

Democrats dissatisfied with Supervisor's reply to transphobic signage

By David Ambro

Local Democrats are expressing disappointment this week about the reply by Town of Smithtown officials to a resident who spoke out at the April 2 Smithtown Town Board meeting about transphobic signs she removed from telephone poles in downtown Smithtown.

Linda Obernauer, of the United Community Action Network, held up two signs, one she removed from the utility pole in front of the Smithtown Library March 1 and the other she removed from a utility pole on

Ms. Obernauer should leave the signs on the poles and call the Smithtown Department of Public Safety to send someone to take them down. He said that will enable the town to investigate the incidents. None of the other town board members responded.

In a statement to **The Smithtown New** Tuesday, April 9, Amy Fortunato, an officer in the Smithtown Democratic Committee, a former candidate for the town board and for receiver of taxes, and a member of the Town's Unity Council which works to address bias in the community, called the town board response inefficient and flaccid.

"I strongly recommend that the town council condemn any and all hate speech in whatever form," Ms. Fortunato said. "The presentation by Linda Obernauer at the town board meeting last week was alarming and should have caused a stronger statement that disavows this type of hatred. I remind the town council that all residents of Smithtown should be protected, included, and appreciated rather than marginalized or threatened. We hope for unity and support from the town council in this matter."

The Suffolk County Democratic Committee also released a statement Tuesday about the transphobic signs.

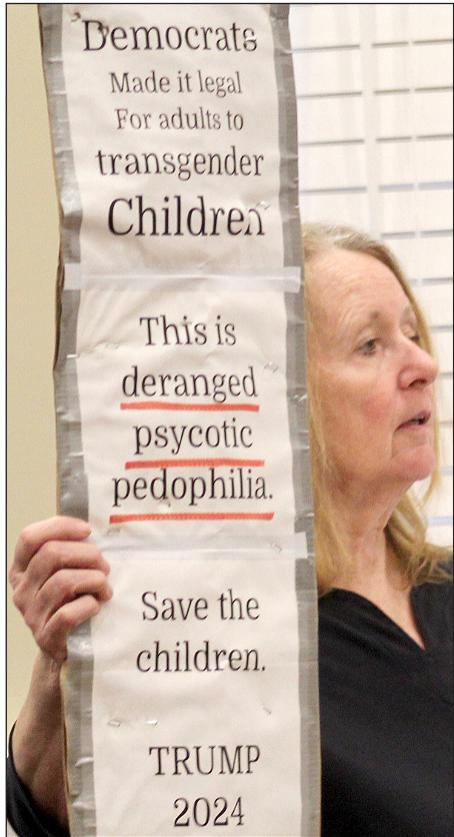
"The vilification of transgender individuals is unacceptable and the Suffolk County Democratic Committee vehemently condemns the disgusting signage that was illegally affixed to telephone polls in Smithtown," said Suffolk County Democratic Committee Executive Director Alexandra VanDerlofske. "All persons, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, or religion, have a right to feel safe and free from hostile speech in their own communities, and we must work together to show the offenders that this type of hate will not be allowed here in Suffolk."

"We fully support the resolution suggested by the United Community Action Network, and further call on the Town of Smithtown to act swiftly to ideally determine who erected the signage to prevent them from doing so in the future," Ms. VanDerlofske said.

Finally, the Smithtown Democratic Committee sent a letter to **The NEWS** this week addressing the subject and urging the town board to take more affirmative action. The local Democrats contend that the reputation of Smithtown is at stake.

"We, the members of the Smithtown Democratic Committee, along with other residents, wholeheartedly condemn the placement of anti-LGBT+ signage across our town, and the response by Supervisor Ed Wehrheim and the Town Board at a recent meeting," says the Smithtown Democratic Committee letter. "Over

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Linda Obernauer at the April 2 Smithtown Town Board meeting with one of the signs she removed from a utility pole.

Landing Avenue just north of Main Street March 29. The first sign says "Democrats made it legal for adults to transgender children. This is deranged psychotic pedophilia. Save the children. Trump 2024." The second sign says "Democrats take pedophilia to a whole new level by making it legal for adults to transgender children. Save the children. Trump 2024."

After Ms. Obernauer showed the town board the signs she said there is an urgent need for action. "By staying silent we create a permission structure that allows continuous hurtful acts against our town's most vulnerable. Parents raising non-binary conforming children need support, not ridicule. Children who are questioning their gender identity need love and understanding, not mockery," she said.

In response, Superior Edward Wehrheim asked that in the future



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Robert Gottlieb (left), who built his practice as a criminal defense attorney in Commack, with actor Lucas Hedges at the Hollywood premiere of **Shirley**, a Netflix film about the 1972 presidential campaign of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, of Brooklyn. While he was attending Cornell University (below), Mr. Gottlieb was on the Chisholm campaign staff, his character portrayed in the film by Mr. Hedges.

Robert Gottlieb portrayed in new Netflix film, Shirley

By David Ambro

For a generation of Suffolk County residents, Robert Gottlieb was a hard-changing Commack criminal defense attorney who took on high-profile cases and twice ran for District Attorney, but it was not until the March 22 release of the Netflix film **Shirley** that his formative years came into the spotlight.

