

Nellie McClung

Her Passion For Change

Word Count: 1200

Who wouldn't want to solve the world's issues? Climate change, poverty, disease - our world is full of problems without working solutions. One prevalent issue these days is equality. Throughout the generations, humanity has progressed substantially, but the notion that women are innately inferior to men has prevailed since ancient times. For ages, women have been silenced, and forced to conform to this sentiment. Nellie McClung refused to live like this. Even in a time where women's rights were ignored, Nellie pushed for change with pride and determination. Not once did she ignore the injustice around her, not once did she shake in the face of opposition, not once did she forget her values. She accomplished so much because of her dedication to equality and her passion for change.

Our story begins on October 20 1873, in Chatsworth, Ontario. Nellie Leitia Mooney was born. In 1880, her family moved to Manitoba, and at the early age of 16, she began her career as a teacher in a school near Manitou. Here, she was introduced to the emerging women's right movement. Captivated by the pull of activism, Nellie quickly joined numerous social reform groups. Then in 1911, she and her family moved to Winnipeg, where she joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union, a group devoted to solving the problems caused by alcohol abuse. She also joined the Winnipeg Women's Rights and Reform movement and other women's suffrage groups.

Nellie went on to make even larger waves in the sociopolitical landscape by becoming a founding member of the Political Equality League, an organization celebrated for its work in women's suffrage. It was with this group that she made one of her greatest strides for women's suffrage: the 1914 "Mock Parliament" play. The day before, the Manitoba legislature had rejected the League's appeal for women's political rights. Tired of the attitudes of politicians against women's suffrage, Nellie and other members of the Political Equality League rented out a theatre and staged a Mock Parliament. The play was a satirical parody of a trial debating the question "Should men have the right to vote?" It was amusing but also eye-opening, as it refuted the arguments presented by chauvinists against women's suffrage. The success of the play sparked widespread conversations around female suffrage and challenged the damaging social norms that plagued Canada's perception of women. It was no surprise that, in 1916, Manitoba became the first province to afford women the right to vote; Saskatchewan and Alberta quickly followed suit.

Arguably, Nellie McClung's greatest achievement was winning the famous "Person's Case". In 1927, fellow suffragist Emily Murphy asked Nellie to sign a petition asking that Canadian Women be legally recognized as "persons" under the British North America Act. Throughout her legal career, Murphy had experienced rampant sexism as a result of this act. Lawyers argued that since she legally wasn't a person, her decisions couldn't be taken seriously. This needed to change. Nellie signed, along with Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby and Henrietta Muir Edwards. The petition was examined by numerous government departments before it finally arrived in the Supreme Court of Canada. After some deliberation, the court ruled that Canadian women weren't "persons", according to law. Determined to succeed, the Famous Five brought their petition to the Privy Council in England, which was the highest court in Canada at the time. Finally, in 1929, the Council ruled that Canadian women were indeed persons, and created the opportunity for women to run for senate. Winning this legal battle solidified the status of Canadian women as equals, and inspired great social reform across Canada.

We've come a long way in the fight for equality, but the war is far from over. Gender bias in STEM fields is still a prevalent issue, and a study by researchers from Yale further proves this. Male and female evaluators in biology, chemistry and physics departments at six highly ranked research universities were given two applications. The applications were exactly the same, the only difference made was the name, which was either 'Jennifer' or 'John'. 'Jennifer' received substantially lower ratings than 'John', and both male and female evaluators were likely to give 'Jennifer' lower ratings. The evaluators also gave 'Jennifer' a 12% lower salary recommendation compared to 'John.' There are many other examples of sexism in STEM: the average salary is 18% lower for women, 49% of women in STEM have experienced discrimination in the workplace, 20% have resigned because of it and women usually receive fewer awards, research grants and invitations to speak at conferences. These devaluations make advancing in STEM increasingly difficult for women. Damaging stereotypes like the notion that women are academically inferior to men, permeate STEM, and hinders the growth of this field. Nellie would stand with these women, and bring awareness to the bias against women in STEM. To make change, we need to start conversations around this issue and encourage young girls to foster a passion for this field.

Breaking stereotypes was one of Nellie's many passions, and I too, have taken action to break society's mold. In grade 8, I proved my academic prowess by taking accelerated math classes, so that this year, I could study the grade 10 math curriculum. I've shattered stereotypes by achieving perfect scores on my report card, and was awarded my school's general proficiency award, all whilst participating in multiple extracurriculars; these include the volleyball and badminton teams and the student council. All of these achievements landed me a spot in Henry Wisewood's International Baccalaureate program, where I will be surrounded with those who share my dedication and drive. Furthermore, this Halloween I gave back to my community by trick or treating for nonperishable items to donate to the Calgary Food Bank. Finally, after joining the Air Cadet Band, my band mates and I visited

the Colonel Belcher nursing home, and played Christmas carols for the veterans staying there; putting a smile on their faces was my favourite achievement.

Without the efforts of women like Nellie McClung, I wouldn't even be able to join Air Cadets. Despite my perfect scores, I would be barred from many professions. I wouldn't be allowed to use my talents to help people, rather, my life would be limited by the visions and expectations of others. Although I am proud of my achievements, it's important to acknowledge where we'd be without those who paved the way for our achievements to be accepted. Without them, we wouldn't have the opportunities granted to us today.

Learning from the life of Nellie McClung has inspired me to build on the framework left by the efforts of women like her. I seek to become a torchbearer for women in leadership positions and be a person who inspires others to be as multifaceted. Nellie's passion for fighting injustice is what the leaders of tomorrow must replicate and amplify to change the state of our society. The members of this generation have much work to do, but we will make strides in the fight for equality. By emulating the lives of Alberta champions, like Nellie McClung, we are making a difference. This is only the beginning. As we continue this battle, we will honor the legacies of our predecessors, whilst forging our own.

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