Common Values

On the 90th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, nurses learn lessons from the suffragists to apply to patient advocacy today. BY LUCIA HWANG

HEY CAME BY TRAIN. They came by bus. They came by taxi. And they came by plane.

On Aug. 26, more than 2,500 registered nurses journeyed under the banner of National Nurses United to Sacramento, Calif. to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the right of American women to vote, and to draw parallels between the struggle of suffragists with the struggle of today’s nurses to advocate for their patients at the bedside, at the ballot box, and in the streets. To mark the historic occasion, most of the RNs donned Victorian and Edwardian dress and nursing uniforms from those eras. The gathering of that many energetic nurses in period costume was an amazing sight to behold.
“I think the suffragist movement is about showing how solidarity can get things done,” said Lynn Lucas, a stepdown neurology RN at Doctors Medical Center in Modesto, Calif. Lucas looked regal in a high-necked blouse and long skirt. “It’s the same for nurses. What we want is to protect the safety of our patients through ratios.”

The event was also an opportunity to highlight how California gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman dishonored the legacy of women suffragists by failing to vote for most of her life and how her policies did not have the best interests of women at heart. The large signs some of the marchers carried said it best: “Women vote for women who vote.”

“I’m here to show unity,” said Katya Salguero, a pediatric oncology RN at Kaiser Permanente in Roseville, Calif. “As nurses, we share the same values. Meg Whitman does not represent our core values. She would take us in the opposite direction of where we need to go. There’s so much that still needs to be done for patients.” Salguero spoke about how ancillary staff on her unit have been cut and that managers are not considering acuity when making patient assignments.

That day, the RNs first learned about the history of the women’s suffrage movement and about its overlap with the modern nursing movement. Most were not surprised to find out that RNs such as Lavinia Dock and Lillian Wald, who were pioneers for their profession, for public health, and for numerous labor and social justice causes, also participated extensively in the fight for women’s suffrage. NNU nurses then marched in the street toward the Capitol along with allies from unions representing teachers, firefighters, ironworkers, and longshore workers, among others. Together, they finally rallied on the Capitol steps. “Nurses’ values were commonly the same as the suffragettes’ values: caring, compassion, and community,” said Malinda Markowitz, RN and a copresident of CNA/NNU, to the crowd of marchers.
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Many RNs interviewed said that they attended the event because they were determined to protect California’s mandatory RN-to-patient safe staffing ratios. They did not trust that Whitman, who has repeatedly said she supported deregulation of business, would uphold nursing ratios. “I’ve been a nurse for 24 years and I remember what it was like before we had ratios,” said Chris Davis, a labor and delivery RN at Ventura County Medical Center. Davis was costumed as a British Red Cross nurse, complete with apron and hat. “Sometimes I used to have 14 moms by myself. I’m here to be an advocate for safe patient staffing ratios and to ensure the safety of my children and my children’s children, and also the next generation of nurses.”

The event was attended by some notables, including California Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, who presented the nurses with a state resolution commending them for their voting rights work, and by Elizabeth Jenkins-Sahlin, the great, great, great granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a prominent early women’s suffragist.

“I’m so happy to be part of this living legacy,” said Jenkins-Sahlin, 25. “I’m so happy that so many have come out to take advantage of their right to free speech and assembly to work for change and progress.”

Many RNs honored earlier generations of nurses and women in their families by incorporating special clothing or pieces of jewelry into their costumes and attire. Deborah Burger, RN and a CNA/NNU copresident, wore a delicate lace collar that her first mother-in-law had hand tatted and antique cufflinks that belonged to her, too. Catherine Noble, a medical-surgical RN in Templeton, Calif. who volunteers for the Red Cross, was decked out in a vintage Red Cross nursing cap and antique pins. Pat Schramm, a retired RN, wore a vintage velvet cloche hat that had been passed down to her from a favorite aunt.

