

Third Place Winner
Division II – 10-12th Grades
Belva Lockwood: A Crack in The Glass
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It's 1884. The civil war has just come to an end, and there continues to be a universal agreement that a woman's place is in the home. It was in this historical backdrop that attorney Belva Lockwood ran her presidential campaign, despite not even being able to vote for herself. She fought for the rights women have today by breaking down glass ceiling after glass ceiling. Lockwood fought her way to a Judicial Doctorate. She fought her way onto the floor of the Supreme Court. Setting the precedent for generations of women to come. Moral courage is standing up for what you believe in not once, but over and over again. Belva Lockwood and her moral courage, not only defied the domestic gender norms at the time but also inspires a new generation of "glass ceiling breakers".

Belva Lockwood was born on October 24, 1830, in upstate New York. She was not born into a particularly wealthy family and was not expected to receive any sort of higher education at birth. But Lockwood was not one for meeting expectations. At 22, Belva Lockwood found herself a widow and a mother to a 3-year-old daughter. As a working mother, she put herself through college, remarried and eventually became a teacher. After teaching for a few years she went to law school. Despite doing exceptionally well, the National University Law School would not give her a diploma, as the prevailing opinion of men at the time was that the women's brain was too feeble for any extreme mental exertion. It was only when President Ulysses S. Grant made the institution graduate her, was she officially the first female alumni of the law school (Norgren Blazing). However, even after she got her degree and opened a practice, the U.S. Supreme Court denied her entry into their bar. Nevertheless, Belva Lockwood relentlessly lobbied in Congress until The Act to Relieve Legal Disabilities of Women was passed. A year later, the act gave her the ability to argue *Kaiser v. Stickney* in high court (Klebanow, 43). This act of legal argumentation marked Lockwood in history as the first female bar member to have ever argued before the US Supreme Court.

As an attorney, Belva Lockwood advocated not only for rich white men but also for the underrepresented communities of the 1880s. She helped women divorce their husbands and defended several Native Americans in land claim cases. As a female attorney, she recognized that she had to please the male populous if she was to be considered a viable colleague. In order to win their favor, she would use subtle humor and charm. For instance, when she defended herself in a lawsuit for \$847, she appealed to the jury and members of the court by writing a 53 line rhyming poem assuring them of her innocence. In the mid-1880s, Belva Lockwood began to step away from the legal profession and began her ascent into politics. As a political candidate, she continued to defend the rights of the marginalized. Her platform was based on equal political rights, temperance, Native American rights, and civil service reform. She ran not once, but twice, and received over 4,000 votes. A formidable number, given that, at the time, only white men had the right to vote (Norgren Blazing).

Belva Lockwood championed women's rights as an attorney and as a politician, at a time when it was not socially acceptable for women to be anything other than mothers and domestics. She once said, "It is the glory of each generation to make its own precedents" (Norgren President, 74). Her

bravery and determination set the precedent for not only the women of her generation but for generations to come.

Belva Lockwood story very inspiring to me, as I am very passionate about government and civic participation. At school, I am an attorney on my Mock Trial team and a peer student leader for Inspire to Vote. In the future, I am interested in studying political science and even go to law school myself. If not for Belva Lockwood and the hundreds of other women who have fought for equal participation in the fields of law and politics, I would not have the same opportunity to pursue my dreams. That said, more than 180 years later, women still face discrimination in the American Judicial, Legislative and Executive branches. Lockwood was the first female attorney to argue on the floor of the Supreme Court in 1880. Yet, in the present day, 139 years later, only 12% of arguments made in high court were made by women (Walsh). Even though women make up more than half of all law school graduates, they only represent 30% of all partners in law practices (Report Women in Law, 10). Finally, out of all 45 presidents in the history of the United States, not one has been female.

Social justice and gender equality is not a solitary pursuit. It has been the combined efforts of hundreds of thousands of women throughout the course of history who have dedicated their lives to making the world a better place for all. To change a society it takes courageous individuals, like Belva Lockwood and others whose names our textbooks omit, tirelessly advocating for their beliefs. “It is the glory of each generation to make its own precedents.” If my generation is to shatter the persisting “glass ceilings,” it is imperative for us to understand the acts of moral courage made by the phenomenal women that came before us.

Work Cited

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