

Rippling Change: Inspired by Annie Gale

By Kailey Lam

History is shaped by people who choose to act when others remain silent. Annie Gale, a social reformer and the first woman elected to Calgary's city council, was one of those people. Her legacy of compassion, determination, and advocacy continue to inspire many, including myself. Volunteering at local homeless shelters, as well as drop in centers and food banks, have allowed me to experience first-hand what it means to serve a community in need. As I've learned more about Annie's story, I've realized how deeply her values really mirror the work I've been doing. No matter how many years go by, the path that Annie has paved for Calgary, to be a diverse, comfortable, safe city to reside in, will forever be relevant.

Annie Gale (Hannah Rolinson) born in Worschetire, England in 1879. In 1912, she moved to Calgary with her husband, William John Gale, and their two sons. This life changing decision enabled her to become one of the finest citizens Calgary has ever had.

I have been so fortunate to be able to volunteer and help out around so many areas in the city including, the YMCA leadership program, Girl Guides, Pathfinders and the Calgary Public Library. Helping out young kids explore their love for reading and assist in fun, summer family events, really evokes a sense of community in me. During Girl Guides, I packed boxes full of life necessities for people in need, spreading comfort and warmth throughout the city. My YMCA leadership program has opened up so many incredible opportunities to help out around the city and lend a helping hand for others who are struggling to get by. Offering help at homeless shelters, food banks, drop in centers and more have really opened my eyes to another side of the city I never saw, and how I could contribute to make Calgary a better place to live in.

When I first began volunteering at shelters in my city, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. I was nervous and unsure of whether or not I would be able to make a difference in my community. All I could do was offer my time and help to support comfortable lives for people in need. I started by helping serve meals and organizing donated clothing. Over time, I became more involved—talking to people, hearing their stories, and realizing how complex and individual each person's experience with homelessness truly is. I came to understand that I wasn't just handing out food or folding clothes, I was helping to guarantee a more comfortable lifestyle for citizens experiencing homelessness than the ones they've had before. I was filling their bellies and fueling their bodies with food, that at a certain point in their lives, they went days without. I was providing clothes which help keep them warm, so they wouldn't have to live in tattered and threadbare clothes. These moments reminded me of the kind of society Annie Gale worked to build: one where no one was invisible, and everyone had a right to live with dignity and in comfort.

Annie Gale's advocacy and determination to make Calgary a better place to live in, really highlights what it means to be a strong, woman leader. She was shocked by the expensive, poor quality food that was typically imported from British Columbia. Many families could not afford the high price of produce and food, which was poor quality and unsafe to consume. On the behalf of the disadvantaged, she wanted to speak up and refuse to ignore these problems. She quickly became a member of the Vacant Lots Garden. The purpose of this establishment was so residents were able to garden on empty, civic land for a small fee. The two main purposes for this garden were beautification of the land and a better food supply. Her actions really mirror my values and my beliefs in giving back to people who are less fortunate, and guaranteeing safety and stability in their homes.

Annie Gale's persistence and refusing to ignore the challenges in her city, despite her disadvantage due to being a woman, make me realize that women are stronger than we give ourselves credit for. It can be extremely disheartening trying to make a lasting impact in the world when you are a woman. You are taken less seriously because of your gender and it seems like you have to work twice as hard because you may not seem 'tough' or 'smart enough' or 'just a pretty face' to make a difference. The reality of all of this however is that no matter how many people are putting you down or condescending you for your hard work, is to tune them out. They are all white noise and that is exactly what Annie Gale did. Though people regarded her as a "very conservative woman, not particularly interested in women's suffrage", she did everything in her power to improve Calgary's living conditions, for everyone wishing to live in comfort.

Annie Gale came to Calgary in the early 1900s and was struck by the challenges faced by ordinary families, poor housing, unsafe food, and limited access to health care. Instead of looking away, she took action. She organized community efforts to improve living conditions, and in 1917, she became the first woman in the British Empire elected to a municipal council. Her advocacy led to reforms in public health and affordable housing, and she constantly pushed for the government to do more for the people served. Her fight for the vulnerable is directly reflected in the work being done today in homeless shelters, ensuring comfortability for all citizens of Calgary. No one should have to live in such unfortunate circumstances. For me, Annie Gale's compassion continues to inspire and guide me in my own work within my community.

While volunteering, I've come to realize that homelessness isn't just a housing issue—it's a human one. Many of the people I've met have faced circumstances beyond their control: job loss, illness, trauma, or lack of support. Annie Gale understood this too. She believed that government should not just maintain order but actively improve people's lives. Her vision for public service was rooted in compassion and a belief in the power of collective responsibility. Volunteering is my way of contributing to that vision, it may not be as powerful as the work she's done for the city over the years, but it is no less important.

There was one moment that really stuck with me. During my volunteering at a homeless shelter, I was speaking with a man who had been experiencing homelessness for years who fortunately, was able to find safety in a homeless shelter. As I served food to him and his young daughter, he thanked me immensely for providing food and consolation for his daughter. He never thought he would see the day where he could sit and enjoy his meal, without worrying about when their next meal would be. He was extremely grateful to have found a place where his daughter could live in comfort, and not suffer out on the streets. That moment reminded me that helping people isn't just about systems and policies; it's about connection and compassion. It's about being present. I think Annie Gale would have understood that deeply.

Her legacy has taught me that creating change doesn't always mean having to hold a political office. Sometimes, it means showing up, whether it's at a city council meeting or at a homeless shelter kitchen. It means recognizing that we all have a role to play in building a more just and caring society. Volunteering has shown me how even the smallest actions, listening, helping, sharing, can make a lasting impact.

Annie Gale's life and work have helped me see my own volunteer experience in a new light. What I once saw as simple community service, I now understand as social justice and preserving the lasting impacts Annie Gale has made for Calgary. Volunteering has connected me to my community, but it's also connected me to a history of people, like Annie Gale, who refused to ignore the needs of others. Her story reminds me that caring is powerful, and taking action is necessary. I hope to continue carrying her legacy on to each new generation of volunteers and Alberta citizens.

I will be playing a section of the musical piece titled, *Rippling Watercolours* by Brian Balmages on my french horn. I was inspired to play this section because of how it reminded me of Annie Gale. It is elegant but so extremely powerful as well, building up ever so slowly and reaching a beautiful, full, dramatic sound, just like how Annie's voice slowly builds up, speaking up for all the citizens of Calgary.

References:

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