

Roberta MacAdams: A Champion Albertan

Nowadays, the challenging COVID-19 situation has made Albertans familiar with admirable Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer, who provides us with daily updates. Another woman constantly praised by the media worldwide is Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. Under her valiant leadership, New Zealand was successfully and rapidly able to control the spread of the virus. Seeing these women, I cannot help but remember Roberta MacAdams, a champion Albertan. Roberta MacAdams played an exceptional role in World War I, prompted a social revolution, and established a legacy we benefit from every day. She was one of the first women elected to the legislature in the entire British Empire, paving the way for present female politicians and leaders. MacAdams has immensely contributed to Alberta by being an educator, nutritionist, lieutenant, and politician.

Roberta Catherine MacAdams was born in Sarnia, Ontario, in 1881. At a time when it was uncommon for women to pursue secondary education, Roberta MacAdams studied domestic science at the Macdonald Institute in Guelph, Ontario. After graduation, MacAdams moved to Edmonton and accepted a position as a domestic science instructor with the Alberta Government in 1912. MacAdams traveled province-wide; educating rural women in home economics and discussing their needs. Upon meeting with these women, she learned that they felt isolated, lonely, and had minimal access to information about health and well-being. Disturbed by these findings, she wrote a report garnering increased government funding for the Alberta Women's Institute (AWI), a rural women's support network. She then traveled the province, helping women set up AWI branches to give them a sense of security, along with access to information and support. In 1914, she was hired by the Edmonton Public School Board, where she established another milestone: the first department of Domestic Economy in Alberta public schools. Despite living in a period where women were not expected to work outside the home, Roberta MacAdams was widely recognized for her abilities in the working sector.

When World War I broke out and escalated, MacAdams enlisted in the army and was appointed as a staff dietician in the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Given the rank of lieutenant, she was stationed at Orpington, England in a military hospital. Whilst adjusting to life overseas, MacAdams was tasked with overseeing the production of around 6000 meals daily. Amidst high prices, wartime shortages, and being allocated only 16.4 pence per day to feed each wounded soldier and 14.4 pence for each staff member, MacAdams worked organizational wonders to provide nutritious meals for everyone.

While MacAdams was abroad, Alberta's political legislation was rapidly evolving. Not only were women allowed to vote and run for office, but the Alberta Military Representation Act was passed. This bill created a constituency for the 38,000 Albertans serving overseas who could vote for two candidates to represent them in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. In 1917,

MacAdams decided to run as a candidate against 20 men in the provincial election. Her campaign slogan was “Give one vote for the man of your choice and the other to the sister.”

MacAdams became one of the first two women elected to a legislature in the British Empire. True to her promises, she supported her military peers by introducing *The Great War Next-of-Kin Association*, intended to “secure economic justice for men and women who have taken part in the Great War.” With this bill passing, MacAdams started a movement for veterans to receive adequate compensation and earned the distinction of becoming the first woman in the British Empire to successfully introduce and pass a piece of legislation. Her indomitable persistence coupled with her can-do attitude unquestionably led MacAdams to play a significant role in our history. Although MacAdams passed away in 1959, she has left behind a political, educational, social, and military legacy Albertans continually benefit from.

As I reflect on her legacy, it becomes clear to me that such dedication to public service is needed in times like this. Today, it seems like society is drowning in a tsunami of uncertainty, much like when the Great War broke out. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unfamiliar and unforgiving situation that has truly shocked our world. According to the World Health Organization, “COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus.” Assisting one another mentally and emotionally is more critical now than ever before. During such times, we are most inspired by individuals who answer the call to provide systems of support and communication: individuals like Roberta MacAdams.

During her lifetime, MacAdams supported mental health by setting up the Alberta Women’s Institute, an organization which allowed women to connect and combat the detrimental effects of inaccessibility and seclusion. Much like rural women felt a sense of loneliness and isolation in the early 1900s, many people feel that way under current circumstances. MacAdams’s leadership would have helped support them. Just as she assisted wounded soldiers separated from their families, MacAdams would have found ways to support vulnerable seniors living in care homes stay safe and healthy. Additionally, I imagine that MacAdams would use her home economics experience to make masks from quilts and bandanas, manage meals for people required to quarantine, and encourage others to contribute in such ways themselves—starting a revolution of community support.

Embodying strength, independence and accomplishment, Roberta MacAdams symbolizes societal development. Her efforts have shown me that it is possible to create a far-reaching impact through our ambitions and self-started endeavors. Volunteering is one way that I strive to create such an impact. My volunteer journey began with the phenomenal organization—“Me to We,” a global initiative empowering youth to take a stand for countless issues like poverty and world hunger. Currently, I am extensively involved as a volunteer with Winsport and the Calgary Public Library. In my school last year, I organized a “Kindness Cafe” that raised donations for the Alberta Children’s Hospital and spread smiles during final exams week.

Roberta MacAdams was multifaceted and wore several different hats throughout her lifetime; characteristics I profoundly value. In addition to my volunteer work, I have discovered sports to be a great way to connect with others and gain leadership skills. I have been on my school's basketball, volleyball, badminton, and track teams, through which I have developed invaluable teamwork and time management skills. Additionally, I am a passionate member of the debate team and have competed at the regional and provincial level, winning several medals. Debating has helped me hone my communication skills, which I hope to use to articulate ideas and advocate for change. Throughout junior high, I have been recognized as Science Student of the Year, Athlete of the Year, and Communication Skills Student of the Year. This testifies to my belief that academics and extracurriculars can successfully coexist in balance, just like MacAdams took on several career paths and interests.

I admire Roberta MacAdams for never backing down from a challenge and having a valorous attitude. Her drive for success and willingness to try new things are attributes I hope to continue to develop myself. Especially in these difficult times, I will remember MacAdams's triumphs as a beacon of hope and motivation to reach my full potential and face the challenges that each day brings.

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