Laney Hughes Paper

It is hard to believe that Laney Hughes was just an eighth grader when she wrote this extraordinary paper on Betty Friedan.

Laney wrote the paper as part of a research project for “History Day,” a collaborative effort of the English and social studies classes at D.C. Everest Junior High School in Weston, Wisc. The 2014 theme was “Rights and Responsibilities in History.” Laney chose Betty Friedan for her research topic, saying she was eager to learn more about her, particularly her impact on today’s women. For some of her research, she used the Betty Friedan Hometown Tribute website.

In a letter to Tribute committee member Barb Drake, Laney wrote, “I think it is fascinating that women were denied so many rights in the 1960s and 70s that come freely to women today, partially because of Betty Friedan’s contributions.”

Well-said, Laney! Congratulations to you, and congratulations to your school for challenging its students to tackle projects such as this.

Barb Drake
On behalf of the Betty Friedan Hometown Tribute Committee
2014 History Day Research Paper Submission

2014 History Day Theme: Rights and Responsibilities in History

Research Topic: Betty Friedan

Submitted by Laney Hughes
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“Why doesn’t the pie-mix ad tell the woman she could use the time saved to become an astronomer?”

-Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique

At one point, she was exiled from her own neighborhood, and she was warned by both the Mexican and American government that her life was in danger.\(^1\) However, through all adversity, she kept one goal in view: to give women of the future a future. This woman was Betty Friedan. She was a force for equality in the 20th century who, through relentless activism, gave women the ability to begin to dismantle patriarchal America. If not for Betty Friedan, would women still be stuck in a society that would not allow them to reach their full potential? To completely answer this question, one must understand background events in feminism, Friedan’s life, and her historical significance.

During the colonial era and Revolutionary War, women were treated as second-class citizens. Very few had jobs, and those who did earned half as much as men.\(^2\) Women were not considered full members of society and could not vote; therefore, they had no representation in the government. Amendments to enfranchise women were brought up in every session of Congress from 1878 to 1917, to no avail.\(^3\) This changed in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was passed after a 50 year struggle. But, after the Nineteenth Amendment was at last ratified, many women retired from their activism and returned to the roles of passive wives and mothers.\(^4\) Activists

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grew weary from the never-ending backlash towards their efforts. “From the very beginning of the movement, feminists were called ‘man haters.’ Women who supported the movement were denounced as ‘unladylike,’” and mocked as ‘ugly old maids.’”5 Because of this, women began to disregard the importance of women's rights activism, and once again fell into the trap of domesticity.

Although World War II had devastating effects, the upheaval it created induced many positive changes in America. Among the most striking were the new opportunities that arose for all women to work. Women during World War II were taxi drivers, electricians, chemists, and almost everything else. Over 18,000 women served in the U.S. Marine Corps Women’s Reserve.6 Women were the backbone of America, a position they had not yet experienced before.

This triumphant time screeched to a halt when the war ended in 1945. Instead of being thanked, women were simply told to “go back home where they belonged.”7 America’s apparent gratitude for working women dissolved quickly. Some women were glad to go home, albeit many had grown fond of the economic independence and self-reliance their jobs brought them.8 Grudgingly, these women retired into domesticity and took up the roles of housewives.

As feminism lay seemingly dormant, an emotional plague spread through the minds of middle-class American women. Many had grown discontented with their dull lives as housewives. They felt that something was missing, and often asked, “Is this all for me?”9 They depended on their husbands to be the breadwinners of their families, and their identities were determined by the statuses of their husbands and children.

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Destined to become the pioneer who revived feminism from the dead, Betty Friedan was born on February 4, 1921. She was a bright pupil who worked hard in high school and college. While she was an undergraduate at Smith University, she discovered that her intelligence was frightening to potential spouses and was “keeping her from love.”¹⁰ She quit her studies and got married in 1947. Soon, she started to feel the same lingering feeling as other American housewives. This sense of emptiness continued to grow, even as Friedan began to take writing jobs from women’s magazines. In 1957, Friedan surveyed women from her class at Smith upon their 15th year since graduation.¹¹ Although she had intended to publish the results in a light, chatty article for McCall's, Friedan saw that the results were more fitting for an expose on American theories about the responsibilities of women. She discovered that 89 percent of her fellow graduates had not used their education to pursue a career. Of those 89 percent, almost all were unhappy with their lives, and none of them knew why.¹² When Friedan submitted the article to McCall’s, the male editors skewed her results to their own liking.¹³ Weeks later, she asked for maternity leave for her second child and was fired, although it was allowed in her contract. Upon confronting her male employer, he quickly dismissed her saying her pregnancy was a “personal matter.”¹⁴ Outraged, Betty Friedan channeled her animosity into a single book with a fire-truck red dustjacket: *The Feminine Mystique*.