The celebration of women’s and nurses’ political power was particularly moving for Mariana Holiday, a telemetry RN at San Gabriel Valley Medical Center. Holiday immigrated from then-Yugoslavia to the United State in the late 1980s and is proud to have become a nurse and a voter. “Our profession is very powerful,” said Holiday. “I have an obligation to be here to represent all the human race and all women across the world.”

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A Storied History

It's mindboggling to think now, but women in the United States only secured the right to vote 90 years ago after struggling for more than a century to win the franchise. And it may also surprise registered nurses to know that the past, present, and future of the modern nursing profession is inseparable from the political power and advocacy represented by a woman's right to vote.

Earlier generations of nurses understood this well.

On March 13, 1913, nearly 8,000 women and some men marched in a grand procession down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House to very publicly demand that women have the right to vote. One section of the parade was organized by various professions, and a significant contingent of nurses, dressed in full uniform with caps and capes, marched solemnly behind a cloth banner reading “American nurses.” Many prominent nurses of that era, including the noted public health nurse Lillian Wald, organized colleagues to march and could be found front and center. The suffragists weren’t allowed to demonstrate in peace, however. Spectators, mostly men who were in Washington, D.C. for the presidential inauguration of Woodrow Wilson the next day, jeered, heckled, and even physically harassed the marchers. The police did little to protect them.

Despite the interference, the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913 was a spectacular success, completely upstaging the presidential inauguration and providing a much-needed shot in the arm to the women’s suffrage movement. But the event did not happen in isolation. It was the result of thousands of women working collectively and more than 60 years of groundwork by previous generations of suffragists.

The first stage of women’s suffrage was led by leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 19th century. These notable names first popularized the idea of the right of women to vote, and they attempted to win the franchise for women on a state by state level. Though a handful of western states granted women suffrage, the movement had largely stalled at the national level by the turn of the century.

Around this time, younger women reinvigorated the women’s suffrage movement with new energy, new ideas, and new tactics. They marked the second stage of the movement, during which suffragists such as Alice Paul and Lucy Burns pressed for a federal Constitutional amendment for women to have the right to vote. Paul and her colleagues founded the National Woman’s Party in 1916 and began adopting some of the more militant methods used by suffragists in Britain. The women demonstrated, staged parades, picketed the White House around the clock, held mass meetings, and went on hunger strikes. Many women were jailed for their exercise of First Amendment rights and physically abused by law enforcement and prison guards. Paul, who went on a hunger strike while imprisoned to protest conditions, was brutally force fed through tubes down her throat. The authorities even tried to have Paul committed to a psychiatric institution. The 2004 film Iron Jawed Angels depicts the strong wills, intelligence, and suffering of Paul and her generation of suffragists.

By 1918, the pressure on President Wilson by suffragists was too strong and he supported the Suffrage Amendment. In 1920, by a margin of one vote in Tennessee, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution passed.

Not coincidentally, many nurses participated in this stage of the women’s suffrage movement. It was an era in which the effects of industrialization had come full force to the nation’s urban centers. In trying to promote health among their patients and their communities, nurses realized they needed to simultaneously work on broader social issues for working people, such as poor sanitation, disease, overcrowding, poverty, child labor, and lack of educational opportunities. To improve their patients’ lives, nurses understood, they needed to be active in the political arena, not only to elect lawmakers, but to publicly pressure them to act in the interests of the public. To voice their concerns and champion their causes, nurses formed professional associations and then unions—which are another form of collective democratic action.

The same situation exists today for NNU’s registered nurse members. The parallels between the fight for women’s suffrage and the goals many of today’s RNs hold dear, such as safe staffing ratios and the creation of a system guaranteeing quality healthcare to everyone regardless of income, are striking. Nurses are confronting entrenched, monied interests and must organize themselves and the public to apply the political pressure necessary to make elected officials do the right thing. But as we approach this November’s election, at least one piece of the puzzle, the right of women to vote, has already been won. Let’s honor the legacy of the suffragists by using it wisely.