

# Her Inability to Accept Injustice

An Essay about Ruth Gorman

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What do you do when you see injustice? Do you walk away? Pretend it never happened? Ruth Gorman was a woman with determination like no other, facing injustice and conquering it head-on rather than running away from it. Though many in her time thought a woman shouldn't do the things she did, she did them with pride, because her unyielding passion fueled her in overcoming the many impossibilities she faced. In a time when women's rights were overlooked, Indigenous peoples could not vote without giving up their treaty status, and disabled children were often shunned from the public education system- she changed that out of her love for her home, Alberta, and her inability to accept injustice.

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1914 Ruth Gorman was born to Colonel Mark Bennett and Fleda Pattyson Peacock. She completed her primary and secondary education in Calgary, but took a path unexpected for a woman born into privilege in her time- following in her father's footsteps, she became a lawyer. She graduated from the University of Alberta in 1937 with a Bachelor of Arts; subsequently, in 1939, graduating with a Bachelor of Law. Gorman was one of only two women in her graduating class of 1939, later being admitted into the Alberta Bar Association in 1940.

Volunteering her legal knowledge, she worked on behalf of Aboriginal and women's groups, becoming the legal convener for the Calgary branch of the Local Council of Women and also an active member of the Western Canada Concept Party. Through her work, she advocated for women's public washrooms, public education for disabled children, oversaw the Dower Act, which prevented men from selling off property without their wife's written consent, and won a publicized fight with the CPR in order to preserve the Prince's Island Park in Calgary. Her efforts were seen as victories in regards to gender and social equality.

Becoming legal advisor for the Indian Association of Alberta in 1946, Gorman's true colours as a strong female leader for Alberta began to show. After her key role in a stunning victory in the 1956 Hobbema Case, in which the government wanted to depopulate reserves, the Maskwacis Cree bestowed upon her the title of Queen Morning Star. She fought tirelessly with John Laurie, Howard Beebe, and Chief Johnny Samson in an effort to repeal section 112 of the Indian Act, which prevented Indigenous peoples from voting in municipal, provincial, or federal elections without having to give up their treaty status.

An excerpt from Gorman's book, Behind the Man, states how Gorman "passionately believed that Canadian society was not living up to their treaty obligations and that if Canadians as a whole knew of their shame there would be change". Many saw the effort of getting Indigenous peoples the right to vote a fruitless labour; however, Gorman did not stand

to see the injustices against her fellow Albertans play out, and advocated for what she knew was right. Despite what she herself described as “general hopelessness”, Indigenous peoples earned the right to vote in 1960, a monumental victory for everyone involved, including Ruth Gorman.

After her retirement from the Indian Association of Alberta in 1962, she took an interest in publishing, becoming the publisher and editor of the Golden West Magazine, a magazine which promoted life in the West, running from 1965 to 1977. Additionally, she worked on a biography of John Laurie, Behind the Man. It was published by the University of Calgary Press in 2007, highlighting her and John Laurie’s struggles in bringing about change in First Nations communities. After her retirement in 1962, she still volunteered on behalf of Aboriginal issues and other people in need until her death on December 10, 2002. She was honoured with many awards in her lifetime, including Calgary’s Woman of the Year in 1960, Citizen of the Year in 1961, an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary in 1966, Alberta Woman of the Century in 1967, and was made an officer of the Order of Canada in 1968, one of the highest honours a Canadian can receive.

Gorman spent her life fighting against injustice in any form, impacted the rights of Albertan Aboriginals, Albertan women, disabled children, and proved to everyone that women are just as capable as men in impacting the lives of those who need it. Though many fights against injustice have been won since Gorman’s time, we still face challenges regarding an unfair and potentially biased justice system for Aboriginal youth. Though Aboriginal youth make up only seven percent of Canada’s overall population, 41 percent of youth entering the justice system are Aboriginal. According to documents obtained by the Canadian Press, the problem over the decades has gotten worse, as a result of “bias in the policing, justice and corrections systems”.

Such high rates of Aboriginal youth in the justice system can also be traced back to many factors, including a lack of mental health resources and a child welfare system that takes children away from their families on the basis of mistrust. Often, the children end up in unsafe foster environments. The conditions many Aboriginal youth face on reserves are deplorable and something needs to be done to resolve the issues. I believe Ruth Gorman would have advocated for a fairer justice system and for the child welfare system to take into better account the wellbeing of the children. She would have urged and fought for meaningful change in the treatment of her fellow Canadians.

Like Ruth Gorman, I have been making sure my voice in my community is heard. Last year, I won the Imagine a Canada contest held by the National Centre for Truth and

Reconciliation and got to go to Edmonton and Ottawa to speak about my vision for a reconciled Canada in the future. In Ottawa, I listened to the perspectives of residential school survivors and also voiced my opinions of how I thought Canada should go about reconciliation in the future. I was also a part of the Reconciliation Rights and Relations panel at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, where I spoke about issues affecting Canada such as global warming, reconciliation, and economics among a panel of distinguished adults. I have also promoted Orange Shirt Day at my school, making sure everyone knows about the truth so that we can move on towards a bright future and reconcile as a nation.

Ruth Gorman represents everything I find admirable in a leader: she was a determined woman who showed everyone that dreams can be synonymous with reality and truly made a difference in the lives of many Albertans in the past and present. She was an active feminist, one of Alberta's very few female lawyers in the 40's, advocated for the rights of disabled children, and helped bring Indigenous peoples the right to vote without giving up their treaty status. It was her inability to accept injustice which brought her to conquer many obstacles and the reason why Ruth Gorman is my Alberta Champion.

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