*The Feminine Mystique* caused extreme social upheaval. Within its pages, *The Feminine

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⁠¹³ Ibid.
Mystique sought to find the root of oppression for dissatisfied American housewives. Friedan determined that the issue sprouted from the media and women’s magazines, and goes on to write that “the image of woman that emerges from the big, pretty magazines is young and frivolous...gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home.”\(^{15}\) Along with searching for the cause of the “feminine mystique,” Friedan also advised women to reach for their own dreams regardless of societal limits. Stephanie Coontz, a well-known author, agrees by saying that the desire to be something more is “normal” and “when [that desire] is thwarted, you can feel bad about it.”\(^{16}\)

Overall, The Feminine Mystique radiated with messages of fulfillment, equality, and (most of all) the hope for change. As the book drew to an end, Friedan left two final sentences in the reader’s mind: “It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voice of the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete.”\(^{17}\)

The United States soon erupted with newly empowered women. Young activists protested in Washington DC, staged a sit-in at the office of the anti-feminist magazine Ladies’ Home Journal, and demanded women’s history courses be taught at colleges across the United States.\(^{18}\) Over 360 institutes of higher education were brought to court for gender discrimination.\(^{19}\) Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique had started a movement that could not be quieted.


Betty Friedan also co-founded one of the largest feminist organizations in the world, the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW’s early goals included eliminating sex-segregated help wanted ads, breaking the “traditional assumption” that women had to choose between marriage and a career, and urging women to exercise their right to freedom of speech to make political gains. The Women’s Strike for Equality was also organized by NOW, and was described by Time magazine as the “the first big demonstration of the women’s liberation movement.” Held on the Nineteenth Amendment’s 50th anniversary, over 90 cities participated by protesting and marching. Tens of thousands of women marched down 5th Avenue in New York. NOW helped unify American women and created a strong base for further advances in feminism. As well as bettering the lives of middle-class white women, NOW also played an important part in the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, one of the organization’s top goals was to gain enough support to compel the U.S. government to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which barred employment discrimination based on both gender and race.

Dayna Long, the president of Wisconsin NOW, says that Wisconsin’s main NOW chapter in Madison recently participated in Love Your Body Day, an event that NOW has hosted for approximately 15 years. Dayna explained that members put together care packages to promote the “radical act of loving the way your body is, regardless if your body type is not considered standard.” Wisconsin NOW also partners with 9to5 (a national organization dedicated to achieving justice in the

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24 Pressman Fuentes, Sonia. E-mail interview by the author. Weston, USA. January 2014.
workplace) so women can “achieve equality in the workplace and can be successful without having to make sacrifices with their families.” Dayna advises that everyone can contribute to this cause: “Ninety percent of almost any achievement is just willing to be the one to do it. Don’t ever hesitate or think you’re too young.”

Along with co-founding NOW in 1966, Betty Friedan also co-founded the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) in 1970. NWPC was the only national organization with the sole purpose of increasing women’s participation in all aspects of political life. Following the motto “make policy, not coffee,” NWPC established the Campaign Support Committee for women running for office—the first political action commission of its kind.

Friedan’s next milestone was publishing *The Second Stage* in 1981. *The Second Stage* was the result of Friedan’s renewed mindset on the roles of women. Instead of reinforcing the phenomenon that feminists were “man haters,” *The Second Stage* took a new approach by advocating for the sharing of responsibilities between husband and wife. “I think that implicit in the women’s movement is the idea that women will share in the economic burden, and men will share more equally in the home and the family,” Friedan said later during an interview. Although *The Second Stage* was controversial among

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some radical feminists, women across the nation were once again inspired by her powerful literature and contemporary ideas.

Betty Friedan continued her activism throughout the 1980s and 90s, and she was active in many social rights movements until she passed away in 2006. “Betty signed the books she wrote: ‘Evolve! Enjoy!’ To the end of her legendary life, she took her own advice. She evolved. She enjoyed.”

Friedan’s legacy affected American women in many different ways. Ever since the publication of the *The Feminine Mystique*, women have been taking strides. Seventy-five percent of all American women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four were participants in the labor force in 2010; this is a complete reversal compared to the mere eleven percent of employed women in 1957. The number of female doctors has increased twenty-five percent since 1960, and the number of female lawyers has grown from three percent to thirty percent. The amount of married women with children under 18 participating in the labor force has spiked from 27 percent in 1960 to 65 percent in 2010.

