

The Grandmother of Borough Hall

By Philip Berroll

In the spacious conference room on the second floor of Queens Borough Hall, Claire Shulman speaks to a visiting delegation of Russian women about her job as Borough President. The women, legislative aides in the former Soviet Union, are visiting the U.S. to learn about the workings of American government and politics (“Next, we’re going to see Bella Abzug,” says their interpreter). One of the Russians asks Shulman how she deals with day-to-day problems, such as a poorly paved street.

“I call up the person in charge of roads, who is a mayoral appointee,” Shulman responds, “and I say, ‘By tomorrow, you’d better pave this street, or else.’” She pauses. “It usually works.” The women laugh – “That’s how it is in Russia,” says the interpreter.

The performance is typical Shulman, combining the no-nonsense pragmatism of a veteran officeholder with the wry warmth of a Jewish grandmother. It’s a style that an overwhelming number of Queens voters find appealing: the 71-year-old Shulman, currently running for her fourth term as Borough President, is so popular that local Republicans offered the lifelong Democrat their line on the ballot in November. (She declined, not wanting to cause difficulties for other Democratic candidates in Queens.) At this point, Shulman’s only opposition is Conservative Party candidate David DiCasa.

Few would have predicted such success for Shulman when she took office in March of 1986. Then Deputy Borough President, she was named to the higher post following the suicide of the incumbent, Donald Manes, who had been implicated in the city-wide corruption scandals of the mid-‘80s. Shulman had never held elective office, and it was widely assumed by political insiders that her role was to “keep the office warm” for a few months while the powerful Queens Democratic organization chose a legitimate successor to Manes.

But Shulman says she “never paid much attention” to what others might have thought -- “I decided what I was going to focus on and I went ahead and did it.” Gaining the support of Rep. Thomas Manton, the Queens Democratic leader, she was elected to serve the

remainder of Manes' term, then re-elected to full four-year terms in 1989 (with 86% of the vote) and 1993.

It's no exaggeration to say that Shulman is now one of the most powerful Democratic women in New York City politics... which is why many observers were shocked when she recently decided not to support her longtime colleague, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, for Mayor this year. Against the wishes of Manton and other Queens Democrats, she crossed party lines to endorse Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for a second term (she had backed David Dinkins in 1993).

It had been rumored that Shulman's endorsement was part of a *quid pro quo* in exchange for the offer of the GOP line to her. But Shulman insists that only two factors figured in her decision: she was impressed with the Mayor's record – and less so with the campaigns of his opponents.

“It was not an easy thing to do,” she says. “I knew it would hurt the feelings of people I've worked with over the years. But I felt it was my responsibility to endorse who I felt would be the best mayor for the next four years. And I believed that Giuliani had done a good job – that the city has come back, that its reputation worldwide has improved, revenues have increased; the city just seemed to be in a lot better shape.”

Though Shulman asserts, “I still believe in the Democratic philosophy that we are responsible for the most vulnerable in our society,” she feels “that the way the Mayor is going about it, by trying to increase the tax base so that we can provide services for those folks, is appropriate and proper for the future of this city.”

As for the Democrats, “I wanted to give them an opportunity to say what their programs and positions for the future would be – and though I think they're all decent people, in my opinion they have not yet done this. I don't see what they would do to improve the city.”

Understandably, Messinger was none too pleased by her colleague's choice. “I regret that she made this decision,” she said recently in an interview on radio station WNYC. “It's a bad decision for the city and a bad decision for Queens. Five of the six school districts in Queens are seriously overcrowded, and some classrooms are 110-120% over capacity.”

But Shulman does not share Messinger's view that Giuliani's budget cuts are a major cause of school overcrowding. "This problem didn't just happen," she says. "The reason Queens is so behind in the number of [classroom] seats that are required is that we get new kids into the system – a couple of thousand every year. They're all immigrants, coming here for a better life, and we want to make sure their kids get educated.

"There are things that we can do. We're trying to play catch-up with the construction of schools. Also, the Board of Education and I have spoken to [teacher's union head] Sandy Feldman about the idea of a 12 month school year, which will cut the overage by about 30%. And keeping the schools open longer every day is another possibility."

The problems of Queens' immigrant population are a major concern of Shulman's – particularly the large number of Bukharan Jews from the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan who have settled in the Rego Park-Forest Hills area in recent years.

