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## Major Keys

Britney Wilson

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# Major Keys

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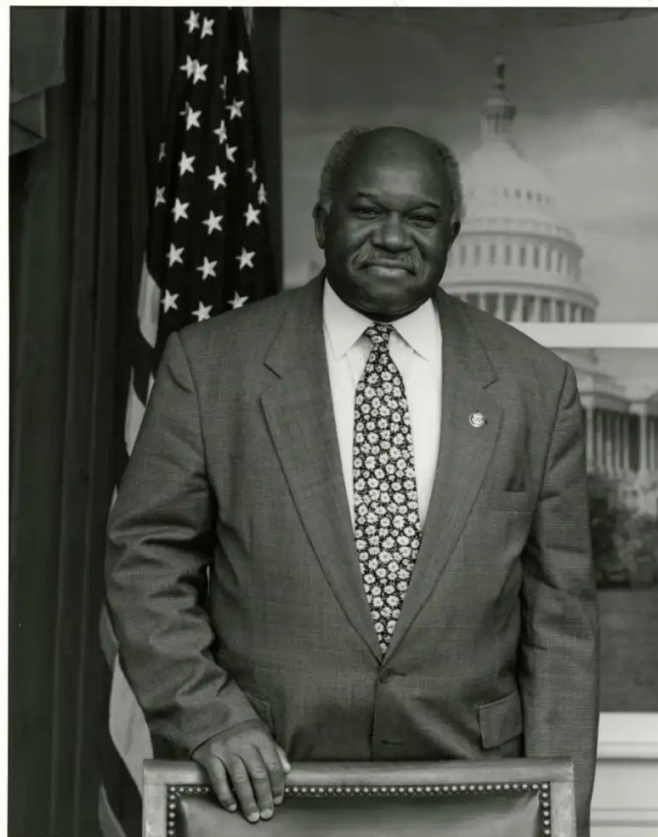
### Britney Wilson

In my sophomore year of high school I was nominated to attend the National Young Leaders Conference (NYLC) in Washington, D.C. The four-day conference was designed to engage interested students in the mechanics of government, politics, and life on Capitol Hill. As a teenager, I'd decided that becoming an attorney was the most effective way to advocate for myself and others like me as a Black disabled woman. I viewed law and politics as the peanut butter and jelly of changemaking. So I also had aspirations of becoming a politician and I was obsessed with D.C.

I begged my mother to let me attend the conference. It cost several thousand dollars that she couldn't afford—so much that the nomination packet came with fundraising strategies—and not for early investments in our future political campaigns. Before social media and “crowdfunding” became a term of art, my family, friends, neighbors, teachers, and everyone I knew chipped in so that I could attend. This was mutual aid before it was called mutual aid.

As part of the conference, students were scheduled to meet with their Congressional representatives. Most of my fellow conference attendees had only gotten to spend a few minutes with a staff member and not with their actual representative. However, much to my surprise, when my representative, Congressman Major Owens, heard there was a student from his district in Brownsville, Brooklyn at the

conference, he insisted on meeting with me himself.



Congressman Major Owens, U.S. House of Representatives, 1983-2006.

Major Owens Collection, Brooklyn Public Library – Center for Brooklyn History. Photo of an older Black man who is wearing a suit and tie standing with one hand placed on the back of a chair. Behind him is the American flag on a stand to the left of him and a backdrop showing the US Capitol building. He is smiling at the camera.

After talking for several minutes with his Chief of Staff, who welcomed me warmly, I entered the Congressman's office with no talking points, no elevator pitch, and only a vague familiarity with his name. He was sitting behind his desk in front of a wall that had black-and-white photos of scenes from *The Cosby Show*.

I introduced myself and we talked for a long time about school, my experiences growing up with Cerebral Palsy, my desire to be a civil rights lawyer, and my interest in politics. During a pause in conversation, I pointed to one of the *Cosby Show* photos behind him and recited the scene it depicted—one of the many scenes

in which Claire checks Elvin on his chauvinistic misogyny—from memory. The Congressman was amused and surprised. “Aren’t you a little young for this show?” he asked. I explained that although I was very young when the show ended, I often watched the reruns. It had been one of my favorite shows growing up. It was my turn to be surprised when the Congressman told me that Geoffrey Owens, the actor who played Elvin, was his son.

