

The Savior of Stolen Rights

An Essay about Ruth Gorman



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Ruth. Meaning, a friend, a companion, and a compassionate person. If I had to add something, it would be the word hero. As Ruth Gorman wasn't just a compassionate person, she was a compassionate hero. In the past, it was discouraged to designate a woman as a hero, as terms such as "savior" or "hero" were strictly reserved for men. Women have long faced unfair treatment and criticism for their gender, often their goals, ideas, and requests disregarded. This struggle is not unique to women; minority groups experience similar hardships apart from society, where they face barriers regarding their rights and participation in certain activities. Thankfully, attitudes have shifted, and we now acknowledge and honor the rights of the minorities we've wronged. As well as with advancements in civilization, gender equality has become more prevalent, showing us that heroism knows no gender. This growth in our society allowed women, minority groups, and all who make their homes in Alberta to find a sense of belonging in their communities. It's Ruth Gorman who we have to thank for that.

On February 14th, 1914, Ruth Gorman was born to Colonel Mark Bennett and Fleda Pattyson Peacock. Later, as a young woman of 23 years, she graduated as one of two pioneering women from the University of Alberta with a law degree. Her academic journey led her to achieve a Bachelor of Arts in 1937 and a Bachelor of Laws in 1939. Even in her youth, Ruth shattered societal norms in a revolutionary manner. In the public's eye, being a female lawyer was uncommon enough but achieving two bachelor's degrees was unthinkable. Taking a bold step she was admitted to the Alberta Bar Association in 1940 being one of the first female lawyers to do so. This marked the beginning of a heroine's journey against societal structures and inequality.

Applying her expertise, Ruth advocated and fought on behalf of minority groups such as aboriginal and women groups across the province. She became the legal convener of the Calgary Branch of the Local Council of Women as well as an enthusiastic member of the Western Canada Concept Party. Some of the most famous cases she defended were women's public washroom rights, public education for disabled children, the legalization of skimmed milk for mothers, and she oversaw the Dower Act which prohibited men from selling property without their wives' written agreement. Moreover, she won the publicly known struggle of preserving Prince's Island Park in Calgary. She received multiple awards including in 1960 with the Calgary's Woman of the Year award, and the Alberta Woman of the Century in 1961. She was a 1968 Officer of the Order of Canada, and she was given an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary in 1966. Her accomplishments made her an unvanquished lawyer and an inspiring role model to all women of her time.

Ruth became the unpaid legal advisor for the Indian Association of Alberta in 1946, where she demonstrated her strength as a justice advocate. This began to show as she conquered the famous Hobbema case, saving the Maskiwacis Cree reserves from being depopulated by the federal government. As a show of gratitude, the Maskiwacis Cree dubbed her the title Queen Morning Star for her support to the Indigenous community. Additionally, in 1960 Gorman fought alongside noteworthy figures such as Chief Johnny Samson, Howard Beebe, and John Laurie. Together they worked to invalidate section 112 from the Indian Act which required Indigenous people to give up their treaty rights in order to vote. After successfully repealing the section, she soon resigned from the Indian Association of Alberta in 1962. Her contributions to the Indigenous community will always be remembered as the work of a resilient female leader.

After her retirement, Ruth pursued her newfound passion for writing, editing, and publishing. From 1965 to 1977 she was the publisher and editor of My Golden West magazine which was later changed to Canadian Golden West. As Ruth describes it, "This magazine will give you a record of, and a key to enjoying, this golden land of yours — golden in its big sky, its wheat fields, its oil, but above all, golden in its people." Furthermore, she worked on the biography of John Laurie, titled *Behind The Man*, which is considered to be a window not only into John's life but into Ruth's as well. It is the embodiment of the struggles both faced when they undertook the task of advocating for the rights of Indigenous communities. Even after retirement Ruth still found ways to tell the world about the injustices minorities faced. She volunteered on behalf of multiple aboriginal groups and continued to advocate for them until her death on December 10, 2002.

From the start, Ruth paved the way for women in the law field and continued to make a lasting impact as time progressed. Ruth improved the rights of Indigenous peoples, disabled children, and Albertan women of all different ages. Ruth portrays an inspiration to all, as she changed the worldview of many regarding minority groups. However, issues concerning them still persist to this day. According to The Guardian Newspaper, "Nearly one in 10 young Indigenous people reported feeling 'very sad' about their life overall, compared to only one in 50 non-Indigenous youth." I'm sure you've heard the saying, that today's generation is our future. Naturally what they experience and feel now will affect the outcomes of our society, potentially leading to a bleak, precarious, and grim Calgary.

These emotions and behaviors could be linked to several aspects as well, including a lack of available mental health resources and a child welfare system that most indigenous youths abhor. According to The Government of Canada "In Canada, 53.8% of children in foster care are Indigenous" These Indigenous youth make up more than half of the children in foster care, yet they're being treated unfairly and in an unacceptable manner. The methods that this child welfare

system uses involve taking Indigenous youth from their homes and families often without their parents' knowledge or consent. This often lands the Indigenous youth in an unstable condition of traveling from home to home and potentially never returning to their family. While intentionally being placed into non-indigenous households. The actions of the child welfare system were often justified by insisting that the Indigenous family was living in poverty or suffering from addiction. If Ruth Gorman were in our society today, I believe she would've fought and raised her voice for a fairer child welfare system and for more mental health resources to be introduced and given to Aboriginal youth.

In these past few months, Ruth quickly became my ideal female role model and to honor her dedication to Albertans, I decided to carry the torch forward. Ruth's ability to lead with integrity, empathy, and determination has inspired me to engage in my community. For instance, I have sought leadership positions, such as running for student council and being an active participant in school discussions regarding important topics. Which includes discussing residential school survivors, Indigenous rights, bullying, and mental health. Ruth's commitment to citizenship prompted me to give back to my community. I have volunteered on multiple occasions at my local library, most memorably when I led activities for younger groups on Orange Shirt Day. That included giving a speech about reconciliation and the importance of honoring residential school victims. Furthermore, her dedication to strive for excellence has driven me to set high standards for myself. Whether it's academics, sports, or personal improvement, I have always given it my all and pushed myself to be greater. Academically I have participated in the Math Competition held by the University of Waterloo as well as I participated in the CYSF science fair held at the University of Calgary. Additionally, I have grown as a person these past few months. I am now more confident and proud of my achievements. As I continue to grow and evolve, I will commit myself to applying Ruth's principles and values to my daily life and my community both now and in the future. Hopefully one day I will be able to call myself a champion of my community just like many call Ruth today.

Ruth Gorman's story epitomizes determination, compassion, and courage. With her unusual occupation and relentless spirit as a justice advocate, she rewrote the status quo and defended the rights of minority groups. Thanks to her, many minorities now have secure futures in society. Ruth's legacy inspires us to stay true to our beliefs, overcome life's obstacles, and strive for a more inclusive and diverse society. Her remarkable achievements remind us that with willpower you can pave your own path. As well as her life serves as a beacon of hope, guiding us towards a brilliant, exceptional, and more equitable Alberta. Maybe it was her determined stare or her unwavering will, but she inspired me from the very beginning. In my eyes, the savior of rights will always be Ruth Gorman. My Alberta Champion.

My interactive game about Ruth Gorman:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/10VStCrfKAf3MOpA9NoMFkFgMpK086XB4OtThkin4gRE/edit?usp=sharing>

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