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Women's Hall of Fame

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Women’s Hall of Fame

Brianna Kean
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Department of Graphic Design

Honors Research Project

Submitted to
The Williams Honors College
The University of Akron

Women’s Hall of Fame

Brianna Kean

Special Thanks To:
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and the other Honors Art students

No matter how you identify we can all take actions in support of gender equality. Women have come a long way in society since Sacagawea’s time, but that doesn’t mean we live in an equal world. I was inspired by these ten women, and I hope you are too. Take that inspiration and turn it into action, so that maybe one day people might honor you for supporting women’s rights.
Throughout history women have been fighting through many battles just to be treated as equals. Women did not have the right to vote, could not hold a government position, not accepted for jobs in a “male” role, and more. Even through all these struggles women all over the world keep fighting for their place in society. While we have come a long way over the past 200 years, we are still not in an equal world. Women still have to fight and stand up for themselves and others everyday. This constant struggle that women face was my inspiration in deciding what to do for my honors project. As a woman, there have been some scary times recently and I wanted to reflect on how we got to where we are today and learn how we can keep pushing forward. In reading about the history of women I found ten different women that stood out to me and who inspired me through their actions to take more action in my own life. My goal of this project was to teach other people about these women to hopefully inspire others the way I was inspired to take action.

All the women that I chose have different impacts on society, and they all come from different walk of life. In timeline order, I have chosen to recognize Sacagawea, Emmeline Pankhurst, Nellie Bly, Marie Stopes, Frida Kahlo, Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Junko Tabei, and Kamala Harris.

For each woman that was honored I created a portrait and wrote a poem in addition to their bio to give a more personable experience. All of these pieces came together in my exhibition that was displayed at Myers School of Art November 5-9 2022.

Sacagawea was born in what is now Idaho in 1788 into the Lemhi Shoshone tribe. When she was only 12 years old, she was kidnapped from her tribe by their rival tribe, the Hidatsa. A man by the name of Toussaint Charbonneau—who was a French-Canadian trader living amongst the Hidatsa tribe—took Sacagawea and claimed her as one of his wives.

When Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase from France, he wanted to determine the boundaries of the country. To do so, he sent Meriwether Lewis who brought William Clark to explore the land and determine the boundaries. Lewis and Clark settled camp near the village where Sacagawea and Charbonneau were living. Charbonneau offered to help Lewis and Clark in their exploration because he knew the Hidatsa and Sacagawea knew the Shoshone. Lewis and Clark hired Charbonneau in their expedition known as the Corps of Discovery.

S
acagawea started their expedition with her son on her back. Throughout the expedition Sacagawea proved to be a valuable member in offering language translations, showing which plants were safe to eat, offering a sign of peace to tribes, and more.

On May 14th, 1805, Charbonneau was steering a boat through a storm, and the boat ended up tipping and they lost all the expedition supplies. Sacagawea saved the day by gathering supplies from the water such as instruments, books, gunpowder, medicines, and clothing. Without those supplies the expedition would have suffered majorly. In July of 1805, Sacagawea started translating to the chief of the Shoshone and noticed it was her brother. She was able to convince her family to provide more guides and horses for the expedition. Despite all the help that she provided from her time with Lewis and Clark Sacagawea was never compensated for the work that she had done, but Charbonneau was.

Two months after giving birth to her first child, 17-year-old, Sacagawea, started their expedition with her son on her back. Throughout the expedition Sacagawea proved to be a valuable member in offering language translations, showing which plants were safe to eat, offering a sign of peace to tribes, and more.

Elizabeth Jane Cochran, or better known as Nellie Bly, was born on May 5, 1864, in Cochran's Mill, Pennsylvania. At 16 Nellie tried to find a place to work to help her family through financial struggles, but found no one who wanted to hire a young woman. One day she read an article in the Pittsburgh Dispatch that discouraged women from being in the workforce. Bly wrote to the editor saying that there needed to be more opportunities for women in the workforce. The editor saw the letter and hired Nellie to write a column which is where her pen name of Nellie Bly started. She was only able to write pieces about women, so she quit.

Bly moved to New York in 1886 for new opportunities but found it difficult to find any work in a male-dominated field. In 1887 she stormed into the office of the editor Joseph Pulitzer from the New York World. Pulitzer turned her down for writing a piece on immigration, but then he told her to investigate Blackwell's Island, which was New York's most notorious mental asylum.

Bly not only took up the challenge to investigate it, but she falsified a mental illness to get into the asylum to learn from the inside how patients were treated. This courageous act made her one of the most notable journalists in history. She ended up writing a six-part series about what she went through and saw called Ten Days in the Madhouse.

In 1889 Bly decided to take her investigative journalism to another level when she decided to travel around the world after reading the book Around the World in 80 Days by Jules Verne. She wrote daily updates that were published in the New York World. She ended up finishing the trip in just 72 days, which set the world record.

