

A Conversation with Molly Gonzales  
Advocacy Manager, Alice Paul Institute  
By Sherri Cornett

The parallels between Alice Paul and Molly Gonzales are palpable, as if I were getting a real time connection to Alice's world. Both pursued several educational paths and were curious and motivated to acquire knowledge and skills to support their passions for human rights. . . Alice had 3 law degrees! Molly studied gender, sexuality, and women's studies and political science and non-profit management and women's history and



*Paulsdale: Alice Paul home and Institute*



*Molly Gonzales*

became an archivist! Both started their advocacy work as young women.

Beyond the museum in Alice's family home in southern New Jersey, her history and archives, the Alice Paul Institute offers leadership development and civic engagement opportunities for all ages. It is an ever-evolving institution that holds itself as a model of adaptive use of a historic site.

Molly's path provides inspirational guideposts for other feminists and this conversation was both exuberant and hope-inducing! Check out the many links for further information.

a Quaker, as was Susan B. Anthony, and was instilled with the tenet that genders were equal.

**Molly Gonzales:** Yes! After starting at Swarthmore College, which was founded by Quakers and was co-ed, in 1901, she moved to London, where she became



*Alice Paul at graduation*

friends with and fought along Emmeline Pankhurst, England's most militant suffragette, and her daughter Christabel. I love looking at the early photos of her in her mid-twenties – they are so inspiring. She was already breaking windows, getting arrested and going on hunger strikes.

**SC:** I won't ask if you have done anything similar. . . but, tell me about the path that led you to API?

**MG:** I studied gender, sexuality, and women's studies alongside political science in college and went on to work for my master's degree in human rights. I would say that is the path I was on, to take seriously women's stories through dedicated scholarship. Women's history is what radicalized me. In my other history classes, women were completely erased. We don't hear their stories.



*Learn more about Alice Paul*

**SC:** It is frustrating to hear that this is still happening.

**MG:** Right. Maybe we know about Susan B. Anthony and some of the first ladies, but not the actual female architects of this country. Or how they were also in those rooms or at least influencing those rooms. So, a lot of people think women were just not there.

**SC:** Would you connect the dots between your human rights focus and your archivist experience?

**MG:** Yes, when I was working on my master of arts in human rights at American University, I also worked as a graduate student archivist. I see preserving of marginalized voices, their history – cataloging them and digitizing them – as a practice of humanitarian work, particularly with women’s history. Kate Eichhorn’s *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* changed everything for me. She talks about the cutting room floor of history, particularly the feminist scrapheap, and how women have been tossed aside, but . . . they’re still there. You just have to look for them.



*Free version of  
Archival Turn in  
Feminism*

So, I spent two years digitizing, processing myriad collections related to women’s history. There were hundreds of boxes of unprocessed materials. I wondered what other countries were doing? And through that, I was like, my goodness, the U.S. is miles behind all of these other democracies. We don’t have an ERA when many countries codified gender equality in some meaningful way after WWII and the US is one of only eight countries to not sign CEDAW (Convention to End Discrimination Against Women).

**SC:** It is indeed alarming to have this broader perspective, and necessary. I was a UN Rep for the Women’s Caucus for Art and came away from conferences reminded that we can be so myopic in this country.

**MG:** My goodness, yes, even though we say we are a liberal democracy, a progressive country. . . The only way that women have been able to get protections – suffrage, Title Nine – was that women like Alice Paul and Patsy Mink and Shirley Chisholm demanded them.

As an archivist, I was like, we *have* to preserve women’s voices. But there are thousands of collections sitting in boxes, in people’s attics, the dust of history. So, when I focused on marginalized voices, women’s voice, the work became a human rights practice.

And, all of this came together for API. It’s a dream position. I get to advance women’s history!

**SC:** Your enthusiasm and passion are contagious, Molly. Would you talk about goals or new projects for you and your position as Advocacy Manager? The Institute seems to be always evolving.



*Schlesinger Library*

**MG:** Yes, we are definitely in a transitory stage as we address the effect of Zoom School during COVID and the analysis paralysis students have because of so many social issues going on. Will they have the bandwidth to care about the ERA?

And, they do! I lead field trips and presentations with them. We talk about the many ways the ERA would solve many of our society's problems. One of my favorite archival resources is Harvard's Schlesinger Library (considered the leading center for scholarship on the history of women in the US), which lets them look at and compare images of archival material. One of Alice's advocacy strategies was to make giant charts of all of the different civil rights and liberties. I like to show them how women were doing advocacy and research, pre-internet, cell phones. . . how research and education can be tools for feminist liberation. It is exciting to see them get jazzed up.

**SC:** And, gives us hope for our future!

**MG:** Yes! The Girls Leadership Council is one of our biggest programs. We focus on how to get the next generation of girls, teen feminists, to believe in themselves, to have the skills to get to the next level of their careers and their lives, and also how to advocate safely and be politically minded adults.

It's a safe space to talk about issues impacting them, to work through political ideas, take on service projects, learn more about women's history and social justice. And, the girls lead the projects. In January, they had a Period Product Drive and put donation boxes in in libraries and schools and other public spaces. It was incredibly successful. Girls wanting other girls and women to menstruate with dignity. . . And, it was inspired by the things Alice did as a young woman.

**SC:** Any anecdotes from the Institute, particularly about reaching kids?

**MG:** Yes! This spring break, a mother came in with her two daughters. All the way from Indiana. They were talking about book bans back home, where the mom had to sign a form for her kid to read a book about Alice! The mother was like, you're kidding me, right?

We talked about how many parents wouldn't get around to signing a form or kids might be too embarrassed to ask them – more roadblocks to learning about women's history. But, that interaction with the mom and her daughters was magical. Those daughters said they love Alice, her story and want to learn more about women's history. They don't have a museum there, so this work feels really pressing right now.

