

In depth profiles ON THE WHO'S WHO

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Photo courtesy of the office of Speaker Oliver

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Hey Smarty-Pants **Talent Comes in a Skirt** **Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver®**

By Aliza Davidovit

In times where being a household-name is a huge plus in politics, Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver enters New Jersey's senatorial primary race with a disadvantage. She is running against two well-known congressmen, Rush Holt and Frank Pallone, as well as Cory Booker, the popular mayor from Newark, NJ, who has almost a million and-a-half Twitter followers. That's hard to tweet and Oliver has certainly entered a foray where not everybody knows *her* name, but she's still very glad she came. In fact, that's exactly why she came, to change the paradigm of who can win elections and why they win them. She feels it's time to create a more diverse face to Congress and to break up the old-boy network on Capitol Hill--the millionaire club that's hogging and buying the spotlight.

Oliver, who once wanted to be an archeologist, would certainly know a fossil when she sees one and she definitely feels that Washington D.C. has become a stoic and stuck institution because of its lack of racial, gender and economic diversity. Although she is not the only African American in the race, she is the only woman and she insists that the lack of representation of women in New Jersey's congressional delegation must end. Lagging in the polls though, it's doubtful that she herself will be a part of the change she wants to see. But the Assembly Speaker says that regardless of the outcome, she wants her candidacy to serve as a symbol to Americans that their choice of candidates goes beyond the typical image of what

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a politician should look like. Quoting her role model, Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, Oliver says "Talent [also] comes in a skirt."

Talent can also come in high-heels, but the ever-fashionable Oliver says she's been campaigning in comfortable shoes so that she can get through her 18-hour days and go toe-to-toe with the male candidates. With solid experience of her own, she says she's been doing just great and loves meeting New Jerseyites and learning how she can help. The only thing she doesn't like about campaigning is having to sit still for long car rides. It makes sense, as her life story has been one of a woman always on the go. Oliver who has a B.A. from Lincoln University in Sociology and a Master's from Columbia University in Planning and Administration, is the first African-American woman to lead a legislative house in New Jersey and only the second African-American woman to lead a legislative house in American history. She was elected to the New Jersey General Assembly in 2003 and took the oath of office as Assembly Speaker on Jan. 12, 2010 after her sixth year of service. She currently still holds the position but is undecided whether she will run again. While in the Assembly, she says her aim has always been to protect New Jersey's families. She sponsored legislation creating paid family leave and legislation that amended the state's wrongful death law. She also sponsored legislation that provides low-cost auto insurance for people with low incomes and co-sponsored the law creating the Department of Children and Families, just to mention a few of the achievement she highlights on her campaign site. Prior to entering public service, she devoted much of her life to community service as a non-profit administrator for an organization that catered to young people and taught them life lessons in program development, grantsmanship and training. She also taught at Rutgers Graduate School of Business Administration in Newark, where she taught a course in non-profit management. Education is thus a very important issue for Oliver who believes that American kids are losing their competitive advantage. If she was a senator she would call for significant investment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) training and would work toward funding universal preschool to make sure that every child has that step up.

And for those who need a hand up, i.e., America's middle class, Oliver says the tax code needs to be simplified and that working families should not have to bear the brunt of the burden while companies are not bringing their dollars back to her state because of unfair loopholes.

But the biggest hole she would deal with is the economic one. Sheila Oliver believes in building an economy from the middle out and shifting focus to the information age jobs of the future. She forecasts that as the baby boom generation continues to age, more and more jobs in the healthcare field will be made available and people must be trained to step into those professions. She is a proponent of a single payer system but nonetheless embraces Obamacare which now gives 1.3 million previously denied New Jerseyans medical coverage.

Oliver, 61, assures that whatever cause she embraces, whether it be gun control, women's rights, gay rights, etc., she will work tirelessly on behalf of her constituents applying her strong work ethic which she learned from her parents. For the most part, though, it was her father, an insurance salesman,

who nurtured her politics as he was very involved in civic affairs. Originally from Connecticut, he had served in WWII and upon his return settled in New Jersey, met Oliver's mother and started a family. As a young girl Oliver shares that she was an introvert and would love to spend time alone reading. The book that most influenced her political thinking at the young age of 14 was Charles Dickens', *A Tale of Two Cities*. "Reading about the French Revolution, the inequities of distribution of wealth, and the Bastille, formed my political ideology and political thinking." She was also shaped by the ethnically diverse community she grew up in and feels it made her open-minded and able to fraternize with just about everyone, including the Orthodox Jewish family that lived across the street.

But if senatorial candidate Sheila Oliver had to point to the Jewish person she admires most, sorry rabbi, her gaze would have to take her across an ocean and not across the street. With enthusiasm in her voice, she said she just loves Golda Meir and also deeply admires her. "She was a real role model way ahead of her time," Oliver says. "To see a woman of her era in a position of diplomatic and political leadership in an environment that internationally was dominated by men is truly inspiring." That being said, Oliver really doesn't have to look that far to find a Jewish person she admires. She says that the Jewish people have made great contributions to New Jersey on numerous fronts such as education, commerce, philanthropy, etc. and she did not leave out the knish from among them, which is her favorite Jewish food.

As for her travels, Oliver has not yet been to Israel, but she says she looks forward to taking up the UJC of Metrowest's offer to take her there. In addition to all the splendors of the land, her archeological and historical interests in the region are beckoning her. "Jerusalem is the cradle of civilization," she says. "It's also a shame people don't know their history and realize that Israel is indeed the historic land of the Jewish people and that it is not a country that just popped up out of nowhere in 1948." Oliver stands for an undivided Jerusalem, calls Israel a strong ally of America and would be ready to back the Jewish Homeland if it is forced into a war with Iran.

Oliver herself was raised a Baptist but in graduate school started attending an ecumenical church and then sought out different spiritual experiences. Her grandmother had eventually named her "The Travelling Christian." But upon those travels she makes sure to make a difference. "I know God has given each one of us a specific purpose in life and we should all be responsive to the direction God points us to," she shares. "I believe God finds favor with us when we make our lives purposeful. I think it is an abomination to not have a purpose in life."

But what if a person feels they can't achieve their purpose in life?

And so we played "Tell it to Sheila" to find out.

In grade five, Oliver had a newspaper column called "Tell it to Sheila," where people sought her advice and she gave it to them. So the *Jewish Link* asked her: "Dear Sheila, I am a woman and a minority and I feel that being both will bar my ability to reach my dreams and touch the stars?"

Her advice: There is nothing that can hinder you, nothing to fear but fear itself. Have confidence, develop a healthy self-esteem and never think that you are less than anyone else! I think if you travel through life attitudinally with feeling comfortable that you are equal with every human being, it will provide you with impetus to accomplish whatever it is you want to accomplish—now go for it! And that my dear readers is Sheila Oliver!

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