

A Conversation with Deborah L Hughes  
President & CEO  
Susan B. Anthony Museum & House  
By Sherri Cornett

Though there are now informative and engaging books and podcasts (see links) about Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), the depth and breadth of Anthony's contributions, as with so many women who helped form this country, are not easily found in text books. For a more complete understanding, folks from all over the world make the pilgrimage to the National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House in Rochester, New York.



*The National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House Image courtesy of National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, Rochester, NY. Used with permission*

The  
Anthony  
Museum's  
President  
and CEO

Deborah L. Hughes shared that their mission is directly tied to a reflection Anthony made when talking with family about her eventual demise: "When I am gone, let there be no tears. . .pass by, and get on with the work." The inspiring stories and history, which Deborah shared with me below, make evident that this directive, Susan's legacy, and the programs they have birthed, continue to influence and activate children and

adults to envision and work for a more just and equitable world for all. We encourage you to learn more and find your own spark of motivation. As Susan proclaimed, "Organize! Educate! Agitate! must be our battle cry."

**Sherri Cornett:** Deborah, it seems that one has to barely open a book about Susan B. Anthony or walk in the door of her house, now a museum, to become inspired. Her life was so full with activism!

**Deborah L. Hughes:** Yes! The four values that Susan B. Anthony and her family held dear, and which inspire us at The Anthony, are embossed in granite on a pillar at the family gravesite here in Rochester.

The first two are *Equality* and *Humanity*. Anthony believed that every human being has the same essential worth, value, and inalienable rights. No exceptions.

The third is *Liberty*. Anthony believed that no person should be under the ownership, control, or power of another. There are no contexts in which involuntary control of another can be asserted to be for the benefit of the oppressed. She would apply this to freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of relationship, and freedom of choice in all personal matters of body or conscience.



*Susan B. Anthony by J.E.Hale Image courtesy of National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, Rochester, NY. Used with permission*



*Deborah L. Hughes, CEO & President of The National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House Image courtesy of National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, Rochester, NY. Used with permission*

The fourth is *Justice*. While Susan B. Anthony had enough respect for the law and hope in the U.S. Constitution to spend decades of her life working to change the world through those channels, she had no respect for laws that violated the first three values of humanity, equality, and liberty. She regularly engaged in civil disobedience to expose an unjust law, whether it was the trafficking of human beings, the violence inflicted on women and children, unfair or disparate wages, or access to education, food, housing, jobs, health care, or the ballot box. She was denied a fair trial after voting in the 1872 election; she may be the only felon to be convicted in a federal criminal case without the benefit of jury deliberation. She held justice to the highest court of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

**SC:** How did Anthony and her sister activists get other people to learn about these values, to understand them and take action?

**DLH:** Anthony and other social reformers understood the power of image, art, and song to raise the conscience and compassion of the public. They understood what the Powers-That-Be have always understood: the inertia of apathy and indifference is a bulwark against any movement for social change.

Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published a magazine and named it the “*Revolution*” because they wanted to call attention to the ways in which our country’s policies and laws were in direct contradiction to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” espoused in the Declaration of Independence. Government, she firmly believed, must be of the people, by the people, for ALL the people.

**SC:** Would you tell me how The Anthony Museum’s programming continues this work?

**DLH:** We have and have had many wonderful programs, particularly for the neighborhood kids. In an afterschool program, the house became like a one-room schoolhouse, with kids from 5-16 years old, some of whom stayed with us for many years and became amazing storytellers about Susan’s life. One of my favorite programs is called *Change It*. Due to Common Core Standards, second graders are introduced to the idea of social reforms.

**SC:** The Common Core set that up? That is impressive!

**DLH:** Yes, we thought it was a bit early, but these seven-year-olds truly get the idea that when Anthony saw things that she didn’t think were right, she wanted to fix them. The students get to pick something they want to fix. . . sometimes it is something profound, sometimes it is a simple change in the school. They learn about how Anthony advocated, from speeches or petitions or protests and they decide how they are going to advocate. It is so uplifting to see these second graders marching up and down the street chanting for something they believe in.

**SC:** How about for adults?

**DLH:** Another program we loved was called *Women in Transition*, which was based on Anthony’s efforts to push hearts to a place of really understanding the value of each human and the importance of the freedoms for our communities, to really connect with each other. These women were in some form of residential treatment. . . substance abuse, domestic violence, veterans with trauma. . . We encouraged them to journal and talk to each other, to share their stories.

**SC:** Is there a story that stands out for you?

**DLH:** Yes! One day I saw a woman in the lobby wearing her graduation regalia and her master's program hood. She said she had been homeless and had a lot of issues, but then joined our *Women in Transition* program, which helped her decide to get somewhere else in her life. She had just graduated with a master's in marriage and family counseling and wanted to come by and say thank you for helping her turn her life around.

**SC:** Ahh, that is heart-warming. We all need to hear more stories like that! I read that Anthony was raised as both a liberal Baptist and Quaker. How did this inform her work?

