



AUGUST 26 2020 STATUE UNVEILING SPEECH

Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President

I cannot think of three more deserving women to put on a pedestal in Central Park than Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Without them, we would not have the right to vote.

But we would not be here today without the hard work of Monumental Women, / sculptor Meredith Bergmann, / Council Member Helen Rosenthal, / Parks Commissioner Mitchell Silver, / Central Park Conservancy President Elizabeth W. Smith and the whole Conservancy, / and we all owe a special debt of thanks to Pam Elam, the President of Monumental Women, Coline Jenkins, Vice President of Monumental Women as well as the great great granddaughter of Ms. Stanton, Penelope Cox, Director of Special Projects in the office of the Manhattan Borough President and all the others who contributed to our success. In the Mayor's office, I want to express appreciation to Stacy Lynch and Ali Davis. I am so proud to have worked toward this accomplishment together.

I have been an elected official for a long time but getting this statue approved was a major challenge.

Seven years ago, hardly anyone was talking about statues. And now folks mostly talk about tearing them down. Whether we agree or not about the content of our monuments, they mark the historical disposition of the city's people, and of its spirit, and the temper of the times.

Much as in the era of the suffragists we honor today, it was just about 7 years ago that a few good women stepped forward to create history, and in the form of this powerful sculpture affirmed the leading role of women in our history, and in the historical importance of New York to the character of our nation. When the struggle to create this sculpture began, the City of New York had only five works of civic sculpture portraying real-life women- Joan of Arc, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein, Golda Meir and Harriett Tubman- and none were in Central Park. So, we banded together, and in the spirit of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Sojourner Truth and the thousands of women who risked their lives for suffrage, we set out to break the Bronze Ceiling.

Stanton, Anthony, and Truth must be smiling somewhere at the hoops the Monumental Women were made to jump through to create a statue honoring three of the most important figures in American history. The answer “No” came in many forms: “The Park is closed to new statues”; “Women don’t want a statue, they want a garden”; “If we say yes to this statue, we’ll have to say yes to any statue.” And my personal favorite: “You have to prove that each of these women had actually set foot in Central Park.”

Funding was a challenge, as it was for the suffragists. Only my office and that of City Councilmember Helen Rosenthal put in public money; Generous individual donations and foundation support have provided the rest. A highlight of the money chase was hearing that local Girl Scout troops were donating the proceeds of their cookie fundraising toward completion of the statue.

Well, it took 70 years to get the vote, but only 7 to get the statue, and if you listen carefully you can just hear Stanton’s voice: “Don’t worry ladies, we’re getting there.”

In our own way we too believed we were on the right side of history and sought to build a force to make change in the status quo. It’s never easy. In the hundred years since suffrage passed our franchise has in fact brought about what many in opposition feared: our voices and their conviction have grown ever-stronger through one struggle after another, and our grip on the levers of power ever more sure.

It is sobering to recall that the women figured here not only never saw themselves honored by works of civic art; none lived to see the 19th Amendment ratified in 1920. But they knew that voting was only a right worth fighting for if we exercise it. We’re coming up on a monumental election. Not only our rights but our lives are at stake. We must motivate everyone who can be touched by our voices, by our love, and belief in a constitutional republic that every vote must count. As we have seen, change begins in the streets. But to be effective it must lead to the voting booth. This year, that franchise, won for us by these smart, courageous women, is once again our most important civil right.