

Monumental Women from Montclair

See a town native's statue honoring suffragettes on a spring stroll in Central Park

WRITTEN BY JULIA MARTIN

In Central Park, on Literary Walk, a spot next to Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, had been empty for 175 years — with nothing but trees and shrubbery.

But in August 2020, a 14-foot-tall bronze sculpture was installed there depicting suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth, commemorating the centennial of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

It was the park's first new statute in 70 years and the first representing real women who changed history — not fictional or mythological females such as Mother Goose or Alice in Wonderland.

Millions have already visited the Women's Rights Pioneers Monument, at about 68th Street, among the men on Literary Walk, one of the park's most popular areas.

It has become a favorite spot to take selfies, leave flowers, and listen to the voices of Meryl Streep, Viola Davis and Rita Moreno telling the subject's stories on the "Talking Statues" app, download-able at the site. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, it became an impromptu memorial, and on Election Day 2020, it was plastered with "I Voted" stickers. Two female New York City mayoral candidates launched their campaigns at the monument, and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul unveiled her abortion rights agenda there. >



PIONEERS OF THE PARK Montclair native Meredith Bergmann, creator of the Women's Rights Pioneers Monument stands in her studio next to her sculpture.

COURTESY OF MONUMENTAL WOMEN

“I WANTED TO NOT ONLY INTERPRET HISTORY MYSELF, BUT TO LEAVE IT OPEN FOR PEOPLE WALKING BY TO INTERPRET.”

MEREDITH BERGMANN

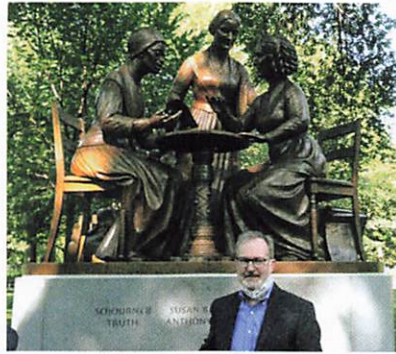
Few who see the sculpture, however, are aware of the Herculean effort it took to get the artwork funded, approved, created and installed. Fewer still know that the drive and talent of two Montclair residents were central to the endeavor.

One was the sculptor herself, Meredith Bergmann, who was born in town and graduated from Montclair High School in 1982. Now living in Massachusetts with her film producer husband Michael Bergmann, she’s the creator of many public sculptures, including the Boston Women’s Memorial, and is known for creating artworks that tell a story from the past with a sense of mischief.

Her Central Park monument, for example, contains what’s known as Easter eggs — symbols or clues that help tell the story. A pattern of sunflowers is embossed on Stanton’s skirt in tribute to her nom de plume Sunflower, which she used when writing editorials for the Seneca Falls newspaper. Anthony wears a cameo depicting Minerva, the Roman goddess of strategy and wisdom, and Truth a jacket woven with laurel wreaths to symbolize victory and honor.

The second person from Montclair behind the statue is accountant Dave Spaulding, board member of the nonprofit Monumental Women, who helped the group raise and manage the \$1.6 million needed for the project.

Securing the funding was just the beginning. It took many more years to run the gauntlet of city regulations and commissions. That included proving to the Central Park Conservancy that all three women had once set foot in Central Park; hiring an arborist to certify that the 36-ton statue and foundation



MULTI-STEP EFFORT As a board member of Monumental Women, Montclair accountant Dave Spaulding also played a role in getting the statue installed.

wouldn’t damage tree roots and an archaeologist to vet the spot for artifacts; and establishing a fund to maintain the statute in perpetuity.

There was also a trial in the court of public opinion. In 2019, an outcry arose after a model of Bergmann’s original two-woman design was displayed in Albany. In it, Stanton and Anthony unfurl a long list of women (including Montclair’s Lucy Stone) who fought the suffrage battle. Gloria Steinem and others said that depiction erased the many contributions of Black women.

After Bergman modified the design to include Sojourner Truth and depicted the three women in discussion, there was a new objection: There was no proof that the three women had ever sat down together, and Stanton and Anthony hadn’t given Truth and other Black suffragists credit for their contributions. We spoke with Spaulding and Bergmann about how, against the odds, the suffragist statue came to life.

HOW DID THE GROUP MONUMENTAL WOMEN COME ABOUT?

SPAULDING: In 2014, a few friends,

historians and activists, mostly in the New York area, started talking about the total lack of any real women in the park, and decided we needed to right that wrong. I was asked to join the board, since I do a lot of accounting work for arts organizations. Coline Jenkins, the great-great-granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, is also on the board.

GIVE US AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS.

SPAULDING: We had over 90 submissions, but we liked Meredith’s design best. It was approved in July of 2018 and she created it in two years, which is very fast for a commission of this magnitude.

