



Courtesy Martese Chism family

The TORCH has PASSED

Grandmother's death-bed revelations ignite a powerful legacy for an Illinois RN

by Erin L. FitzGerald

Chicago-area RN Martese Chism believes that the struggle for universal health care is the most important struggle of the 21st century. “What the civil rights movement was to the 1960s,” says Chism, “is what universal health care should be for us today.”

Chism’s conviction has been hard-won through personal experience and struggle. Two years ago, her grandmother, Odester Webber, called Chism to her sick bed when she was suffering with breast cancer. The grandmother told Chism that she’d had to cash out all of her bonds, her life’s savings, to pay for her medications.

“I was heartbroken,” says Chism. “I thought Medicare would pay for all of that, but I was wrong.” Chism wondered how such a thing could happen. “My grandmother was an upstanding citizen, a good person who worked all of her life in a factory. I thought, why must a person give up their life savings in order to live?”

But the blows kept coming. That same day, Chism’s grandmother gave her a box filled with mementos of her great-grandmother Birdia Kegler, who died at the age of 57 when Chism was five. Chism never knew what happened to her great-grandmother. She had heard that she’d died in an auto accident of

a broken neck. But her grandmother told her that great-grandmother Birdia was a civil rights activist instrumental in advocating for black voting rights in Tallahatchie County, Miss., and that she hadn’t died in an accident. She had been murdered.

Chism later found out from the book *Where Rebels Roost: Mississippi Civil Rights Revisited* by Susan and Barry Klopfer that her grandmother and a friend, Adlema Amlett, were likely run off the

Birdia Keglar, Chism’s great-grandmother, was a civil rights activist who was likely killed by the KKK while advocating voting rights. Chism, an Illinois deputy registrar, registers others to vote.

road by the Ku Klux Klan as they drove home after testifying about voting rights at a hearing in Jackson, Miss.

Evidence about the accident at the time was sparse because local police officers quickly cleared the scene and avoided the family's inquiries. No one was allowed to view the area, including family members, and records, according to the Highway Patrol in the area, no longer exist. Though reports at the time stated that there was a head-on two-car collision, no one was ever arrested or brought forward to answer to, or claim responsibility for, the incident. Repeated efforts by Birdia's son (Chism's grandfather) to find answers to his mother's death were consistently thwarted by authorities.

"I always wondered why I had this fight in me to help people and to stand up for people's rights. When I heard about my great-grandmother, it made sense to me." Though Chism's mother had been active in local Democratic politics in Memphis, and Chism went door to door with her mother campaigning for candidates as a child, she felt it never fully accounted for the passion for social justice that beat in her heart. "When my grandmother told me about Birdia she said, 'Martese, that's why you stand up for people the way you do. You inherited that from Birdia Kegler.'"

When she returned home from her grandmother's sick bed that day in February of 2004, Chism wept. She didn't want anyone else's family to suffer because they didn't have money or insurance to pay their medical bills. "I prayed to God for a sign of what I should do," says Chism.

After her "amen," the phone rang. On the other end of the line was National Nurse Organizing Committee representative



Courtesy Charlene Jones, RN

Jill Furillo, RN. "Jill doesn't even know that this is the reason I decided to work with NNOC," says Chism, "But that phone call was my sign."

Chism, who'd called the National Nurse Organizing Committee a week before because she was impressed with NNOC's position on universal health care and staffing ratios, began the organizing drive that seceded RNs at Cook County Bureau of Health Services from the Illinois Nurses Association and made them part of NNOC.

"I took care of my grandmother," says Chism. "She died one month into the National Nurse Organizing Committee campaign." Chism thought often of her grandmother, and of her great-grandmother, Birdia Kegler, whose story was lost for a while, but revived by Chism as she continued the struggle her great-grandmother fought and died for. Civil rights and health care rights, says Chism, are "...about the same things. It's about equality. It's about social justice. But we've got people more concerned about making a profit than helping the sick."

Chism's experience with Hurricane Rita's survivors only solidified her belief that universal health care is a cause worth fighting for. Although she expected to work with African-American survivors in rural Texas, she worked, as did many of her colleagues, with impoverished white survivors, igniting her belief that poverty crosses color lines.

On the day civil rights activist Rosa Parks was memorialized, Chism said she felt like her

Chism hugs a Newton, Texas, resident who volunteered to cook meals for relief workers aiding victims of Hurricane Rita.



Courtesy Martese Chism Family

Chism photographed at age 18 months with her grandmother Odester Webber, who supported Chism while she went through nursing school. Webber spent her life savings to pay for medication when she had breast cancer.

great-grandmother Birdia's spirit was finally "really gone."

"Rosa Parks inspired my great-grandmother's involvement in the civil rights movement," says Chism. "When Rosa Parks was alive, it felt like my great-grandmother was still alive. Then, I thought to myself, Martese, maybe it's time to stop living off the legacies of civil rights activists of the past. Maybe it's time to pick up the torch and finish the race."

For Chism, the light burns bright, her mission is clear. It's time, she says, for health care for everyone.

Martese Chism is a Registered Nurse in the Medical-Surgical Department of Stroger Hospital in Cook County, Illinois. She will be touring in 2006 with the National Nurse Organizing Committee RN tour to promote universal health care in the United States.