

WORDS:

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Gina McMurchy-Barber, British Columbia

INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA

Grades 4-8 History, Social Studies, Language Arts, Drama

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- gain an appreciation of the struggles faced by women prior to gaining the right to vote and becoming “persons” in the eyes of the law;
- become familiar with both local and national figures who helped women to gain enfranchisement;
- learn how women contributed to the development of Canada and its history;
- develop critical thinking skills in relation to rights, privileges, and freedoms;
- become prepared for future study of the Human Rights Act and the Children’s Rights Act of the United Nations;
- bring history alive through dramatization.

ACTIVITIES

Activity #1 — Story and Writing Activity

(You can use the following story or tell one of your own. This story tells of two children, born at the same time, to the same parents, but who are not treated equally. It is intended to keep the gender of the children uncertain until the end. Students will see the unfairness of the circumstances and begin thinking about ways to bring equality.)

Not so long ago, a young mother gave birth to a set of beautiful twins. While she gently held each in her arms, she wondered what to name them. As she looked into the face of one infant she saw a serious nature and eyes with a hint of rebellion. “I will call you Blair, for I believe that you will be a battleground,” declared the mother. Turning to her other baby, “And you little one I will call Jem, for you have magnificent features and will catch the eye of many admirers.”

The two babies and their parents lived a modest life. The mother and father had newly immigrated to Canada from a faraway country in Eastern Europe. The young couple wanted their children to have better lives than they had had so they worked hard to provide for them in the new homeland. However, as the two babies grew, it became more apparent that they were not seen as equal in the eyes of their parents. Whenever the family cow gave milk, it was Jem who always got the cream. And Mother always made sure that Jem’s tummy was filled before offering the bottle to Blair. As the children grew older there were other things that divided them. Jem was sent off to school at six, but Blair stayed home. Mother wanted Blair to learn domestic chores, while plans for Jem involved a higher education and a prosperous career.

The children continued to grow and by the time they were 12, Blair was more of a servant to Jem than a sibling. Blair helped to cook the meals, chop the wood, wash the clothes by hand, and care for the animals. All the while, Jem was busy studying from the fascinating books sent from school.

One day, when the family was away, Blair took the opportunity to look through Jem's books. They were so intriguing that Blair said, "I want to learn to read, to understand the many wonders of the world, to have opportunities to better myself. I must find a way to make Jem teach me."

Seizing every opportunity for bribing Jem with extra rations of meat or favours, Blair soon learned to read and even became a better student than Jem. Once the tables were turned, it was Jem who bribed Blair for help with homework.

One day, Blair's parents were in the kitchen talking of future plans for their children. "Ah! One day Jem will be rich and successful and will care for us in our old age. We can always be sure with Jem that things will go well. But what will we do with Blair?" asked Mother.

"There's only one thing we can do is we must find Blair a mate that has promising prospects and will be a good provider," replied Father.

Blair slipped upstairs to a quiet place in the corner to think about what Mother and Father had said. "Why is it that two infants born at the same time, to the same parents, could be treated so differently?" Blair questioned. "Why is Jem the one to be given the best of the food, to be sent to school, to take ease in the evening to read and study? Why are my parents so sure of Jem's future success? And why is my only future prospect to find a mate who will provide for me?" Blair wanted more in life than to be taken care of, and wanted more choices for a future.

Long after everyone had gone to sleep, Blair continued to think over these questions and began to form a plan for changing the bleak future Mother and Father had predicted.

Discussion: Why do you think Jem and Blair were treated differently? (Jem is a boy and Blair is a girl.) When do you think this story took place? (In some cases less than a century ago.) If you were Blair, what plans would you be making to change your future? (Find other girls that thought the same way and tried to change the way females were treated. This is in fact what many women did, forming the beginning of the women's rights movement.)

Writing Assignment: Write an ending to Blair's story.

(Books should be available to the children that help them to understand the conditions for Canadian women in the past. They need to know such things as: women did not have the right to vote provincially or federally until the early part of the last century; women were not allowed to own property or keep their own money; women had no legal right to parent their own children in the event that the husband

died; if a woman was over the age of 21 she could earn money and own property, but as soon as she married it all became her husband's; women were not considered "persons" in the eyes of the law.)

Activity #2 — Interview/Research Project

There are many older ladies who may remember a time when women had fewer options or rights. They may even have mothers who were part of the women's rights movement in Canada. Ask a grandmother, older friend, or neighbour what they experienced or remember regarding the attitudes and treatment of women. Then write or share what you discovered.

Through library research, find out what you can about some or all of the following women: Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Emily Stowe, Irene Parlby, E. Cora Hind, Henrietta Muir Edwards. Through your research you will come across many other women who made a contribution to improving conditions for women. Who were they and what did they do?

Another research option is to examine how creative women like Emily Carr and Lucy Maud Montgomery managed to follow their passions despite attitudes of the time. Excellent books for this work are *HerStory: Women from Canada's Past* by Susan Merritt, *Firing the Heather* by Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis, and *Nellie L.* by Connie Brummel Crook. The Famous Five Foundation site on the Internet is also helpful.

Activity #3 — Writing Assignment

There are many special women in our lives. Some of them lived long ago, while many are with us today. Choose a woman that you admire and write a page about her. Ask yourself the following questions: What has she done that I admire? Who has she benefited? What lasting impact will her contribution have?

The woman you choose to write about could be someone you know, like your mother, grandmother, sister, teacher or friend. It could also be a prominent figure in the community, country or world.

When you're done, you can either send your work to the one you admire or to The Famous Five Foundation.

Activity #4 — Novel Study

Nellie L. by Connie Brummel Crook is a wonderful historical fiction novel about the childhood of Nellie McClung. It could be read to the class during reading time, and followed by question sheets or a discussion period. On the other hand, it can be used for a class novel study, with each child having a copy. Discuss the restrictions felt by young Nellie McClung as she grew up in the late 1800s. What kinds of things did Nellie want improved for women? How did she go about doing it?

Activity #5 — Skit

Students are encouraged to write their own script for their skits. They may base their script on the *Nellie L.* novel by Connie Brummel Crook, or on their own interview/research related to the women's movement.

About the Educator

Gina McMurchy-Barber instils a love of Canadian history in her students through experiential learning. Interviews, pen pals, songs, cooking, presentations and field trips are used to teach topics as diverse as the Canadian Parliamentary System, the Gold Rush, Québec, The Great Depression, Archaeology, Human Rights and First Nations Peoples. She writes plays to allow her students to inhabit the past and integrates her units, weaving Canadian history into science, writing, literature, art and music.