

Shirley really cared about the people around her. She always said she was a person for the people. And that's why, in 1968, she ran for the United States Congress. The Congress is a group of people who decide on the laws of the United States, and no Black woman had ever been elected to Congress before. But Shirley didn't let that stop her.

To win their votes, Shirley went straight to the people. She talked with people in grocery stores, at their homes, and even drove through neighborhoods in her campaign truck shouting through a megaphone. She'd say, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Fighting Shirley Chisholm coming through!" Then she'd stop and talk to everyone she could. Her hard work paid off. The people voted for Shirley and she became the first Black woman ever elected to Congress.

She continued to work hard when she got to Congress. She fought to make things better for women, children, and families. One of her biggest accomplishments was helping to create the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—or WIC—to make sure families had enough food to eat. Shirley remembered what it was like for her parents to struggle to put food on the table. She felt that no child should go hungry in the United States.

Shirley also stood up against things like the Vietnam War and unfair discrimination. She always said she was "Unbought and Unbossed," meaning she worked for the people, not for anyone else.

In January 1972, Shirley Chisholm made an announcement that would shake the country. She stood at the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn and said, "I am running for president. I stand before you today, not as a Black candidate, not as a woman candidate, but as a candidate for all people." On that day, she became the first Black woman in the history of the United States to run for President.

Running for President was challenging. Being a woman leader and especially a Black woman leader in America was difficult and rare. People like Shirley had to fight their way to the top and they received a lot of pushback. Others didn't believe a woman should run for president. But she didn't let it stop her from trying.

Unfortunately, Shirley didn't make it through the first round of voting. She couldn't raise enough money, and not enough people supported her. However, she did win 10% of the votes in the Democratic primary election, which was a huge achievement at that time in history.

Despite the people who thought she couldn't work in the NY State Legislature, become the first Black Congresswoman, or even run for president, Shirley still did all those things. And, she changed people's lives in the process. Shirley Chisholm made an indelible mark on history for everyone in America, and paved the way for so many female leaders to come. Shirley proved that no matter what happens in the world, there will always be something worth fighting for.

## Give it Some Thought

- Who was Shirley Chisholm, and why is she an important figure in history?
- Why was it a big deal for Shirley to run for President? What did her campaign show people?
- What qualities do you think made Shirley a strong leader? How can you show those qualities in your own life?
- Shirley was the first Black woman elected to Congress. How do you think her success inspired others to follow their dreams?
- Shirley wanted equal rights for everyone. What does equality mean to you?
- Have you ever noticed something that was unfair? What do you think Shirley would have done in that situation?
- If you could change one thing to make the world a better place, what would it be?

## Glossary

**Barbados** – An island country in the Caribbean where Shirley lived as a child.

**Heritage** – The traditions, history, and culture passed down from families and ancestors. Shirley was proud of her Caribbean heritage.

**Domestic Worker** – A person who works in someone's home, doing jobs like cleaning, cooking, or taking care of children. Shirley's mother was a domestic worker, and Shirley fought for their rights.

**Legislature** – A group of people, like Congress, who make laws for a country or state. Shirley first worked in the New York State Legislature before joining Congress.

**Congress** – A group of people elected to make laws for the United States. It includes the House of Representatives and the Senate. Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman elected to Congress.

**Campaign** – The activities a person does to get people to vote for them in an election, like giving speeches, making posters, and talking to voters.

**Election** – A process where people vote to choose leaders, like a mayor, governor, or president.

**Democracy** – A type of government where people have the power to choose their leaders by voting.

**Equal Rights** – The idea that everyone should be treated fairly, no matter their race, gender, or background. Shirley worked to make sure all people had equal rights.

**Discrimination** – Unfair treatment of people because of their race, gender, or other differences. Shirley fought against discrimination her whole life.

**WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Program)** – A program Shirley helped create to make sure moms and young kids have food.

**Unbought and Unbossed** – A phrase Shirley Chisholm used to describe herself, meaning she worked for the people and wasn't controlled by powerful groups or money.

**Caucus** – A group of people in a political party or government who work together to support shared ideas or goals. Shirley helped form the Congressional Black Caucus to make sure Black leaders had a stronger voice in government.

**Primary Election** – A first round of voting to help political parties choose who will run in the final election for a big job, like President.

## Use Your Imagination

Choose one or all these activities to help you connect with Shirley Chisholm's story.

### Create a Campaign Poster

Shirley Chisholm was a trailblazer in United States politics. Pretend that you are running for something and create your own campaign poster. Include:

- A slogan (like Shirley's "Unbought and Unbossed!")
- Your key goals for what you would change or improve in your community.
- Bright and bold design to grab attention.

### Leadership Speech Challenge

Shirley used her voice to inspire people. Now it's your turn! Write a short speech about an issue you care about and present it to a group. Help them to understand why it's important for them to get involved in solving the issue.

### Community First Project

Shirley cared deeply about helping her community. Follow her example and identify a need in your school or neighborhood (like recycling, kindness, or food access). Think of small actions you can take to help. Make a "Shirley Chisholm Action Plan" to carry out your actions.

### "Yes, I Can!" Journal

Shirley never let obstacles stop her. Start a journal where you write about challenges you face and how you can overcome them with drive and determination, just like Shirley.