



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Sean M. Ryan

Senator Sean Ryan Unveils Shirley Chisholm Statue At Forest Lawn Cemetery

SEAN M. RYAN May 1, 2025

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First Known Statue Honoring Trailblazing Former Congresswoman Unveiled in Buffalo Near Chisholm's Final Resting Place

BUFFALO – Today, May 1, 2025, New York State Senator Sean Ryan joined partners from Forest Lawn Cemetery and Burchfield Penney Art Center to officially unveil a statue depicting Shirley Chisholm outside of Forest Lawn's Birchwood Mausoleum, Chisholm's final resting place. Other notable attendees included Congressman Tim Kennedy and New York

State Senator April Baskin.

Chisholm made history as the first Black woman to serve in the United States Congress in 1968 and the first Black candidate to seek a major party's nomination for president in 1972. During her political career, she was a tireless champion of women, minorities, and the poor. She fought for education and wage reform, and touted herself as "the people's politician." While in Congress, she advocated for programs like Head Start, school lunches, and food stamps. Notably, Chisholm was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the National Women's Political Caucus. After her retirement from Congress in 1983, Chisholm lived for several years in Williamsville, New York with her husband, Buffalo native and fellow former New York State Assemblymember Arthur Hardwick.

The statue was commissioned using state funding secured by Senator Ryan to honor Chisholm's legacy and convey that women – particularly Black women – are capable of anything. It was designed by Buffalo artist Julia Bottoms and cast in bronze by Gareth Lichty. Bottoms' concept was designed to evoke emotion and inspire reflection through a series of elements that reference Chisholm's life and legacy. It features Chisholm standing behind a podium adorned with the seal of the 1972 Democratic National Convention, with her hand raised high in the air displaying a peace sign. On one side of the podium is a plaque featuring Chisholm's famous quote: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." Propped against the opposite side of the podium is a folding chair, providing a symbolic reference to the quote.

The statue is the first known statue in Chisholm's likeness to be completed, though others have been announced for Prospect Park and Brower Park in New York City. U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock and Congresswoman Yvette Clarke have sponsored legislation to bring a Shirley Chisholm statue to the United States Capitol.

Senator Ryan commissioned the statue with the intention that it would serve as a tool to help educate future generations of Western New Yorkers about Chisholm's national impact and local ties. As such, the unveiling was the final planned event in what Senator Ryan hopes will be a perpetual local celebration of Chisholm's legacy. Early in the statue's planning phase, Senator Ryan hosted [a panel discussion at the Buffalo History Museum](#) examining Chisholm's life and her connection to Western New York. After Bottoms was selected to design the statue, Senator Ryan secured a state grant to fund *Stepping Into Your Light*, a program that connected her with local students from Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center and Just Buffalo Literary Center, who created multimedia compositions exploring elements of Chisholm's life that incorporated their own experiences and artistic interests. On Saturday, Senator Ryan moderated [a panel discussion at the Burchfield Penney Art Center](#) featuring Bottoms and four other local artists who utilize art as a vehicle for social change. Finally, he appeared on the latest episode of the [Buffalo History Museum Podcast](#) to discuss his personal connection to Chisholm and the importance of celebrating her legacy.

Senator Sean Ryan said, "Today, we celebrate Shirley Chisholm as a trailblazer who broke barriers as the nation's first Black congresswoman and presidential candidate. Those milestones inspired millions and are what made her famous, but it was her lifelong commitment to using her fame and influence to uplift others that made her such a special person. Throughout her career and even after her retirement, she was a fearless advocate for the underrepresented and those who sought to follow in her footsteps. Today, we were proud to unveil a statue that authentically captures Chisholm's personality and conveys the philosophy by which she lived every day. I'd like to thank Julia Bottoms, members of our steering committee, and everyone else involved with this project for all of their hard work to make this day possible. I hope that this statue will stand not only as a celebration of an important figure in our nation's history, but also as inspiration for future generations who will see themselves in Chisholm and understand that anything is possible."

Senator April Baskin said, “A true trailblazer, Shirley Chisholm was ahead of her time in her political philosophy; she persevered through the seemingly insurmountable challenges of being the first Black female elected to Congress and first Presidential candidate. Her tenacious will to represent the American people helped lay the foundation for Black female elected officials. I stand on her shoulders and am incredibly honored to mold her symbolism into a statue, right here in Buffalo where she made her home.”

Julie R. Snyder, CEO of Forest Lawn Cemetery, said, “Forest Lawn has nearly 170,000 ‘permanent residents’ including the former congresswoman and her late husband, Arthur Hardwick, Jr., entombed together in Birchwood Mausoleum. We also are home to 32 other members of Congress. When we say ‘Come Home to Forest Lawn’ we mean it for so many Western New Yorkers in so many ways and especially today as we honor the late great Shirley Chisholm who is at home and at rest here, now joined by her amazing likeness as sculpted by Julia Bottoms. We look forward to welcoming visitors to see this sculpture, from near and far, for years to come. Many thanks to New York State Senator Sean Ryan for his stewardship and the advocacy of the steering committee to make this a reality.”

Scott Propeack, Executive Director of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, said, “It is an honor to be involved in the Shirley Chisholm project. We are happy that the community can now proudly celebrate Shirley as a Buffalonian. In the model of her work and vision, we can move forward with her in mind and how we do the work of today.”

Julia Bottoms said, “Working on this project has been an incredible journey. It has inspired me not only as an artist, but as a Black woman. My life, work, and dreams exist in the footsteps of Chisholm’s legacy. Her historic run for president and her overall career in politics spoke to me even as I navigate the fine arts field – a field in which, like politics, Black women are historically underrepresented. I see my own hopes, the hopes of past Black women, and the dreams of those still to come, intertwined with the bronze. Her iconic quote, ‘If they don’t

give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair' is a focal point throughout the statue and an incredibly relevant message for us all. Chisholm's words ring as true today as they did so many years ago. Through it all, her message remains clear: Dare to achieve beyond the boundaries the world has set for you! Her words and her work inspired this statue, and my goal is to honor her legacy with it. I looked to capture her personality in the details such as her sense of fashion, her signature hairstyle, and her magnetic demeanor. I also remained faithful in my depiction of her likeness, and committed to honoring her beautiful Black features. I hope this statue sparks conversations and curiosity. I hope it reminds people of her connection to our city. Above all I hope it inspires everyone, but especially Buffalonians, to embody a bit of her indomitable spirit!"