

Nellie McClung: An Everyday Superwoman

By Ariam Solomon

Nellie McClung is not only one of Alberta's best heroines, but also one of the most empowering women of all time. In a time when women were seen as less than human, Nellie McClung did more than just change the law, she transformed society's perspective of women. She fought tooth and nail in the world of politics — a world dominated by men — to get the world to see women as nothing less than human beings.

Born in Chatsworth, Ontario on October 20, 1873, as Nellie Letitia Mooney, she was one of six children born to John Mooney and Letitia McCurdy who would all move to a homestead in Souris Valley, Montreal in 1880. Later, she would get a job in 1889 teaching at Hazel school at the young age of 16 despite the fact she hadn't been going to school until the age of 10. She continued to teach until she married Robert Wesley McClung, a druggist who worked in Manitou, Manitoba. In Manitou, she later became a prominent member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Canada (WCTU), an organization that had Annie McClung, Nellie McClung's mother-in-law, as the provincial president. WCTU believed that alcohol abuse was the reason for unemployment, disease, sex work, poverty, violence against women and children, and immorality, they campaigned for the legal prohibition of all alcohol drinks. In 1898, a national vote was put forward where a majority of the voters elected in favour of prohibition leading WCTU and McClung to victory.

In 1911, a pregnant Nellie McClung moved to Winnipeg with her husband and four children. McClung was welcomed with open arms by the Winnipeg women's rights and reform movement, as she was an effective speaker and would play a key role in the 1914 Liberal's campaign against Sir Rodmond Roblin's Conservative government, who had refused women's suffrage. The McClungs would move to Alberta before the Liberals had won against Roblin's conservative government in 1915. While in Alberta, Nellie McClung continued to fight for female suffrage, her effective speaking skills gained her prominence throughout Canada and the United States as she went on speaking tours and was also a Liberal member of legislation in Edmonton.

Five female activists, known as the Famous 5, who consisted of Emily Murphy, Henrietta Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby petitioned for the Supreme Court of Canada to recognize women as persons. This movement unfolded when Emily Murphy, was not granted to sit in the senate because she was not deemed a 'person' but rather a husband's property under the law. When the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against the case, the Famous 5 did not stop, instead, they brought the case to the Judicial Committee in Britain, eventually winning their appeal and granting women the right to be seen as a 'person'.

During the pandemic, social media brought many issues to light such as the Black Lives Matter movement and rising rape crime awarenesses. One issue in particular struck me as a topic McClung would have fought against is the hate Asians have been receiving all over the United States and Canada. McClung's enfranchisement of Japanese Canadians was not very known because her many other outstanding achievements outshone it. Hate crimes against Asians have

slowly been rising since 2016 but suddenly spiked by 149% in large American cities in 2020 and that number is still rising in 2021. Why have anti-Asian hate crimes all of a sudden surged? Evidence points towards the hate crimes being a racist reaction to the Covid-19 virus that had originated in Wuhan, China but is now a worldwide pandemic. Another factor that acted as a catalyst for all these crimes was when the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, referred to Covid-19 as the "China Virus". Civic leaders encourage perspective-taking and giving, this is when different groups of people tell their stories, so in this case McClung and The Famous 5 would have organized a gathering where Asians would tell their story then another group of people tell their story. I believe that this would be a great way to reduce the anti-Asian hate crimes percentage because storytelling is an important way to build connections and break down social barriers, and that was exactly what McClung had done in the past, breaking down social barriers that society had built.

When my English teacher introduced this essay topic to our class, I just thought that this would be another assignment we had to get through but, then our class started to look through the list of Albertan champions. While going through the list, I realized that I knew many of these names, just not what these people had done for their names to be so notable in Canadian history. Once I came upon Nellie McClung, I was drawn in by her life story, all her achievements and what she had fought for. She was what I imagined as a powerful woman, even with all of society telling her that what she was doing was wrong, she fought for what she believed in. Society told her that she belonged in the house cooking, cleaning and raising the children, "*Take it from me, Ms. McClung, nice women don't want to vote,*" said Premier R.P. Roblin. Even with the premier and a whole government party against her, she fought for what she thought was right. Nellie McClung was not only a leader in the female suffrage movement, but also a mother of five and an author of several short stories and two autobiography books. She was an everyday superhero who could do it all.

In my religion and culture, they believe that women should be quiet, timid and that her place in the household was in the kitchen cooking, cleaning and raising the children and we are supposed to let the men take care of all "men's work". I have always been quiet instead of speaking against my church teachers or distant relatives who have always been outspoken about these ideas. I admire McClung's strength and courage and hope that one day I have half of what she has so that I have the confidence to speak for the ideas that I stand for.

Currently, due to Covid-19, I have not been as involved in the community as I used to be, but some of my most recent involvements in the community were with my youth group. Our youth group held a fundraiser at the end of 2019 raising almost eight thousand dollars to be sent to Ethiopia, where it would help orphans and families that had been struggling. On February 15, 2020, we held our last small fundraiser raising about three thousand dollars, some of that money was used for our church and the remaining money was going to be spent on group work, we had been planning to buy supplies and hand make a bunch on brown-bagged lunches and go around Calgary giving them to the homeless. Our plans were cancelled when the lockdown was announced, instead, we are now planning another virtual fundraising event and finding ways to help the community while still being safe.

Competing in groups against one another, my grade took part in the Youth Philanthropy

Initiative, also known as YPI. In YPI students worked in teams to understand more about local social issues, and then choose one charity to research, connect with and make a presentation about, for three main purposes: to advocate for the important social issues to address; to learn about their goals, challenges and hopes so we can show others the impact that they have in the community. While watching group presentations, I learned about the YWCA of Calgary, this charity's mission statement is *"to intervene, empower, and lead when and where women need us most."* I chose to speak about this charity here because I believe that this charity stands for what Nellie McClung had fought for. Once the pandemic has ended, I plan to start volunteering more at this charity and many other charities like it. With more independence, I'll be doing more volunteering in my community to do my part in bettering the world.

Nellie McClung did it all from being a mother of five, to a leader in the female suffrage movement and an author. In conclusion, Nellie McClung's efforts to make women and men seen as equal have helped us get this far. With all that is happening in the world today, we need to keep from making the same mistakes made in the past and instead learn from the mistakes *"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning."*-Albert Einstein. I strive to be like Nellie McClung and find my voice to fight social injustice so that maybe one day others won't have to.

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