



1-18-2020

Empowered Women Empower Women

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Recommended Citation

Douds, Anne S., "Empowered Women Empower Women" (2020). *Public Policy Faculty Publications*. 3.
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Empowered Women Empower Women

Abstract

Good afternoon and thank you for your determination to hold this important event today regardless of the weather. When Jenny said that we would go forward rain, sleet, or snow, I did not anticipate that we would have all three in the same day!

Maybe your determination derives from the residual spirit of a group of women who gathered here 100 years ago, also determined, but that time they were determined to ensure that their community acknowledged their right to vote. They were empowered, excited, and ready to act because, five years prior, in 1915, Katherine Wentworth of the Pennsylvania Women's Suffrage Association, commissioned the Justice Bell, also known as the Women's Liberty Bell or the Suffrage Bell. Once it was done, they loaded in the back of a flatbed truck and drove it to all 67 Pennsylvania counties. But they chained the clapper so it would not ring to symbolize the silence imposed upon women through the denial of the right to vote.

When the 19th Amendment finally was ratified in 1920, Wentworth and her fellow suffragists gathered in Philadelphia to ring the bell 48 times to honor the 48 states of the Union at the time. All courthouses and churches in Pennsylvania were supposed to join in a statewide ringing at 4 pm that afternoon. The women of Gettysburg were gathered here, anxiously awaiting 4 pm. It came and passed. 4:01. 4:02. Then, as the Gettysburg Times reported "they decided that action would have to be taken by themselves." They rushed the courthouse and proceeded to ring the bell "several minutes," which, as the Times also reported, "the women thoroughly enjoyed . . . until officials arrived and relieved them." Sometimes, you have to take matters into your own hands if you want to make a difference in your community. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Women's march, suffragette, Gettysburg, voting rights, reproductive rights, empowerment, feminism, law

Disciplines

Civil Rights and Discrimination | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Law | Women's Studies

Comments

This speech was given at the 2020 Women's March sponsored by Gettysburg Rising and the YWCA of Gettysburg & Adams County on January 18, 2020 in Gettysburg, PA.

EMPOWERED WOMEN EMPOWER WOMEN

Anne S. Douds, JD, PhD

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Those women were empowered by the suffrage movement. They were empowered by the women who came before them, and also but their own contemporaries. They empowered one another, and they now empower us to continue to fight for equality. That is the way it has always been and it how it always should be: empowered women empower women. Have you heard that phrase much recently? I have. I have seen it on t-shirts and key chains, and I really like it.

Empowered women empower women. Think about that for a sec. Empowered woman, those who feel in control, emboldened, able. When I first heard this phrase, I thought of hierarchal relationships. Women of power, of higher status mentoring younger, disenfranchised ones, or those with less social or financial capitol. But it is more than that. It implies reciprocity. Duality. The sentences almost mirror each other and remind us that, often, we can be the agent for change, the agent for empowerment. And sometimes we need people to

empower us. It is not about age, or class, or status. It is about sisterhood, the value of the feminine. Sometimes, in our day to day lives, our packs become too heavy, the yolk of all that is wrong or difficult can seem overwhelming. We fall victim to pessimism, to cynicism, to self-doubt, to fear. On those days, we need to first empower ourselves by, as Nora Ephron says, remembering to be the heroines of our stories, not the victims. Then we need to empower those around us. I submit that some of the best traditions are oral ones, and stories can empower us. So, I am going to share a few with you today.

DORA KELLY LEWIS

I hope that many of you have had a chance to hear our own Dora Townsend talk about her grandmother, Dora Lewis Kelly, who was a fierce voting rights activist. She demonstrated in Washington and was arrested at least five times, one of which led to her doing a spell in the disgusting and dangerous Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. Alice Paul (who was born in January) also was there, and together they led a hunger strike – they were abused and force fed but ultimately released.