He went on to tell me that another one of his sons, Chris, was running to take his Congressional seat after his upcoming retirement. The seat had previously been held by Shirley Chisolm, the first Black woman to be elected to Congress in the United States, and its impending vacancy was no small matter. Congressman Owens said that participating in a Congressional campaign would be a great way to learn about government and politics and he later recommended me to Chris as a campaign volunteer. As a result, I spent that summer canvassing, making phone calls, and preparing mailings from the Brooklyn storefront that served as his campaign headquarters. I even got to meet “Elvin.” Although Chris didn’t win the election, I learned a lot, and he ultimately wrote one of my letters of recommendation for college.

I don’t remember exactly when or how I learned about Congressman Owens’ place in disability rights history. I just know that it happened by accident and long after I met him or volunteered for his son’s campaign. I talk a lot about the irony of being a civil rights attorney who was never formally taught much of anything about disability rights, history, or law despite my educational and career choices being expressly tied to my identity as a Black disabled woman. Like disability, learning about Black history and racial justice was also often an affirmative self-undertaking and not information I was presented with or taught in school—at least not until I got to college at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). However, it was generally easier to get information about race than about disability or especially about the overlap between the two.

At the conference, as it had been and was for most of my educational life, I had been the only, at least visibly, disabled student in attendance. I would later discover the separations between

civil rights and disability rights advocacy spaces as a disabled civil rights attorney who often had to remind her civil rights colleagues of the existence of disabled people. Similarly, I knew about Shirley Chisholm as a figure in Black history, but I didn't know that the Black Congressman who'd literally helped me had also helped spearhead the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Congressman Owens didn't tell me as we sat in his office talking about my life, goals, and classic sitcoms or even when we saw one another again while I was volunteering for Chris that summer. No one on the campaign team told me. Maybe they thought I already knew. In hindsight, I suppose it would have been awkward to say, "Hey, disabled girl, did you know I helped get the ADA passed?" or even "Did you know my father did?" It wouldn't have been unusual for politicians or aspiring politicians to do so repeatedly or even to take pictures with me to fill campaign literature with an "inspirational" and informative anecdote. In fact, it would practically have been expected—but I'm glad they never did.

I don't know what or how much anyone told Congressman Owens about me before he agreed to meet with me. I don't know if he was thinking about the ADA Task Force he helped convene to generate information and support for the ADA during our first meeting. Maybe he just saw an ambitious young girl from his district that he wanted to encourage. Maybe it was both. Either way, I'm grateful for the investment he made in me, and I hope to do the same for others.

Congressman Owens did something much better than regale me with tales about his efforts to get the ADA passed: he, along with many other mentors I've been fortunate enough to have, helped make a world I was interested in more accessible to me. I haven't always been able to articulate it, but I think that's why I ultimately became interested in teaching. At its core, it's the art of making experiences, information, and opportunities accessible to others. I say this with full recognition that education is often framed and practiced in ways that reinforce ableism via problematic notions of elitism, intelligence, and capability, among many other things, and

especially in the legal realm. This is a reality I plan to work to both illuminate and deconstruct.

After the last several years of practicing civil rights law as a Black disabled attorney, I realized that perhaps the best way for me to be the change I want to see in the legal advocacy world is to help generate it from the source. One way to ensure that other future advocates don't go without an awareness of ableism and disability history and how it impacts all areas of life is to teach it to them. I chose to start a clinic in particular—the mini-law offices inside law schools where students work on cases and learn to lawyer—because just as canvassing in my community taught me about the political process, I believe in the power of learning while doing to make abstract concepts concrete.

I also want to continue to advocate and help build the bridge I hope to see between the civil and disability rights advocacy communities. I can think of no better way to pay it forward than to take an interest in students' interests the way the Congressman took an interest in mine. I want to help connect them to people and opportunities that will help them achieve their goals. Most importantly, I want to do all of this with and on behalf of people with disabilities, and especially disabled people of color, as students, advocates, clients, and community partners. Just as Congressman Owens helped provide me with access and insight I needed to accomplish what I wanted, I want my clinic to be a thought experiment in what it means to engage in social justice advocacy that enables other people with disabilities to do the same.

## **ABOUT**



Black woman with curly natural, black hair and glasses in a blue chambray suit and white and blue polka dot top standing on crutches in an office.

**Britney Wilson** is an Associate Professor of Law and Director of the new Civil Rights and Disability Justice Clinic at New York Law School. For more about Britney, check out episode 94 from the Disability Visibility podcast. You can find her on Twitter: @labelleverte