**SC:** Could you talk about how the Alice Paul Institute is responding to some folks writing off Alice because she said and did things then that would be called out in our current awareness. What's the language around how you adapt that?

**MG:** Yeah, that's a really good question and something that we get asked a lot.



*Alice Paul*

In recent years, the organization has updated our permanent exhibit to reflect the more diverse voices that were a part of the suffrage movement, specifically highlighting the black suffragists who were there, despite the all too frequent narratives that whitewash the suffrage movement. Women like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell.

Alice did make some wrong choices. . . she excluded Black women while organizing the 1913 Suffrage parade in Washington DC. Sometimes folks like to say, “well, the times were different,” but we like to remind them that she still made that choice. A choice that had incredibly harmful consequences. But human beings are more complicated than their worst mistakes, and while she wasn’t inclusive during this action, it doesn't mean she didn't lobby the U.N. to get gender discrimination included. And The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It means she was a complex person. And, by telling her story in its entirety, the messy details, it really helps us have these hard conversations about feminism, racial inequality and class. Conversations that can produce new, exciting modes of feminism and conversations that help us learn from the mistakes of past feminists to ensure we do not make them again.

In the vein of looking at Alice as a whole person. . . She was staunch, super-educated and she didn’t have a lot of patience. She wanted things done fast. One of my favorite Alice moments is after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed, when the National Women’s Party released a statement with Alice saying that of course, celebrate now, but don’t you dare rest! You thought you are all going to bed? This is just the beginning!

#### The Full text of the Equal Rights Amendment

Section 1: Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Section 2: The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3: This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

The Equal Rights Amendment was written in 1921 by Alice Paul. It has been introduced in Congress every session since 1923.

And, two years later she wrote the Equal Rights Amendment. She was in her mid-30s.

So, I think our position is let’s not shy away from her mistakes. Let’s talk about them. That provides a more interesting, intersectional discourse that otherwise wouldn’t exist.

**SC:** Would you tell me how the Institute was started?

**MG:** Of course! The founding of our organization can be traced by to 1984 when women in the South Jersey NOW group wanted to

celebrate Alice’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday – she was born in 1885 and died in 1977 at the age of 92! That is insane given how many times she was force fed, went on hunger strikes, was beat by the police, and put into solitary confinement! At the same time, Alice’s possessions went up for auction. So, they bought her things, the entire lot, all of her papers and then her house! They weren’t trained in historical preservation or archives, but their passion and dedication to women’s history and the feminist movement meant they learned along the way. When API opened, it was already offering more expansive programming than just field trips and museum tours.

**SC:** The API is part of a larger coalition, right?

**MG:** Yes! The ERA Coalition has over 200 feminist and gender organizations, government and non-government agencies, employing different strategies, pooling resources. We were one of the first to join. Our angle is providing the history of advocacy. The Coalition has monthly partner calls to update and support each other. What is really special is to hear about women in red states, who are fighting for women’s lives. Particularly with states that have abortion or ERA on their ballots this year.

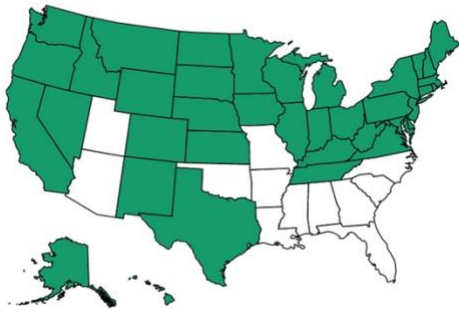


*ERA Coalition Partners*

**SC:** Would you like to talk about the status of the ERA?

**MG:** In 2020, Virginia became the 38<sup>th</sup> state to ratify the ERA, officially completing the proceedings of Article V of the Constitution, which is basically the instruction manual for the Constitutional amendment ratification process. However, Trump's DOJ sent a memo to the National Archivist instructing him not to publish the ERA and that the time limit set on the amendment back in the 1970s, meant the ERA had "expired."

ERA ●  
**RATIFICATION INFO  
STATE BY STATE**



Right now, there are a handful of bills working their way through the house and senate to further the ratification process of the ERA. S.J Res 4, sponsored by Senator Ben Cardin, is a resolution to remove the arbitrary deadline put on the ERA in 1972. H.J. Res 25, sponsored by Representative Ayanna Pressley, is the house equivalent legislation. S.J. Res 39, sponsored by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, is a resolution expressing the 28<sup>th</sup> amendment, known as the ERA, is valid. H.J. res 82, sponsored by Representative Cori Bush, is the house resolution also calling for the validity of the ERA.

Now the push is to show that the ERA is incredibly popular. Current polls show that 70% of Americans support it!

**SC:** How can readers stay informed?

**MG:** Another of our advocacy projects is our bi-weekly newsletter. Folks can sign up via the form at the bottom of the Equal Rights Amendment website. We have around 6000 subscribers all over the country. Some of them have been fighting for the ERA for decades! I update them as to where the ERA was in the news this week, nationally and by state. Because, while the ERA is not federally ratified, 38 states have one in their constitution! The Pennsylvania Supreme Court recently invoked the ERA to protect abortion access! It's mind boggling and incredible and amazing! And, shows that the ERA can really protect us! It sets a precedent!



*API newsletter sign up*

I just started a column *What Does the ERA Mean to You?* We get many diverse responses. Not everyone is a feminist organizer. And they see different things in the ERA . . . it can help with gender justice, class, race, ethnic boundaries, protecting someone who is queer. . .

**SC:** This is all such inspiring information, Molly! You definitely seem to be following in Alice's footsteps! Thank you for spending some time with me!