During her later years Bly wrote about World War I, Europe, and continued sharing issues that impacted women in society. On January 27th, 1922, Nellie Bly died from pneumonia. Arthur Brisbane—the acclaimed newspaper editor—remembered Bly as “the best reporter in America.” Nellie kept fighting for her worth and didn’t give up on her dreams of journalism, just because men thought it was a mans job.

Emmeline Pankhurst was born July 14, 1858, in Manchester. She was surrounded by a family who at the time had radical political views. In 1879 she married Richard Pankhurst who was a lawyer. Pankhurst and her husband were both supporters of the women's suffrage movement. Richard was the writer of the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 “which allowed women to keep the earnings and properties that were acquired before and after marriage.”

Pankhurst was arrested many times from the activities that she engaged in to help fight women’s rights. In jail Pankhurst went on a hunger strike. These hunger strikes were a way to still fight for their cause while in jail and were very common. In 1913 the government passed the Cat and Mouse Act. “Hunger striking prisoners were released until they grew strong again, and then re-arrested.”

In 1914, many efforts for women’s suffrage were put aside to put energy towards war efforts. The Representation of the People Act passed in 1914 which gave women, over the age of 30, the right to vote. Then shortly before Pankhurst’s death in 1928, women were granted equal voting rights with men (age 21). Pankhurst was a strong woman who fought non-stop for women’s suffrage, and without women like her, woman might not have the right to vote now.

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Frida Kahlo was born on July 6, 1907, in Mexico. She contracted polio as a child but seemed to be excelling in school and health wise, until she got into a bus accident at 18 years old which caused chronic pain. While she was recovering from the accident, she took up her childhood interest of art and started thinking of becoming an artist.

When Kahlo turned 20 years old her interest in politics led her to join the Mexican Communist Party, which is also where she met her first husband. Through the 1920's and 1930's she and her husband traveled Mexico and the US which is when she started developing her style as a painter. She mostly got her inspiration from Mexican folk culture.

Famous Surrealist artist Andre Benton became interested in her art and opened exhibitions with and for Kahlo. Her art was noticed by the Louvre, and they bought one of her paintings, The Frame, which made her the first Mexican artist to be featured in their collection.

Kahlo’s art “explored questions of identity, post colonialism, gender, class, and race in Mexican society.”

In 1942 Kahlo became a founding member of the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, which consisted of 25 artists who spread knowledge of Mexican culture. In addition to being an artist, Kahlo was also an art teacher where she encouraged her students to think about art in a vulnerable way.

Throughout her lifetime she suffered from chronic pain, health issues, miscarriages, and more that she documented in her work. She but all her feelings and emotions on display to the public. She normalized being able to have valid feelings and share those without criticism. While this is still a subject that be struggle with, I believe that Frida Kahlo opened that line of communication.

Marie Stopes was born October 15, 1880, in Scotland. She attended the University College London and graduated in botany and geology with a Bachelors in 1902. In 1904 she got her PhD in paleobotany from the University of Munich. She went back to the University College London to get her DSc, and then she became the youngest Doctor of Science in Britain. Stopes was also the first female academic at the University of Manchester where she was a professor of paleobotany.

In 1911 she married Reginald Ruggles Gates, but the marriage did not last long. “The marriage broke down within a year due to Gates’ impotence.” After her failed marriage, she became more interested in the topic of sexual matters and begun to study sexual ethics and physiology of reproduction.

In 1918 Marie got married to Humphrey Verdon Roe and wrote a book titled Married Love. The book gave fame to Stopes overnight. “More than 2000 copies were sold in a fortnight, and it was the first sex manual published in the UK.” Marie Stopes and her husband shared interest in birth control, which she wrote about in her books including Wise Parenthood where she discussed family planning.

On March 17th, 1921, Stopes opened the first family planning clinic in the UK called The Mothers’ Clinic for Constructive Birth Control. The clinic ran by Stopes and her husband, and they only hired female doctors and nurses to make patients feel more comfortable. “The clinic offered free service to married women, providing access to birth control for the poor and gathering scientific information about contraception.” Stopes also designed a rubber cervical cap that the clinic dispensed as well. Throughout the 1920’s she opened more family planning clinics. Stopes even started the world’s first horse-drawn birth control caravan. Marie formed the National Birth Control Council (renamed the Family Planning Association) in 1930.

Stopes died in 1958 from breast cancer, but her legacy lives on through the Marie Stopes International organization. This organization provides many reproductive health services to over 67,000 women daily over 37 counties. Because of Stopes, today we have organizations fighting for woman to have reproductive rights.
"I believe there is only one race—the human race"
She said while fighting for a place
She never backed down, just kept going
Eventually getting to see the world slowly growing

Rosa Louise McCauley was born on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. She went to an industrial school for girls as a child, and then went to Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes until she had to withdraw from school when her grandmother became sick.

