

CHALK TALK: Remember the Ladies, All Year Long

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I've been procrastinating. I've known for months now that I would be writing this Chalk Talk piece and I requested the month of March, specifically, because it's Women's History Month.

I'm a history teacher, and a woman — so this should be my jam. But when it came time to sit down and write the piece, I found myself stuck.

An overload of ideas arrived all at once: grappling with a lack of resources, the importance of women to history, how teachers can include more feminist history — everyone's history — into their curriculum. The ideas came in a jumble, and I was stuck.

So what better way to start than to start at the beginning.

In a letter written to her husband John in 1776, Abigail Adams urged him, and his revolutionary cohorts, "...in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

She went on to basically threaten him that if women were ignored, they would in turn, ignore the laws made by men who disregarded the value of women. She is arguably our country's first feminist leader.

And yet, 243 years later, we are still often struggling to "remember the ladies."

Growing up in western Massachusetts, I had an education rich with history about Pilgrims, the Revolution, and Northampton's own Calvin Coolidge. When it came to women's history, I got the standard (as I've come to call it) "Women's History Highlight Reel": Adams, Sacagawea, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Rosa Parks; all of whom are vitally important to our history and necessary to understanding the struggles and successes of women in the United States.

However, the same can be said for Anna Fisher, Annie Lumpkins, Katherine Switzer, and Komako Kimura; all fascinating women that I have never seen in any textbook. In fact, it wasn't until I went to college that I discovered what I had been missing. Taking classes about women in Japanese history, gender and mental health in the 19th Century, Virginia Woolf, and gender, race and culture in the U.S., didn't just teach me to seek out the women's perspectives throughout



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history, they also taught me how much was lacking from my primary and secondary history education.

Fast forward to today and a quick glance at the U.S. History I textbook on my classroom shelf clearly indicates this problem of absence is still with us. In the first 100 pages my students read, women are mentioned a disappointing five times. Women make up half of our history, but traditional texts continue to exclude most of them from the story.

So how do we go beyond the texts and fill in the blanks? Some of this is being done for us. Thanks to emerging stories like “Hidden Figures” and young reader books like “Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls,” students are ready and willing to look beyond the headliners and search out those in the shadows who are the backbone of the story of our country; we just need to give them the opportunities.

Recently, I modified an assignment I had taught in the past in which students researched a person or event of the American Revolution. I gave them all of the original choices, but added a few such as “Women of the Revolution” and “African-Americans of the Revolution.” Many of my students jumped at the chance to discover someone not listed in the textbooks.

And although some students still chose George Washington and Paul Revere, some also chose Phillis Wheatley and Sybil Ludington and were so excited about what they learned that they actually wanted to share their discoveries with the class. If you know teenagers, that’s a big deal!

History has always been populated with women of strength and courage. And since it’s no secret that K-12 education is populated with significantly more female educators, it stands to reason that we’re pulling for more than a highlight reel.

Women’s contributions to our history in the U.S. and beyond are significant and important not just one month out of the year but all of them, so when you’re planning your next adventure or your next lesson or your next story to tell, take a hint from Abigail Adams and remember the ladies

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