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KATHLEEN SCHATZBERG: COMMUNITY COUNTS

By Kathleen Schatzberg

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By the time you read this, the newest film adaptation of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott will be out in theaters. The film has inspired not only the usual pre-release advertising and promotion by the filmmakers, but also renewed attention to Alcott and her place in our history.

One public radio reviewer noted that although the book was published over 150 years ago, the story and characters still resonate with modern sensibilities about the role of women in society.

Why? Perhaps because in spite of great strides made since Alcott's day, we still have unconscionable gender inequities. Women still earn only 81 cents for each dollar that men earn for comparable work. And of course, the necessity of a #MeToo movement underscores just how much women are still viewed as sexual objects.

Another milestone that 2020 gives us is the 100th anniversary of women finally gaining the right to vote in the U.S. However, we still see the outrageous fact that women running for President of the United States are confronted with questions men don't face: Can she handle the rigors of a campaign? Can she just tone down that temper a bit? What does her clothing say about her?

Moreover, the U.S. ranks 75th among nations for women in elected government offices. Although the 2018 elections brought historic numbers of women into Congress, still fewer than 25% of Representatives and Senators are women. At current rates of change, parity will take at least another century to achieve.

Louisa May Alcott was a Massachusetts native, an ardent feminist, an abolitionist, and a suffragette. Her family's history and her own are writ large in historical sites across the Commonwealth. She died in 1888, more than three decades before women's right to vote was encoded in our Constitution. She would probably be astonished, and annoyed, that the fight for the vote took so long, and that women are still far from achieving equity in elected office throughout the nation.

When the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote was finally enacted in 1920, the Women's Suffrage Movement transformed itself into an organization devoted to educating the voting public – the League of Women Voters. To this day, the League is non-partisan on candidates but takes positions on issues and advocates strongly for women's rights among a host of other public policy matters.

As you might imagine, League of Women Voters chapters are planning all manner of events to observe the centennial of the vote for women in the U.S. To their credit, women's rights advocates are recognizing not only the passion and devotion of early suffragettes, but also their failings, particularly in terms of advocating for women of color.

Among the observances here on Cape Cod will be a lecture on the history of the women's suffrage movement to be held at Cape Cod Community College on March 2. Another is a plan to march in the 4th of July parade in Hyannis – with at least 100 women in suffragette costume. All women and girls of all ages are invited to join us. Plan on it!

If “Community Counts,” we must surely re-dedicate ourselves to the proposition advanced in the 1848 “Declaration of Sentiments” at the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, that “all women and men are created equal.”

We can't wait another 100 years for full equality!

Kathleen Schatzberg is a former president of Cape Cod Community College. Her monthly column chronicles community building on Cape Cod. She is also an active member of the League of Women Voters.