

Nellie McClung: A True Revolutionary for All Women

By Ashna Ganeshalingam

I was sitting in front of a computer at Code Ninjas™ feeling defeated, as an error message flashed on the screen. The sound of my foot tapping on the floor was synchronized with the ticking of the clock – time was running out. I was attempting to code a computer game involving hockey, and having tremendous difficulty coding each hockey stick to move with the mouse. Looking around, I was only seeing boys, which made me wonder whether girls like me could even be good at coding. I let out a lengthy sigh, and kept my fists clenched.

Just then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Claire, you seem upset,” my teacher, Neil, mentioned, adjusting his baseball cap on his head.

I stammered as I choked back tears, “I feel defeated. Everyone in the class has gotten their program to run. They’re all boys, so they’re better than me. I just can’t do it.”

Neil empathetically said, “That’s not true. You should believe in yourself.” He pulled out a diminutive photograph of a woman. “You see this woman? Her name is Nellie McClung. She believed in herself to accomplish her goals during a time when women did not have many rights.”

I had forgotten about my frustrations for a moment. “Who was she?” I asked curiously.

My teacher grinned. “Nellie Letitia Mooney was born on October 20, 1873 in Chatsworth, Ontario. She was raised in Manitoba, and started school at 10!”

Surprised, I said, “Really? What did she do when she grew up?”

“Despite a late start in school, she received a teaching certificate at 16 and got a teaching job in 1889 at Hazel School.” Neil continued, “She got eventually got married at 23 to Robert McClung, and had 5 children. By 1911, she had become prominent in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the largest Canadian women’s organization in the 19th century. They lobbied for the prohibition of alcohol because they believed it caused unemployment, poverty, and violence against women and children.”

“That sounds like an important organization,” I remarked.

Neil added, “Nellie also dabbled in writing. In 1908, she published her first novel, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, which became a bestseller!”

“Wow,” I whispered, suddenly realizing my problems were insignificant.

Neil grinned. “A few years later, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, she participated in the women’s rights and reform movements. She became an inspirational speaker, and created an event called the *Mock Parliament*. In this performance, Nellie ridiculed those who opposed women’s suffrage. In 1916, Manitoba became the first province to allow women to vote, and the Mock Parliament had played a part in this happening.”

“Nellie was truly courageous.” I replied.

“She moved to Edmonton, Alberta in 1915, to continue fighting for female suffrage,” Neil continued. “In 1921, she was the third woman to ever be elected to the Edmonton Members’ Legislative Assembly. Nellie moved back to Calgary in 1923 to continue her writing and participate in speaking tours. In 1927, she joined the Famous 4, which included Emily Murphy, Henrietta Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby!”

“Who were the Famous 5?” I asked.

“Back then, females were not legally known as ‘persons.’ The Famous 5 wanted to change that,” Neil replied as he fixed his baseball cap again. “They petitioned the Supreme Court to declare women as ‘qualified persons’ so they could be senators. Sadly, the Supreme Court went against the suggestion. Nellie and her colleagues continued to lobby, and in 1929, the British Privy Council finally approved the petition! This Persons Case was a significant moment in the history of women’s rights.”

“I cannot believe how much she accomplished!” I exclaimed.

Neil answered, “She did much more than you could have imagined. You can read her autobiography, *Clearing in the West: My Own Story*. She published 16 books in her lifetime, was a part of the Canadian Authors Association, a Board of Governor on the CBC, and a delegate to the League of Nations.”

I acknowledged my teacher’s comments, “Nellie McClung was undeniably a hero. She transformed the lives of women in Canada by relentlessly fighting for women’s rights. She was the epitome of leadership. After hearing your stories today, I have been greatly inspired to continue coding. I believe I should persevere and attempt to solve my problem.” Neil nodded as he removed his baseball cap. Surprisingly, a lengthy brown mane of hair flowed out of the hat. He winked at me and left the room. I was stunned. Neil *perfectly* resembled the woman in his photo.

My encounter with Nellie McClung inspired thoughts about my future. First, she was an advocate for the Canadian community. I would contribute to my community by becoming a pediatric oncologist. I would love to uplift children during arduous times in their lives, and ensure they continue to be optimistic for a good future. Currently, I am developing a business plan for a non-profit charity with my older sister—we would request book donations, which would be given to the Sick Kids Hospital or homeless shelters. I strongly believe that this simple initiative can make a substantial difference in the lives of children, as reading is therapeutic and offers an escape from reality. Second, Nellie was empowering to all women in the past and present. This has inspired me to encourage females to break barriers and do things they traditionally would not. This story’s introduction was a personal anecdote – there was a time in coding class that I felt I was not as good at coding as males. No girl should ever feel this way. Girls should participate in activities that traditionally have more male participation, such as computer coding, robotics, engineering, creating start-ups, debate, and the trades. Like Nellie, it is important that girls have a wide range of skills to create new opportunities for themselves. Finally, just as Nellie did, I think it is important to write about my experiences to allow other girls to be inspired. A blog would be a wonderful way my thoughts could be conveyed and accessible to all. I wish for a girl like me to read my story and be encouraged to also live by Nellie’s legacy.

I admire Nellie McClung because she was a true revolutionary for women. This champion has motivated me to not only pursue my dreams, but also to give back to the community. I will always remember Nellie's tenacity to help me overcome hardships I experience in life and maintain my resilience throughout.

Bibliography

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