**DLH:** Her father was Quaker and her mother was liberal Baptist. Most of her time in Rochester, she, her mother and her sisters were actually members of the Unitarian Church, where they thought the future was better and there was less hypocrisy. So, she was shaped by many traditions. One take from the Quaker culture was the idea of there being no authority except truth, which comes from personal responsibility – the idea that every human being has the same light from the eternal inside of them.

It's also important to note that, during Anthony's lifetime, many people believed that women didn't have the capacity to think, that it would harm them. When she was 11 years old, Anthony was told that she couldn't learn long division because putting too much exercise on the brain would discourage the growth of her other muscles!



Clockwise: Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass. Images courtesy of National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, Rochester, NY. Used with permission

**SC:** That is astounding! Anthony was so multifaceted in her activism – beyond suffragism. And, she wasn't just working for the rights of white women. . .

**DLH:** That is correct. Some folks think of Anthony as one of the white, sometimes educated, women of leisure marching in white dresses in the *Mary Poppins* movie. People don't realize that the real pioneers, who opened up the women's rights movement in the 1820s and 1830s, were multiracial. That many were first abolitionists and listened to and read the abolitionist thoughts of William Lloyd Garrison, who published *The Liberator*, the widely read anti-slavery newspaper, and others who talked about the inherent rights of the human person and that women should have those rights also. And, that the movement was influenced by indigenous cultures, such as the Haudenosaunee, within which women and men carried the burdens of community equally.

Anthony worked with Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. These were not just people working at the same time. They were in the same circles, agreeing and disagreeing on strategy, but wanting to lift up all voices.

And, there was Frederick Douglass. Douglass was a guest at many of the suffragist conventions, including the Women's Rights Convention, where Anthony would



escort him to the dais. Not many men were at the front of these events. He was a big proponent of getting people educated so they weren't complacent about issues. There is a bridge named after them in Rochester – the Frederick Douglass–Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge or, affectionately, as the Freddie-Sue Bridge.

I think Anthony would be the first one to tell you that every person's work is as important as every other person's. So, there was a lot of cross-pollination.

**SC:** Would you talk about Susan's lasting influence on women's votes?

**DLH:** There is a photo of Alice Paul kneeling at Anthony's grave. That has become a tradition on election day. Women will go up to Hope Cemetery – a gorgeous Victorian cemetery – to pay tribute to Anthony and put their *I Voted* sticker on her grave. We had over 10,000 people come on the day of the 2016 election! People were waiting for sometimes 2-3 hours. There was something almost sacred about it, Sherri. People were so gentle with each other. No one was in a hurry. Each person was given time to take in the significance.

**SC:** That gives me chills! And, hope! I want to provide our readers with as many resources as possible, to help them with becoming activated, to have hope. Do you have some more to offer?

**DLH:** Yes, it's mind boggling that you have to work to find the information. Even back then, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage and Ida Husted Harper realized that this history needed to be recorded. They published the six-volume *History of Woman Suffrage*, with all the speeches and background. You can read and feel these incredible voices that are still so timely.



*History of Woman Suffrage*

**SC:** I see a link on your website to the *She Votes* podcast, by the award-winning journalists Ellen Goodman and Lynn Sherr.



*She Voted Podcast*

**DLH:** Both those women have a longstanding connection with our institution. And, have had several projects to bring forward Anthony's history and that of the suffragist movement. Lynn wrote perhaps the best contemporary book about Anthony titled *Failure is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony In Her Own Words*.

We are also about to take over a website *Women and the Vote New York State*. It includes the film *Women & the Vote* and a clip about Election Day 2016, with footage of folks putting their *I Voted* stickers on Susan's grave!



*Women and the Vote New York State*

Another must see is *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004), with Hillary Swank as Alice Paul, which highlights the treatment of women in prison, including the force-feeding.

And, of course, we encourage folks to come to Rochester to learn even more!

**SC:** Thank you, Deborah, for your time and to The Anthony Museum for sponsoring this exhibition, ACCESS!

**DLH:** The Anthony Museum is honored to be a sponsor of this exhibit, which boldly picks up the challenge. ACCESS provides an *organized* platform through which a variety of artists can express powerful feelings about



*The National Susan B. Anthony  
Museum and House*

the ERA (or lack thereof), and they can do so through a variety of media. This exhibit will draw an audience together in a particular place and time for a shared experience that will provide stimulation, *education*, and perspective. We believe this exhibit has the power to stimulate energy and compassion that will awaken hearts, renew commitment, and fuel the work that is yet to be done. Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass called this kind of opportunity an “Agitation.”

In addition to the exhibit itself, this catalogue will bear witness to the expressions of the organizers and artists. While it celebrates and records a particular moment, this catalogue also has the potential to continue the work as it is passed from hand to hand, and generation to generation.

In this democracy, it is ridiculous that we have to clarify that no person should be discriminated against on the basis of their gender. It is outrageous. Let’s Organize! Educate! Agitate!