Shirley is a film about the 1972 campaign by Congressman Shirley Chisholm for the Democratic nomination for president. Considered a trailblazer, Ms. Chisholm is the first Black woman elected to Congress and the first Black woman to run for president, a campaign Mr. Gottlieb was an integral part of. He is featured prominently in the film, his role performed by actor Lucas Hedges, an Oscar nominee for Best Supporting Actor for his role in the 2016 drama **Manchester by the Sea**.

During an interview from his Manhattan office Monday, April 8, Mr. Gottlieb shared his background, his role in advance of the film and the excitement of the release last month.

"Back then I do not consider that I deserved any congratulations contrary to what people have been saying since the movie came out," Mr. Gottlieb said. "I don't think it took courage at all. I had been involved politically with causes

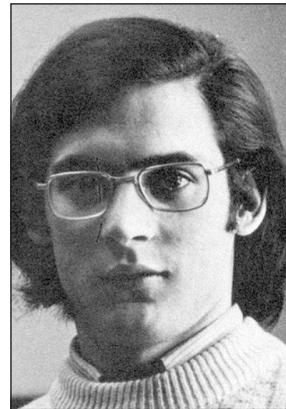
demonstrating against the Vietnam War and for civil rights. I did that throughout high school and college. So working for Chisholm and fighting the good fight with Chisholm was consistent with the course that I was already on."

"At the time I knew it was historic that she was the first Black woman running for president. I knew that was historic but I did not give that any mind and I certainly did not pat myself on the back thinking I did anything historic," said Mr. Gottlieb. "As a result of the movie, I still don't believe I did anything terribly courageous, but I recognize now that not everyone would have done it, which I never really thought about before."

A 1968 Hicksville High School graduate, Mr. Gottlieb earned his undergraduate degree from Cornell University and his law degree from New York University. He began his career as a prosecutor in the Manhattan District Attorney's office from 1975 to 1979. Then moved with his wife Laurie to Stony Brook to raise their two children, Adam, now 44, and Arielle, now 41.

Mr. Gottlieb began his legal career on Long Island as an assistant town attorney in Brookhaven during Democratic Supervisor John Randolph. He was gone a year later when Republican Supervisor Joel Lefkowitz took over. He worked for a firm in Carle Place for two years then opened his own law practice

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Attorney with local roots portrayed in Shirley

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on Veterans Memorial Highway in Commack in 1983. He practiced there for two decades, until 2002 when he moved back to Manhattan where he still practices criminal defense work and takes on high-profile cases from an office at 111 Broadway at Wall Street next to the historic Trinity Church.

Between his junior and senior years in the summer of 1971, Mr. Gottlieb received a paid summer internship for a member of Congress. Able to apply to two, he picked Congressman Allard Lowenstein and Congresswoman Chisholm.

Gottlieb recounted this week that Lowenstein was a newly elected member of the House of Representatives after being a leader in the dump LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson] movement. "He was somebody I felt a political affinity toward," said Mr. Gottlieb.

From a district in Brooklyn, Chisholm, of Bedford-Stuyvesant, was elected to the House in 1968. "She was already making a name for herself and showing the world that she was independent, outspoken, and committed to the ideals of justice and equality and was willing to fight for it. Not in the typical good-old-boys network way. You had a Black congresswoman from Bed-Sty doing battle with John McCormack (D-Boston), who was the Speaker of the House," Gottlieb recalled.

He went to the scene in the movie where Speaker McCormack appointed Rep. Chisholm to the Agriculture Committee. She told him there was no agriculture in her district in Brooklyn, and fought to get a new committee assignment. Mr. Gottlieb landed with the Chisholm House staff, where he worked for the summer.

At the December break after the first semester of his senior year, Mr. Gottlieb visited the Chisholm staff in Washington for the holidays. "We had become very friendly. It was like old-home week. Everyone was in a good mood, it was Christmas," Mr. Gottlieb said.

On the day he was about to leave Washington, Rep. Chisholm pulled Mr. Gottlieb aside and told him she was going to run for president. He flips to the movie rendition of him asking, "Of the United States?"

"Whether or not I uttered those words out loud, I'm not sure, but I know that is exactly what I was thinking," said Mr. Gottlieb.

During their meeting, Rep. Chisholm asked Mr. Gottlieb to serve on her presidential campaign staff as the national student coordinator. "National Student Coordinator—I remember it like it was yesterday," Mr. Gottlieb said Monday.

"It was a significant position because the voting age in America was lowered from 21 to 18 years of age," said Mr. Gottlieb. "She understood and she had already begun on the campus speaking trail. Young people were attracted to her and her message and the entire approach of being independent."

"She clearly wanted to focus on organizing and getting 18 and 19-year-old voters to support her."



CAMPAIGN COHORTS: Robert Gottlieb (right) with Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-California) at the premiere of the Netflix film *Shirley*, about the 1972 presidential campaign of Brooklyn Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. Mr. Gottlieb and Ms. Lee were both students at the time and worked on the campaign, their characters key to the story line in the movie.