Melanie Taylor, founder of The Girls Middle School in California comments that, “Unlike 50 years ago, the majority of us are working outside the home...In the process, we are raising a generation who are seeing the need and benefit of more balance...of both women and men, which is great progress.”

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35 Drake, Barb. E-mail interview by the author. Weston, WI. January 2014.
Friedan was also successful in reconfiguring women’s responsibilities in the home: since 1965, fathers have nearly tripled the time spent with their children. In the 1960s and 70s, a wife taking a job raised the risk of divorce. Today, a wife pursuing a career lowers the risk of divorce.\textsuperscript{37}

Women have also been making a multitude of political advances since Friedan’s activism. Since 1980, in every presidential election, the percentage of eligible female voters who participated in the poll has been higher than that of male voters.\textsuperscript{38} In 1971, there were only 15 female Congress members; today, there are 89.\textsuperscript{39} NWPC, which Friedan co-founded, has also helped integrate women into government positions. “...No one was lobbying for the appointment of women to public office. The Caucus [NWPC] was the leader in changing all of this.”\textsuperscript{40}

Although women are accomplishing new feats every day, their work is not nearly complete. Gains made by women since the 1960s are impressive, but they can still be interpreted negatively. For example, there have only been thirty-two female governors since the founding of our country; twenty-four states to this day have never had a female governor.\textsuperscript{41} Women in America still make about 76 cents to man’s dollar despite the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963.\textsuperscript{42} When asked to compare the status of women in the 1960s to women today, Nancy Whittier, professor of sociology at Smith University, replied, “Many of the problems...are not particularly relevant today. But, at the same time,

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}
Some of the dilemmas women face are frighteningly similar.”

Sonia Pressman Fuentes, a prominent figure in feminism and one of only nine living founders of NOW, agrees. Fuentes believes that the amount of accessible child care in America is still lacking: “Change is desperately needed but most of it hasn’t yet come. Women now are expected to work outside the home and run their households and raise their children although competent, affordable child care is not available to them. If anything, the situation has gotten worse. We still have a long way to go.”

What is so astounding about Friedan’s activism is not so much about the cut-and-dry statistics, but more about the raw impact she had on people’s lives. Talia Weisberg, now a college student at Harvard, explained that “Betty Friedan’s tireless feminist activism has allowed me to dream without any inhibitions and aspire to any goal, regardless of my gender or sex.” When asked how Betty Friedan has changed the responsibilities of women, Talia answered: “Friedan’s activism made the American people realize that women have worthy contributions for the world, and their potential must not be squandered. Because of her work, women are now viewed as equal members of society who shoulder the same responsibilities.” Talia has written over one hundred articles about feminism in various publications, and has co-created Maidelle.com, a writing website that allows teen girls to speak out about their lives and share their thoughts on the modern world. In addition, Talia created the feminist blog Star of Davida, where she shares her personal opinions on current issues.

Barb Drake grew up during a time when women could only become “teachers, nurses, or secretaries.” Drake ended up having an illustrious 40-year career as a reporter, feature writer, city

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44 Pressman Fuentes, Sonia. E-mail interview by the author. Weston, USA. January 2014.

45 Weisberg, Talia. E-mail interview by the author. Weston, USA. January 2014.
editor, associate editor, and editorial page editor. She claims that “had the book [The Feminine Mystique] not been written, and the movement not happened, I might not have been hired as a reporter, and I wouldn’t have been encouraged to apply for every position that opened higher up the ladder.”

Drake feels that “…life is very different for women today than it was in the early 1960s. It is better. And I am grateful.”

Betty Friedan started a movement that changed the face of the United States of America. Whereas women in the 1900s had limited responsibilities of housework and cleaning, women today are becoming educated, working towards the future, and empowering women all around the world to do the same. Because of Friedan’s activism, women can “find new careers, explore new, more positive images of themselves, and express their true nature in any lifestyle they choose--with pride.”

Women today are proud of their identities. As Betty Friedan once said, “Down through the generations in history, my ancestors prayed, ‘I thank Thee, Lord, I was not created a woman.’ From this day forward women all over the world will be able to say ‘I thank Thee, Lord, I was created a woman!'”

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46 Drake, Barb. E-mail interview by the author. Weston, WI. January 2014.