

Marjorie Bell Chambers

Teacher, civic leader, and official in government and nonprofit organizations, Marjorie Bell Chambers was born in New York City on March 11, 1923, the daughter of Kenneth and Katherine (Totman) Bell. Her paternal grandfather, Wilberforce Lee, was a missionary in Angola and her father was raised by an adoptive family in Canada; he became a senior vice-president of Chase Manhattan Bank. Chambers contracted tuberculosis in her childhood and suffered from trouble with her lungs for the remainder of her life. She received her B.A. in history and political science from Mount Holyoke College in 1943, and in 1945 married physicist William H. Chambers, who had served with George Patton's Third Army in Europe during World War II. They both pursued graduate studies at Cornell University, with Chambers receiving her M.A. in 1948. William earned his Ph.D. at Ohio State University, and in 1950, with their children Lee and William, they moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico, where her husband William worked at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Two more children, Leslie and Kenneth, were born in Los Alamos and Chambers focused on raising the family and volunteering with various organizations, including the Girl Scouts and the American Association of University Women. She was a founding member of the Los Alamos Branch of the American Association of University Women, and served as president of that branch, and of the New Mexico Division before serving as national president from 1975 to 1979. In 1964, she began working as a substitute teacher in Los Alamos public schools and in 1965 was hired as project historian at the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission in Los Alamos. This work prompted her to continue her graduate studies and she received her PhD from the University of New Mexico in 1974; she was an adjunct faculty member of the university from 1970 to 1976, returning for the 1984-1985 academic year. She had a long career in higher education, joining the faculty of the Union Institute Graduate School in 1979 and serving as dean of the Midwest region from 1979 to 1982; she retired from the Institute in 2003.

While William Chambers continued to work in New Mexico, after their children were grown, Marjorie's professional activities required her to travel considerably and to settle temporarily in other states. In 1976, she was appointed president of Colorado Women's College, and served until 1978; the first woman president of the college, she launched an intensive 10-day campaign to save it from economic collapse. This campaign was successful, though the college ultimately closed. In 1985, Chambers became interim president of Colby-Sawyer College; the first woman to lead that institution, she also instituted the college's first strategic plan. She also served as chair of the Secretary of the Navy's Advisory Board on Education and Training from 1987 to 1989, and as a vice-chair and commissioner of the New Mexico Commission on Higher Education. In 1976, she co-founded Bell-Chambers Associates, a consulting firm which specialized in government, education, science, and technology.

Chambers was a lifelong advocate for women's rights and was a national spokesperson for the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment. President Ford appointed her to the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs in 1976 and she

remained on the Council until 1980, serving as chair from 1978 to 1979. In 1978, President Carter appointed her to the President's Advisory Committee for Women, and she became acting chair after Bella Abzug was fired from the committee in 1979. She was also very involved in both national and local politics, and in 1982 became the first Republican woman to run (unsuccessfully) for Congress from New Mexico; she followed this with an unsuccessful run for Lieutenant Governor in 1986. She was elected to the Los Alamos County Council in 1975, serving as its chair--and instituting use of the word "councilor" rather than "council man"--in 1976; she also served as chair of the Los Alamos County Personnel Board from 1984 to 1990. She died on August 22, 2006, after a long illness.