Since Rosa McCauley grew up in the south before the Civil Rights Movement, she often faced racial discrimination and violence. Because of what she was experiencing she became an active Civil Rights Movement member. She married Raymond Parks in 1932, and they worked with many local organizations that were fighting for social justice. Rosa Parks was elected secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She was also a known organizer and leader in the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama.

On December 1st, 1955, Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus instead of the back where black people were supposed to sit. When more white people boarded the bus the bus driver asked her to move to the back and she refused, so she was sent to jail. She helped in planning and organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott as well. Participating in the boycott also led her to being fired from her job. Because of her refusing to move on the bus and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the public transportation system in Montgomery integrated. After the boycott Parks and her husband moved to Detroit where they were active members in Detroit’s Civil Rights Movement as well.

After supporting the movement financially and physically for so long, Parks struggled financially and physically after her husband died. The community came together and supported her after everything she had done for them. On October 24th, 2005, Parks died of natural causes and left behind her legacy of fighting against racial discrimination and injustice. She stood up for herself and her community when there were issues in society to make a change.

Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis Missouri. Throughout her childhood she suffered a lot of traumas. She lived back and forth with her mom and grandma, and was raped by her mother’s boyfriend at just age seven. The man went to jail then was shot dead when released. Angelou blamed herself for the man’s death and after the traumatic events she went mute for six years. During her mutism she took up the “interest in poetry an memorized works from Shakespeare and Poe.”

When World War II broke out Angelou sent in an application to join the Women’s Army Corps, but she was denied. After she was rejected, she wanted to find a job, because many jobs were opening up for men going to war. Angelou wanted to be streetcar conductor but was told not to apply because the color of her skin. She asked for an application every day for three weeks straight until the company finally gave her an application. She was only fifteen years old which was not legal working age, so she had to lie and say that she was nineteen years old. She was finally accepted and became the first African American woman to be a streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

“In 1950, African American writers in New York City formed the Harlem Writers Guild to nurture and support the publication of Black authors.”

Angelou joined the Harlem Writers Guild in 1959. In 1969 she published I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings which ended up selling over a million copies worldwide and was translated into multiple languages. The book was an autobiography about her childhood trauma. After that Angelou kept writing and ended up writing six more autobiographies, many poetry volumes, and several essay collections.

Not only was Angelou a writer, but she was also a singer, actress, director, and producer. In 1972, she became the first African American woman to have her screen play turned into a film. Over the span of her career, she was nominated for many awards including multiple Grammy’s that she won, Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award, National Book Foundation’s Literarian Award, and more.

“In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded Angelou the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the country’s highest civilian honor.”

She died on May 28, 2014, and was recognized around the nation for her career in the arts.


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Ruth Bader Ginsburg was born on March 15, 1933, in Brooklyn, New York. She was the daughter of a Jewish immigrant and Brooklyn native. Her parents valued education which nurtured her love of learning from an early age. She graduated from Cornell University in 1954 with a bachelor's degree. After graduating from Cornell, she started law school at Harvard. In her class at Harvard there were 500 students, but only nine women including her. The women in her class were often looked down upon, called the “comic relief” in class, and were not allowed in certain parts of the library that were for “men only.” She ended up transferring to Columbia Law School in class. Even though she graduated last year and graduated in 1959 at the top of her class. Even though she graduated in 1962 she joined many other academic achievements it was difficult for her to find a job. She said “In the fifties, the traditional law firms were just beginning to turn around on hiring Jews. …But to be a woman, a Jew, and a mother… that combination was a bit much.”

Ginsburg was able to get a job as a law clerk for the Southern District of New York in 1959 and served until 1961. From there she went on to grow and learn more through research studies. All of that experience leading up to being appointed to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit by President Jimmy Carter in 1980. After serving in that role for thirteen years she was nominated to be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in 1993 by President Bill Clinton, which she accepted. Ruth was the second woman to serve that position, and the first Jewish woman.

Throughout her time in the Supreme Court, she fought for women’s rights and gender equality. On September 18, 2020, she died from the complications of metastatic pancreas cancer. Ginsburg’s death was mourned by many all over the nation. Currently we are seeing what happens when you take a woman who was fighting for gender equality and women’s rights out of the Supreme Court.

Junko Tabei was born in 1939 “in a small agricultural town in the Fukushima prefecture.” As child Tabei grew up with six other siblings, and she was always described as the small child who was weak and fragile. When she was ten years old one of her teachers took her to hike Mouth Nasu in Nikko National Park and she found her love for the mountains.

Growing up in a impoverished town in Japan she knew that she needed to get a “respectable” job, so she went to study English and American Literature at Showa’s Woman University.