Mr. Gottlieb arranged with Cornell to complete his final semester with an independent study and with a course at George Washington University in Washington D.C. and went to work on the Chisholm campaign. As an aside, Mr. Gottlieb said it was only once more that he would return to Cornell.

He was at Cornell during volatile political times, students taking over buildings and staging protests against the Vietnam War and at the same time there was a racial divide on the campus. During the unrest, four students were added as voting members of the University Board of Trustees, Mr. Gottlieb among those elected and serving on the executive board. While on the presidential campaign trail, he was called back to Cornell to help resolve a standoff with students barricaded in a building.

Mr. Gottlieb climbed into the building through a window, met with the students, went back out the window, and carried their demands to the administration to initiate negotiations. He then returned to Washington and the presidential campaign trail.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Gottlieb visited primary states, Florida, Wisconsin, and North Carolina to organize students at colleges and universities, campaign operations which are featured in the film. "I would go to university campuses organizing rallies and meetings for Chisholm to attend and give speeches and meet with students," he said.

Mr. Gottlieb spent a lot of time in Florida, a key state where the Democratic National Convention was held in Miami July 10-13, 1972. He recalled that by the time of the convention, most of the staff had abandoned Rep. Chisholm. "I was

like the last man standing and I was playing a real important role in those smoke-filled backrooms," said Mr. Gottlieb.

"I was given the opportunity to do something that was important," said Mr. Gottlieb. "The issues were important. I was given the opportunity to fight for things I firmly believed in."

When the campaign ended in the summer of 1972, Mr. Gottlieb began attending NYU Law School and over time he lost contact with Rep. Chisholm. She died in 2005, at the age of 80. Mr. Gottlieb attended the funeral but had no other contact. In late 2021, he received a telephone call at his office from director/screenwriter John Ridley who told him that he was making the movie and spoke to him for more than an hour about the project. Mr. Gottlieb recognized Mr. Ridley as the director/screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave*.

"We had a great conversation during which it all started coming back to me," said Mr. Gottlieb. "I hadn't really thought about it for a lot of years but in speaking about it the events and the incidents you see in the movie when I am speaking to Chisholm or when I was traveling to primary states, or when they wrote on the box of literature 'Go Home...' and then the N-word. All of that is real and I relayed those types of incidents to Ridley," Mr. Gottlieb said.

He was called again by Mr Ridley's office and then Mr. Gottlieb was called by the actor Lucas Hedges about the role. Mr. Gottlieb said Mr. Hedges lives in Brooklyn so they met the next week and went out to dinner.

"He was the nicest guy," said Mr. Gottlieb. "I didn't have the sense that he was scoping me out but after

watching the movie, he clearly was."

"He wanted to understand me. It was mannerisms, my attitude, my feelings as a novice who believed in Chisholm's message to be the catalyst for change."

About Hedges, Mr. Gottlieb commended the way he portrayed a young man who was an inexperienced novice which he overcame with energy and enthusiasm that even drew the attention of Ms. Chisholm in her book, **The Good Fight**.

In *Shirley*, Ms. Chisholm is played by Regina King. The supporting cast included Lance Reddick and Terrence Howard. The film was supposed to come out in 2022 but there were delays. It was pushed to 2023 and Mr. Gottlieb said he was contacted by the production crew and invited to the private screening of the film March 18 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and to the primary in Hollywood March 20, where he walked the red carpet with Mr. Hedges.

"It was very emotional. It's hard to convey. It was overwhelming," said Mr. Gottlieb. "It was emotional for me to watch somebody portray me and then to see the credits, with my photograph from 1972 and a bio about what I have done since with original music in the background was a terrific feeling, enhanced by watching it on the big screen during the limited engagement before being released on Netflix March 22.

Before the Hollywood premiere, he met backstage with Ms. King and Mr. Ridley. "They couldn't have been more gracious and filled with gratitude for the work I did and for my help in bringing alive a lot of the incidents that found their way into the film," said Mr. Gottlieb.

Mr. Gottlieb said that Ms. Chisholm has had a profound impact on his life. "She understood the system. She understood the goal was to do more than just whine and scream about what is wrong in the country but to do something about it. She was committed to accomplishing and not just throwing bombs," he said. "That has always been my attitude. When I ran for DA, I always wanted to do that in Suffolk County. When I ran for DA I always said that I was going to shake up Suffolk County and root out corruption and the good-old-boys-network. I didn't care if you were a Republican or a Democrat, if you committed a crime you were going to be prosecuted."

"That has always been my attitude, so I know she had a significant effect on my attitude that is still alive in me today.... She had a major impact on me."

For the most part, Mr. Gottlieb said the movie was spot-on accurate. He said there was some literary license used in a scene when Ms. Chisholm was denied a place with the other presidential candidates on Meet the Press, a national appearance she was counting on. He said she directed them to sue the network and in the movie it has him playing more of a role than he did. "I don't want to be disbarred for practicing law before I had a license," Mr. Gottlieb said, and laughed aloud. "That is the only area that there was any sought of literary license that was given to real events."