BERGMANN: A monument gets made over and over and over again. You start with a very small, crude clay model, then a more refined model, then a half-size model. You want to work out all your decisions about poses on that. Anthony is nine feet high, and if she had a hand or arm you wanted to move, it would be days and days of work on the full-size model.

For each model, you need approval. We had to wait so long for approval of the half-size model that I had to start working at full size before it was approved. It was a little bit of a game of chicken.

SPAULDING: We did not get final approval until late fall in 2019, and we had to start installing it in the park on July 5 of 2020. We were working on a wing and a prayer.

BERGMANN: Typically, I create the final bronze sculpture by sculpting out a full-size clay model from the half-size model via a slow process that involves drawing a grid on the ground and using a plumb line to measure where, say, the arm would go. >

For this monument, we needed a timesaver, so we used a digital enlarging process where we scanned the half-size clay model and fed it into a computer. The computer drove a milling machine, which created the full-size model in high-density foam, which was shipped to me. I put a layer of clay over it and then it was cast in bronze. Before that, though, I had to completely redo the faces and hands because they weren't expressive enough.

The foam is so much lighter than the clay that I can carry the various body parts easily and don't need to hire as much help. Usually these monuments need a team of people.

SPAULDING: My wife and I went out to Meredith's home in Thanksgiving 2019 to see the full-size clay model, which was 95% finished. It was breathtaking. The hands, the fingertips, the cuticles, the veins and the musculature — you're not going to get that from a computer scan, only from an artist.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP IN MONTCLAIR AND HOW DID IT INFLUENCE YOU TO BECOME A SCULPTOR?

BERGMANN: My father's father came from Austria to this area; my grandfather and aunt and cousins lived in town, too. My mother worked at the Whole Theater and was friends with Apollo and Olympia Dukakis. In 1968, my father ran for town council on the slate of Matthew Carter, the first Black mayor. He was the only one who lost.

It was great for a little kid to be in Montclair. We lived on Greenview. I'd walk through Brookdale and Yantacaw Parks four times a day in elementary school. I was always dawdling in the park and playing in the brook.

The art classes at the high school were wonderful. There were two art teachers, Art McClaskey and Vernon Maxin. They had attended art school together and moved their families to Montclair to teach together. I got to try ceramics and sculpture and

painting and made costumes. At Cooper Union, I tried everything — video and calligraphy and painting. I finally went to my advisor in despair and she suggested I try the bronze foundry. It was easy; I was able to model little pieces in wax without any knowledge of engineering.

I went off to Florence to study sculpture. One day, I got on the train and went up the coast to Carrera to meet the Italian sculptress Carla Labellio, a friend of the mayor of Montclair, Mary Mochari, who was friends with my mother. Labellio was totally intimidating, larger than life, a friend of (artist Isamu) Noguchi. She did these huge abstract white marble sculptures; she had done one for Gerald Ford. Her house was a converted Medieval olive oil mill; it was amazing. I moved to the Carrera area. You got off the train and heard "chink chink," and it was the hammers on the marble emanating from every factory building around. It was paradise, in a way.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE HURDLES YOU FACED IN GETTING THE SUFFRAGIST SCULPTURE ERECTED?

SPAULDING: The first big hurdle was getting the city to overturn its 70-year moratorium on new sculptures in the park. The park is pretty full of sculpture.

We found a spot right next to Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, on Literary Walk. There's been nothing on that spot for 175 years, just trees and shrubbery.

In addition to the many certifications and approvals from experts and local groups, the city required that Monumental Women provide a \$100,000 endowment to maintain the statue in perpetuity. Then, because at the time many statues were being vandalized and toppled for political reasons, the city also required that the statue be insured during the 10 days it was being installed in the park, which cost an extra \$25,000.

Fortunately, a wonderful architecture firm, Beyer Blinder Belle, which specializes in preservation and urban



design, assisted us at a very discounted price. They are so clued in to the city and parks bureaucracy.

WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN THE STATUE WAS UNVEILED?

BERGMANN: Joy. It was immediately put to use, which made me really happy. The debate was largely



ALFRESCO MUSEUM The Women's Rights Pioneers Monument is unveiled in Central Park on Aug. 26, 2020.

forgotten, even forgiven. That happens with almost every public art commission.

We don't have an historical record of these three women's rights advocates sitting down together, but they certainly could have. They met on numerous occasions, and were all houseguests of Stanton.

I wanted the women to do something different, to tell a story of collaboration. I researched it and I couldn't find any other narrative monuments in New York City. A monument is an artwork, an interpretation. I wanted to not only interpret history myself, but to leave it open for people walking by to interpret.

That's what sculptures can do.

SPAULDING: Unlike nearly every other statue in the park, this is not a solitary individual. Something is happening; it's, in essence, alive. That's just not the case when you're looking at a man on a horse staring off in the distance. I mean, what does that say? ■