

# An Architect of Maternal Equity



From the political powerhouse of Washington, D.C. to the front lines of maternal health in rural Georgia, Kristina Cheek is shifting the narrative on "silver rights" and medical advocacy. As the founder of the Sista Girl Birth Initiative, she is proving that high-performance leadership begins with the foundational health of the community.

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## A Foundation of Policy and Power

Long before she was a subject matter expert in maternal health, Kristina Cheek was a student of the "Long Night" of preparation. Growing up in the DMV area (D.C., Maryland, and Virginia), policy wasn't a distant concept—it was the daily backdrop of her life.

"I was very civically and politically aware from a very early age," Cheek recalls. Her education didn't just happen in a classroom; it happened on the Metro, riding past the Supreme Court and watching the halls of the Capitol. At just seven years old, while sitting in a hospital room at Walter Reed with her Aunt Brenda, she made a definitive proclamation: "I want to serve on the Maryland House of Delegates, and then I'm going to run for Congress".

This early exposure was fueled by the *Washington Post*, a staple in her household that served as her window into world affairs. By the time she reached high school, she was already executing on this vision, interning for Congressman Al Wynn and serving as the first Student Government President of her newly built school.

## The Aha Moment: From Advocacy to Personal Agency

The transition from political observer to health advocate crystallized in 2008. Pregnant with her first child and seeking breastfeeding support in Valdosta, Georgia, Cheek found a community of like-minded women through the La Leche League.

Despite being the only Black woman in the group at the time, she found mentors in Nancy Makransky and Brenda Parrish, who poured into her the confidence to pursue an unmedicated, natural birth. When she successfully welcomed her daughter into her arms on December 28, 2008, the experience was transformative.

"I heard so many negative stories... it's always seen as this emergency crisis event," she says. The "aha moment" came when she realized her positive experience was the exception, not the rule, for women who looked like her.



## Execution in the Face of Adversity

Determined to heal the trauma she saw in her peers, Cheek founded a support group that eventually evolved into the **Sista Girl Birth Initiative**. Her professional evolution took her through the halls of public health, serving as a WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator and working with the Department of Public Health's "Baby Love" program.

In October 2023, a significant hurdle appeared: her federal grant funding was cut. Faced with the prospect of programs shutting down while infant mortality rates remained high, Cheek refused to let the vision die. When told she could simply "write a letter" to leadership, her lifelong training in advocacy kicked in.

"I said, 'No, not on my watch,'" she remembers. This setback became the catalyst for her to launch Sista Girl independently in March 2024. Since then, she has moved from bedside doula work to drafting legislation and graduated with a certification (2024) as a Perinatal Patient Navigator at the **Morehouse School of Medicine Center for Maternal Health Equity**.

## Building a Statewide Bridge

Today, Kristina Cheek is balancing grassroots advocacy with high-level policy influence. She is a firm believer that maternal health is not just a "Black problem" but a public health mandate that affects the economic and social stability of the entire community.

As she looks toward the future, her message to the next generation of "Architects" is clear: **Take up space.**

"Do not be afraid to speak out when you see injustice... everyone has a place in this work," she says. Whether she is sipping her signature oat milk mocha or testifying in a committee hearing, Kristina Cheek remains focused on the "Long Night" of work required to ensure safe passage for the next generation of South Georgia families.