Though her studies she continued to climb on a regular basis. Once she graduated in 1962 she joined many climbing groups to meet fellow climbing friends and go on more expeditions. These groups were often mostly men and they thought Tabei was just there to find a husband. Even though most of the men did not like Tabei she kept on persisting and never stopped climbing. To keep up with her expensive hobby of climbing she worked as an editor of a scientific journal and picked up small jobs along the way doing things such as tutoring. In 1969 Junko Tabei founded the Jushi-Tohan mountaineering club for women only. She led the club on many ascents. One of the expeditions she took the club on was the first women-only ascent to Annapurna III in Nepal. The ascent had only been accomplished once before through a different route. Another climb that the group is known for is there climb to the top of Everest. During this ascent the group was almost killed by an avalanche and delayed them a couple day, but their sherpas rescued them. Junko and her sherpa Ang Tshering reached the top of the mountain on May 16, 1975. After this Tabei was able to get on TV and became instantly famous, which gave her sponsorships to keep climbing. In 1992 she became the first woman to climb the highest peaks on all seven continents. “Junko was diagnosed with cancer in 2012, but this did not stop her from climbing and pursuing her dream of scaling mountains in every country.” In the summer of 2016, she led an expedition to Mount Fuji which ended up being her last climb before her death in November of that year.

“Women belong in all places where decisions are made”
Not to be the first, and then fade away
She fought for gender equality and women’s rights
Her legacy lives on through our continued fights

Through her expeditions she has shown
That she is strong to the bone
A fearless leader on the top
She has proven you don’t have to stop

Kamala Harris was born October 20, 1964, in Oakland, California. Her parents were emigrants from India and Jamaica. Harris’ mother received her doctorate the year that Harris was born and went on to be a breast cancer scientist.

While growing up her parents were activists and included Harris in civil rights demonstrations and introduced her to some of her role models who motivated her to become a prosecutor.

She went to Howard University where she earned her bachelor’s degree. After graduating from Howard, she attended the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco where she received her degree in Law.

She started her career in 1990 where she worked at the Alameda County District Attorney’s Office where she specialized in prosecuting child assault cases. She was then elected District Attorney of San Francisco in 2003. In 2010, Harris was elected California’s Attorney General. After that, she served as a member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

On August 11, 2020, she accepted Joe Biden’s offer to be his running mate as Vice President. Kamala Harris became the first woman, the first Black American, and the first South Asian American to be elected Vice President. One thing that her mother told her was “Kamala, you may be the first to do many things, but make sure you are not the last.”

I believe that she took those words and lives them out every day. As the first to do many things, Vice President Harris has been an encouragement to women all around the world. In her 58 years of life so far, she has accomplished great things.

After learning about all these wonderful women who have accomplished great things, I felt inspired and wanted to bring that inspiration to other people. Bringing this information to people in an expressive and emotional way was the goal of my exhibit. To accomplish that I had three different parts to the exhibit.

The first part of the exhibit was what I call the art wall. This wall consisted of the title “Women’s Hall of Fame,” and a timeline of portraits of the ten different women. In making the portraits I was inspired by the famous Hope poster of Barack Obama. Taking out the idea of race and making color block portraits is how I decided to depict these women. I chose the primary colors of red, blue, and yellow to show a place of neutrality while being bold in the color choice and a high contrast with the black and white of the room. All the portraits on the art wall were painted on plexiglass with the color fields on the back and the black outlines on the front. The timeline was made with an 18’ metal pole that hung horizontal. The portraits hung along the pole on the top and bottom.
The second part of the gallery was the learning. Two walls of the gallery consisted of prints of the portraits, the bios that wrote in this paper, and a poem that I wrote for each of the women. Each of the poems were double couplets which have a rhyming rhythm of AABB. The bios were there for people to learn and get the inspiration that I felt, while the poems were there to show emotion and drive the story home.

The last part of the exhibit was the take home wall. This wall had the word “YOU” painted on it with the “O” being a mirror. Next to the wall was a frame that said “No matter how you identify we can all take actions in support of gender equality. Women have come a long way in society since Sacagawea’s time, but that doesn’t mean we live in an equal world. I was inspired by these ten women, and I hope you are too. Take that inspiration and turn it into action, so that maybe one day people might honor you for supporting women’s rights.”
This project was a lot of hard work and dedication to making the exhibit look exactly how I wanted it to. I had many struggles along the way, and quite frankly I didn’t know exactly what my exhibit was going to look like for a while. All I knew was that I want to honor these women and bring inspiration to all.

Throughout my research, creating the work for the exhibit, and putting up the exhibit I learned so much from all of it this semester. I was able to show people where women in society started and some of the women that have paved the way to get to where we are now. All of it to inspire people to keep the momentum going in continuing to improve women’s rights and role in society.
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THANK YOU FOR READING