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165 Years Since Seneca Falls: Continuing to Organize for Equality

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"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."

--Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Convention

One-hundred sixty-five years ago this week on July 19-20 1848, 300 women and men met in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss "the social, civil and religious condition and rights of Woman." The gathering, called the Seneca Falls Convention, produced one of the nation's most important historical documents advocating women's rights - the monumental "Declaration of Sentiments" - planting the seed for the fight for women's suffrage in America, and indirectly for the formation of the League of Women Voters, which would later champion the issue.

Written primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Declaration of Sentiments parodies the Declaration of Independence, which Congress had passed over 70 years earlier. But instead of arguing for America's freedom from the "tyranny" of British control, the Declaration of Sentiments argues for women's freedom from the "tyranny" of patriarchy. Whereas the Founding Fathers wrote in the Declaration of Independence that it is self-evident that "all men are created equal," the Declaration of Sentiments boldly asserts that "all men and women" are equal. The document points out the "patient sufferance" not of "men" or "mankind," but of American women, who were oppressed by an undemocratic government that failed to allow them to possess property rights, speak in public, file for divorce, manage their own wages and attend college.

The most controversial part of the Declaration of Sentiments, which delineated 11 resolutions on women's rights, was its call for the right to vote for women. Even among women's rights leaders, the notion of women's suffrage was perceived as deeply controversial at the time. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's husband, Henry, refused to continue helping her draft the Declaration if she included women's suffrage, believing the addition would put the rest of the document in jeopardy. Even Lucretia Mott, who organized the Seneca Falls Convention with Stanton, begged Stanton not to include women's suffrage among the resolutions. "Why, Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous!" Mott worried. But Cady Stanton refused to back down. "I persisted," she later wrote, "for I saw clearly that the power to make the laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured."

Mott and Henry's fears were almost proven correct when the time came to vote upon passage of the Declaration of Sentiments on the second day of the convention, July 20, 1848. All 11 resolutions were unanimously passed with the exception of the resolution on suffrage, which produced a long and heated debate. But following a moving speech made by abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the convention agreed to pass the resolution.

The Seneca Falls Convention thereby resulted in the first formal demand for women's suffrage in America. The convention laid the framework for the women's suffrage movement, also leading to the founding of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890. The NAWSA championed the successful passage of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote in 1919, followed by the formation of the League of Women Voters by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920.

Today, the League honors the women and men who gathered in New York 165 years ago in efforts to end barriers that denied American citizens their rights and equality. **The anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention reminds us of the power of activism and mobilization -- that even a small group of people can join together to create a transformative mass movement.**

"We do not expect [that] our path will be strewn with the flowers of popular applause, " Stanton stated in her address to the Seneca Falls Convention on July 19, 1848, "...but our banners will beat the dark storm." Today, these words ring true for the men and women in our 800 state and local Leagues across the country who - like those of the Seneca Falls Convention-

tirelessly fight against obstacles in the path to securing democracy and equality for all.

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