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Stone blazed path for women's equality, drew others to cause

Recently, I came across some materials discussing the long road to female equality. Doing this, I learned about the invaluable contributions made by Lucy Stone. Although her name may not be familiar, women owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude in spearheading what was, at that time, the "radical" concept of gender equality.

The first woman in Massachusetts to earn a college degree, Stone organized the first national women's rights convention during which she delivered an electrifying speech which drew Susan B. Anthony to the cause. Stone was also the first woman in the United States to keep her own name after marriage. Her story is intriguing and inspiring and provides a snapshot of the many obstacles faced by women as they sought to establish their equal role in society.

Stone was born in August 1818, on her family's Massachusetts farm, the eighth of nine children. Although she desired to attend school just like her brothers, Stone's father refused to support her education because she was a girl. Undeterred, Stone earned her own money to fund her studies. By age 25, she had saved enough to pay for her first year at Oberlin College in Ohio, the country's first college to admit both women and blacks.

At Oberlin, Stone found herself drawn to public speaking, which was generally disfavored for women at that time. Although female students could debate each other, it was improper for them to debate men. Stone thus organized an off-campus women's debating club, through which she gained confidence and experience.

She eventually accepted a challenge from a male newspaperman to engage in a public debate on women's rights. After defeating him, Stone submitted a petition to the Oberlin faculty board, requesting that women who had been given the coveted honor of being asked to write a commence-

ment speech for their class, would also be allowed to deliver those remarks at the ceremony, just like their male classmates. The petition was supported by both male and female members of her class.

The board refused. When Stone was selected to write the essay for her class, she declined.

Stone returned to Massachusetts in 1847 as the first woman in that state to receive a college degree. Stone moved forward in pursuing a career in public speaking and used her speeches to further efforts in achieving emancipation for slaves and equality for women.

Stone responded to concerns voiced by her mother regarding her chosen path: "I surely would not be a public speaker if I sought a life of ease, for it will be a most laborious one; nor would I do it for the sake of honor, for I know that I shall be disesteemed, even hated, by some who are now my friends, or who profess to be. ... I must pursue that course of conduct which, to me, appears best calculated to promote the highest good of the world."

Stone was soon hired by the American Anti-Slavery Society and, as a paid orator, she traveled widely to deliver speeches in support of abolition. During her presentations, however, she often also included remarks advocating female rights, explaining: "I was a woman before I was an abolitionist. I must speak for women."

Stone's speeches drew strong reactions, both positive and negative. As one historian recounted: "people tore down the posters advertising her talks, burned pepper in the auditoriums where she spoke and pelted her with prayer books and other missiles."

At the same time, however, many were interested in hearing her remarks on gender equality — especially women. Stone began delivering these speeches at separate events, charged admission, and drew large crowds.

In 1850, Stone helped organize the first national female rights convention in Worcester, Mass.

LAW FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

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During that event, she delivered a speech on female rights that was the catalyst for Susan B. Anthony to become involved in the suffrage movement. A copy of Stone's speech also found its way to England and it is believed to have inspired the philosopher John Stuart Mill to publish "The Enfranchisement of Women," which advocated for social and political equality for women.

In 1853, on one of her speaking

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tours, Stone met businessman Henry Blackwell. Blackwell was so impressed by Stone's oratory that he arranged a tour for her during which she gave more than 40 lectures in more than a dozen cities during a four-month period.

Local newspapers were filled with stories about the impact of Stone's speeches. In Chicago, it was said that her lectures were some of the best of the season; in St. Louis, it was reported that she attracted some of the largest crowds ever assembled; and in Indianapolis it was written that Stone's words "set about two-thirds of the women in the town crazy after women's rights and placed half the men in a similar predicament."

After two years of courtship, Stone and Blackwell decided to get married. However, this would not be the typical arrangement of the day. Stone's view was that "[a] wife should no more take her husband's name than he should hers. My name is my identity and must not be lost." Blackwell agreed, stating: "I wish, as a husband, to renounce all the privileges which the law confers upon me, which are not strictly mutual."

Thus, it was no surprise that at their ceremony in 1855, the minister read a statement from the couple announcing that Stone would keep her own name. They made clear their protest against marriage laws which "refuse[d] to recognize the wife as an independent, rational being, while they confer on the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority, investing him with legal powers which no honorable man would exercise and which no man should possess."

Women who followed her example and kept their own names after marriage became known as "Lucy Stoners."

Stone continued to advocate for female rights until her death in 1893. Although she did not live long enough to see the passage of the 19th Amendment which finally enfranchised women in 1920, her tireless efforts paved the way for these positive changes to occur.