"There's been a net decrease in the number of Jews in Queens over the last decade, as the population ages," says Shulman aide Michael Rogovin, "but recently there's been a large Bukharan immigrant influx. (The group takes its name from the city of Bukhara, the Uzbek capital where many of them had lived.) The Bukharans have special needs, but they're not unique to the Jewish community. They have the same needs as all immigrants -- culturalization, language, making ends meet, educational issues. And these are issues that involve government more than with other Jewish communities."

Most of the Bukharans are Orthodox Jews, while many native-born Queens Jews belong to other denominations. But Shulman feels that differences between the groups are a matter of "culture, not religion.

"For example," she says, "in apartment houses, the Bukharans congregate in the halls. If they have a party, sometimes that's where it takes place -- and some of the Jews that have been here a while don't quite understand that. So we've met with both sides, brought them together ... and there now seems to be a kind of peaceful coexistence going on."

Shulman's office has also collected food for the Bukharans for the Jewish holidays, and provided English as a Second Language classes "so that they can learn the English necessary for naturalization. I have over 400,000 seniors in this borough, and I think somewhere between 20 and 30,000 are not citizens, but legal immigrants. And I was concerned that a lot of these folks were going to lose their benefits (under the recent changes in Federal welfare rules)."

Shulman's traditional, grass-roots approach to government is rooted in her background. Born in Flatbush ("across from Ebbets Field") and a graduate of Adelphi University, she moved to Queens in 1945, working as a registered nurse at Queens Hospital Center, where she met her husband, Melvin, a physician. While living in Bayside and raising two sons, Lawrence and Kim, and a daughter, Ellen, she became increasingly involved in school and community affairs: "I joined mother's clubs and the PTA," she says, "and I got to know a lot about education. I did a lot of *pro bono* work in the education field, lobbying for more money."

Shulman went on to become a member of Queens Community Board 11, then became board chair in 1968 "mostly because no one else wanted the job." Her new position gave her grounding – and a growing interest – in the city and state budgeting process. "So when my kids were old enough," she says, "I thought, 'Gee, maybe I should try government.' I knew most of the elected officials (in Queens) through my work, and when they offered me a job as Director of Queens Community Boards at the end of 1972, I took it."

Shulman went on to serve in the position for eight years, then was named Deputy Borough President by Manes. "By that time I'd learned the city government pretty thoroughly, but I was still an appointed official. And then I got to be Borough President," she says dryly, "in an unusual way."

But her experience gave her the skill to deal with numerous challenges during her decade-plus in office – including a significant loss of power when the Board of Estimate was abolished in 1989. (Each of the five Borough Presidents had a seat on the Board,

which functioned as a counterweight to the Mayor – a role that is now filled by the City Council.)

“I still have many discretionary dollars,” says Shulman. “I still appoint a member of the City Planning Commission, and a member of the School Board. And there’s something that’s not in the City Charter: I get elected in a county of two million people. I don’t mean to sound intimidating, but with those numbers, it’s very hazardous to take me on in an important issue if you’re a city-wide elected official.”

Under New York City’s 1993 term-limits law, Shulman’s next term will be her last. Her agenda is ambitious: it includes plans to expand Queens Hospital Center – “We have the largest senior population (in the city) which creates a demand that we cannot fulfill at the present time” – and to build the Technodome, a proposed sports and entertainment center, on 300 acres on the Rockaway Peninsula.

As for her future after leaving office, “Well,” Shulman laughs, “my staff thinks I’m immortal... Seriously, I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Looking back on her career, Shulman feels that things are much easier for women in politics than when she entered public life, “and I’m delighted about that. I think people are becoming accustomed to the idea that women can function in government, and that they can function on a very high level.”

Does she see herself as a role model for younger women? “I hope so. I hope they find this to be a satisfying career – not only women, but younger *people*.”

One woman who has clearly been inspired by Shulman’s example is her daughter, Ellen Shulman Baker. Dr. Baker is a physician and an astronaut, whose space career includes voyages on the Atlantis and Columbia space shuttles and the first docking (in 1995) of Atlantis with the troubled Russian space station Mir.

“My daughter is probably the most organized person I know,” says Shulman, almost in amazement. “She’s got two little kids, and she does everything for them that I did for my

kids – but I wasn't working, other than *pro bono* things. I'm just so impressed by her, and women like her. They're doing *everything*."

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