In August 1918, Lewis took the podium in Lafayette Square to give a protest speech in memory of Inez Milholland. Before she could even finish her first sentence, she was dragged off stage and arrested. At first stunned, but then

inspired, woman after woman, one after another, went to the podium to finish Dora's speech, with each in turn also being arrested until the speech was finally over. Sometimes the best thing we can do for our friends and our communities is to step in for them when they are down. Take their place and carry their mantel, even if only for a little while. To give them a voice. Thanks to Dora and all of those women, 63 million voted in the last election, and that was the mid-terms.

PANTSUIT

Dora went to Georgia that same summer in an unsuccessful bid to get my home state to ratify the 19th Amendment. I grew up in Atlanta during the civil rights movement. I worked for John Lewis and Ben Jones, both Congressmen from Georgia, and both of whom employed female chiefs of staff in the 1980s and 1990s. They mentored me. They empowered me to believe that I could make laws, change laws, fight for those who could not fight for themselves. So, I went to law school, became a trial lawyer, and moved to South Carolina with my husband. During my third year of practice, I showed up to court one day, briefcase in hand, paralegal in tow, clients fully briefed on what was going to happen. I wore what I thought of as a "power suit" in the vernacular of the day – black pants, matching black jacket, colorful blouse. We were sitting in the courtroom. The bailiff announced "all rise!", and we stood while the judge entered the courtroom. He

looked at us, looked away, they looked back quickly and barked, “who the hell do you think you are, little lady?” Since I was the only woman in the room, I gathered he was talking to me. I said “Anne Douds, counsel for the plaintiff, your honor.” He glared at me as if I were being sarcastic or “sassy” as he used to say. He said “what is that you are wearing?” “A suit” I answered. “What kind of suit,” he snarled. “It’s from Talbot’s, your honor.” Well, that sent him over the edge. He screamed. “If you ever come in here dressed that way again, I will hold you in contempt of this court, do I make myself clear?”

This was well before Facebook and Pantsuit Nation, and I was not trying to make a political statement. I wasn’t even trying to make a fashion statement. Talbots is hardly known for its edgy couture. But the pantsuit, as I later researched, had a long history of symbolizing feminism and resistance to societal norms. But back in that courtroom, I was just mortified. My femaleness had been brought into stark relief, and it had been used to chastise me like a child in front of my client and my opposing counsel. We made it through the day. That night, my colleagues encouraged me “not to make a scene” and to realize that I would never change the judge. I thought about it. But the next morning, I dressed in a different pantsuit and went to court. The judge walked in, took one look at me, and said “bailiff, please take Ms. Douds into custody.” I was “relieved” of my presence in the courtroom, much like those Gettysburg women were “relieved” of the bell tower. I only did a

day in jail before the judge realized what a hot potato he had just created. There was a growing women's bar, which the local male attorneys referred to as "the coven," and the coven was mad! He let me go. But during my incredibly short time of being jailed, I did think about all of the women before me, the suffragists, the civil rights advocates, the school desegregationists. This was more than a wardrobe choice to me, and I felt empowered by those women who suffered far, far worse than anything I could imagine. Their stories helped me. We went on to change the unwritten dress code into a documented set of rules that allows anyone to wear pants, regardless of gender, in Beaufort County courts.

I tell that story not because it is revolutionary but because it is mundane. It is small. But it was important to our community at the time. Interestingly, my husband recently took a group of contractors from South Carolina on a tour of Normandy. When they found out his wife was a former South Carolina lawyer, they asked if he thought I knew the "lady lawyer who did the pants thing." He said, "yep, that was her, actually." They loved it and said that their daughters still tell that story. What you do matters. It may be small. It may be quotidian. But it will matter to **you** if you stand up for yourself. And it just might matter to others, as well. So, empower yourself and share your stories. And know that by doing so, you provide a story upon which others can build.

WORKPLACE AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Speaking of courtrooms and lawyers, many cite this third week in January as a milestone in women's reproductive rights. You see, on January 22, 1973, Sarah Weddington learned that she had won a lawsuit on behalf of Norma McCorvey. Norma McCorevy married her abuser at age 16, was pregnant three times before she was 21, developed drug and alcohol addictions, and wanted to abort her unborn child after having lost custody of her other children. Sarah, a young Texas attorney, risked her political and professional capitol to represent Norma, better known as Jane Roe - in the case that established women's autonomy over their reproductive rights, Roe v. Wade. Sarah empowered Norma to fight a law that she thought was unjust for herself, and also unfair to her unborn child. Sarah fought when Norma could not. And we have to remember that, sometimes, we have to fight for what we believe is best for our communities. Sometimes we can only empower others with formal legal action.

