

# Professor pens bio about her hometown hero

BY LAYLA GARMS  
THE CHRONICLE

As a girl in Omaha, Neb., Salem College Professor Dr. Tekla Johnson remembers State Sen. Ernie Chambers as being larger than life, a powerful figure in the African American community who stood strong — and often alone in the Nebraska legislature — fighting injustice wherever he saw it.

In the decades that have followed, Johnson, 47, says her admiration for Chambers, who was Nebraska's lone African American senator for most of his 37-year career, has grown.

"He was a very, very powerful man in the community," related Johnson, who has taught history at Salem since 2010. "...He really became the voice of the African American freedom movement in that state because he would not compromise."

Despite his stature, Chambers maintained close ties to the community, maintaining his job as a barber and passing legislation to allow his constituents to call his office collect, Johnson said.

Chambers, the longest serving senator in Nebraska state history, lost his District 11 seat in 2009, after term limit legislation was passed.

"They passed term limits to get him out, because he was known for filibusters and sort of backing up the works when he doesn't get something he wants for his constituency," Johnson said. "...In his final years in office, they dubbed him 'the dean of the legislature.' He was by far — in terms of stopping the legislation — the most powerful legislator the state senate had ever



Dr. Tekla Johnson on the Salem College campus.

Photos by Layla Garms

seen."

Using the storied history of African Americans in Nebraska as a backdrop, Johnson explores Chambers' remarkable career in her forthcoming political biography, "Free Radical: Ernest Chambers, Black Power and the Politics of Race," which is slated to be published later this month.

"The attempt of this book was to say, 'This was why he was returned to office so many times,'" explained the University of Nebraska-Lincoln alumna. The majority of the community has seen him as representing them in office."

Though he worked hard to be accessible and accountable to his constituents, Chambers was known for being fiercely protective of his personal life, and rarely allowed outsiders to glimpse the man behind the movement, Johnson said. As a result, "Free Radical" is the first published biography of his career. Johnson spent nearly a



Ernie Chambers speaks at a mock funeral protest.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Johnson

decade researching and conferring with the senator, first for her dissertation and later for the book.

"Everyone was surprised when he did allow me to do it," commented the mother of three. "He treated me as a daughter of the community."

"Free Radical" chronicles Chambers' famous battles with Omaha city officials over controversial issues, such as police violence, which Johnson says was a regular occur-

rence in the predominantly white state at the time. Because he remained politically Unaffiliated, Chambers was always free to speak his mind, which was what inspired the name of the book, she said.

"We call the book 'Free Radical' for one reason because he remained absolutely independent," Johnson explained. "He didn't have to tow the party line."

Over the course of his career, Chambers was a

leader in addressing civil rights issues, including the lawsuit that forced Omaha City Schools to fully integrate in 1975; a resolution to divest state funds from Apartheid South Africa; and the 1969 police shooting of Vivian Strong. Though she was just a girl, Johnson, the third of four girls in her family, still remembers her father lifting her up to peer into Strong's casket when her family attended the memorial service.

"She looked like a princess," Johnson said of Strong, who was 14 years-old and unarmed at the time of her death.

Chambers also helped to open the door for other African Americans, by helping to pass legislation that established legislative districts in majority African American communities, Johnson said. Having completed his required four-year break from the legislature, Chambers, now 75, is again running for office. He will face off against incumbent Brenda Council, a Democrat on Nov. 6, the same day that Johnson will host a reading of "Free Radical" and a question and answer session in the Shirley Recital Hall of Salem's Elberson Fine Arts Center. The 7:30 p.m. event is free and open to

the public.

"We try to involve faculty authors whenever we can," said Aimee Mephram, interim director of the Center for Women Writers at Salem. "I think it's a great experience for students to see teachers working on their own projects. The presence in the classroom and teaching is certainly the top priority here at Salem, but I think it's good for students to see teachers working on other projects. I think it can be inspirational for them."



Mephram


Mephram, a native of Dearborn, Mich., said she felt Nov. 6 — Election Day — was a befitting date for a political book reading.


"It's nicely tied to the book," remarked the Washington University in St. Louis alumna. "If people who come to hear her talk can be excited about being engaged in the political process, I think that would be a great outcome."

Hardcover editions of "Free Radical" will be available for sale in the Salem College campus bookstore and at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com). A subsequent book signing is slated for February 2013. For more information, visit [www.salem.edu](http://www.salem.edu).

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