I want to share another personal story about law and empowerment. In January 2002, after undergoing reconstructive uterine surgery to correct a DES-related birth defect, I joyfully discovered that I had made it through the first trimester of pregnancy after too many miscarriages than I care to remember. But my compromised reproductive organs were dangerously fragile, and I was put on 20 hour per day bedrest for the duration of my pregnancy. I was still practicing

law, in court almost every day, so I had to seek what they call an “order for protection” from our administrative judge so that I would not be called into court during my bed rest. The presiding judge received my petition, took it under advisement, and gave me until July 10th – my due date. But said that I would be required to appear in court the next day, Thursday, July 11th. He explained “well, on the 11th, you won’t be pregnant any more. Your doctors said the problem is pregnancy, not the baby.”

You know what I did? I cried. Tears of fury, tears of frustration. This judge, who represented the profession I so loved, was making me choose – it was existential to me. This would be my one and only pregnancy; I knew that going in. And I was prepared to sacrifice my career for it. But I was furious that I had to make that choice. I was utterly disempowered, I felt. Until some women attorneys in the community caught wind of my situation and took me under their wings. They reminded me of an infrequently used legal mechanism by which I could ask the state Supreme Court to intervene in this administrative matter. So, they helped me do the paperwork to, essentially, ask the judge to stop being a jerk. Those women, Nancy Sadler and Judge Jane Dowling Fender, mentored me. They empowered me with the law, to beat it at its own game. I do not know if it helped that the Chief Justice of the South Carolina court was Jean Toal, a woman, but it

worked. And I got six more months of protected time to be regain my strength and be with my baby who is standing right there!

Those women who sought me out did we used to call, “butted in.” I did not seek them out. They sought me. They did not say themselves “it is none of our business.” Or “what a shame - there is nothing we can do.” They **did**. They acted. They empowered. We are always encouraged to “see something, say something.” I suggest that the way to make your community what you want takes more. If you see something, **do** something. Do. Act. Empower. Be the agent of change, for empowerment in your town. Keep your eyes open for who needs you, even if they do not know it yet. And do what you can do.

SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Speaking of doing what you can do. There is perhaps no greater symbol of unlikely female power than Joan of Arc, who was born this month, January 1412. A girl, born into a peasant family in medieval France. What power did she have? At first blush, none. But oh, she did, she did. She had the power of her passion, of her faith She believed in herself and her God. She led an army, liberated Orleans, was betrayed by her own king, and died in a most gruesome fashion. She was later canonized, and many of the Christian faith view Saint Joan as a symbol of female power. She embodied the power that alienated many of her time. It would alienate

some today. Surely, she faced self-doubt, but she felt something deep, something visceral that led her down a path. Who but Joan of Arc could have done what she did? And we are still talking about her today. One of the most celebrated women in history, a little girl from the French countryside. Some attributed Joan of Arc's early success and stoicism to divine intervention. Others to magic. But as J.K. Rowling (also born in January) observed, "We do not need magic to transform our world. We carry all of the power we need inside ourselves already."

What is your power? What will you do, in the centennial year of American women's political power? How will you act? How will you empower? What will you do in this Pennsylvania countryside to make a difference in your own life? In our lives? Our community? Our world? As Jane Goodall reminds us, "What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make." Or to quote Reese Witherspoon, "If you're one of those people who has that little voice in the back of her mind saying, 'Maybe I could do [fill in the blank],' don't tell it to be quiet." Speak. Be loud if you have to. Do. Act. To borrow from James Kerr's book *Legacy*, what is something that you can do in your community, that, if you do not do it, no one else will? **That** is your power. That is your legacy. Now let's go forth and build our legacies in this great community of ours. Legacies of power. Legacies of empowerment.