

Marching Forward

Passion Project Amplifies Voices of Women Changemakers

By Elizabeth Nixon

When longtime Sacred Heart Schools, Atherton educators Kristen Kelly and Serene Williams set out to the East Coast last summer as recipients of a prestigious grant from Harvard, their initial mission was singular: to undergo research at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America with the aim of updating the requirements of advanced placement (AP) government courses to be inclusive of women. They would then share their findings with the College Board, which runs the AP program.

The AP U.S. Government and Politics course currently requires students to learn nine foundational documents, all of which were written by men. “It makes sense, however, that there are no foundational documents written by women required in this course since women are still not considered foundational to the American political system,” write Kelly and Williams in their grant proposal. AP government courses also sorely lack an intersectional lens, they argue—improvements are needed to incorporate the study of race and class as systemic reasons that minorities are disenfranchised and underrepresented throughout history.

Once they found themselves in the research library this past summer, equipped with support to access archival materials through the Teacher Support Grant they were awarded, what they uncovered inspired them to extend their initial goal further: it was clear that what the national AP slate of course offerings needed was a course focused solely on women’s history. They determined then that their new goal would be not only to petition for “writing women into AP government courses” and rewriting the existing exams, but they would also design and write a new curriculum proposal for a standalone AP U.S. Women’s History course and begin the herculean task of garnering support to petition the College Board for the creation of this new course.

“After completing a study of the College Board-released exams for U.S. government, we discovered they rarely ask questions about women in the course and exam description (CED),” says Kelly. “The point of this new course is that it would be intersectional, giving voice to womanism, giving voice to the Chicano movement, giving voice to diverse world religions and religious feminists—that’s a big part of it.”

IT WAS CLEAR THAT WHAT THE NATIONAL AP SLATE OF COURSE OFFERINGS NEEDED WAS A COURSE FOCUSED SOLELY ON WOMEN’S HISTORY.

What they didn’t expect to uncover in the halls of Harvard’s research library were archival materials containing clues to Sacred Heart’s own history of involvement in social justice and feminist activism. Names of religious sisters from Sacred Heart Schools’ founding order, RSCJ, were discovered among the artifacts in the Schlesinger Library as supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the 1970s, the heyday of activism for passing the constitutional amendment. What many don’t realize is that the ERA has never passed. Constitutional equal gender rights are not law of the land, yet more than 80 percent of United States citizens mistakenly assume the ERA has passed.

While it wasn’t entirely surprising for Kelly and Williams to find RSCJ among the documents at the library, as the RSCJ order has long held political stances on social justice issues, such as health care, immigration, and poverty, it is rare for these instances of feminist activism among women religious to be written about publicly.



“When students learn about the political history of Catholic women in their K-16 history courses, it is often in the context of conservative Catholicism. Activists, like Phyllis Schlafly, and groups, such as the Eagle Forum, who clearly identified as anti-feminist, are routinely highlighted,” write Kelly and Williams in an article published by Harvard’s Religion Matters website last August.

“We believe it is especially important for Catholic school educators to counter those narratives by lifting up Catholic women who were pioneers in gender justice,” they continue. “Such lessons also contribute to students’ greater understanding of the women’s rights movement more generally. We simply do not want students to miss learning about all the interesting direct actions undertaken over the decades by feminist nuns who supported constitutional gender equality.”

For Kelly and Williams, the original educational activist and feminist was founder of Sacred Heart schools Saint Madeleine Sophie, who strove to create free education for poor girls in 19th century France. Over the ensuing decades and centuries, the school network blossomed and became the robust organization it is today, with 150-plus Sacred Heart schools worldwide. RSCJ continue to carry the mantle to bring education to girls (and now boys, in many schools) and place importance on serving under-resourced and minority students.

“Saint Madeleine Sophie is our source of inspiration, and many other inspiring RSCJ women religious,” says Kelly. “We’re continuing a long Sacred Heart tradition of teaching students to go out into the world dedicated to fighting discrimination. Students deserve to learn a fuller picture of the ongoing struggle for women’s rights in our country.”

With the grant lasting from 2022 through 2023, Kelly and Williams have a series of ongoing goals stemming from their summer research at Harvard that will continue to unfold this school year. After relaying the plan to create a new AP U.S. Women’s History course to their students and various student groups across SHP, many began to organize around the effort. A petition to the College Board was created by Kelly and Williams in October on Change.org that has so far gained 1,500 signatures, and a group of 20-plus students formed a student advisory to assist the pair.

Called U.S. Women’s AP History League (USWAPHL), and pronounced “waffle” for short, the student advisory group formed in November with the core goal of organizing a task force to advocate for the creation of the new course. With a logo, website, mission statement, and plan of action, the group quickly helped collect hundreds of signatures for the petition. Over the course of three group meetings from November to December, task force teams have conducted letter-writing campaigns to the College Board, historians, women’s studies scholars, businesspeople, and others to ask for support. The group is also preparing a presentation about their efforts for the annual student-led Social Justice Teach-In event held on campus each spring semester, which offers a broad array of social justice-themed workshops and group discussions to all SHP students. A variety of other outreach and marketing initiatives are underway, including creation of brochures, social media campaigns, and student research projects that all help make a case for the new course. The group plans to fundraise so some of its student leaders can attend the upcoming June Berkshire Conference of Women Historians to co-present about the need for the course alongside Kelly and Williams.

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“The kids have really given it the momentum,” says Kelly. “We were stuck at 400 signatures, then the students took it and ran, and we were suddenly well over 1,000 signatures. As a teacher, it’s so much better that it’s coming from the students. The scholars and businesswomen that our students are connecting with are also giving us scholarly feedback, since the proposed curriculum is right there on the Change.org petition, so that is invaluable. A few of the women said, ‘you need more women scientists in the curriculum’—so the feedback is being crowdsourced from these powerful women scholars and supporters, by these empowered young women. It’s becoming this amazing movement.”

Samantha Pyle (SHP '25), one of the students involved in the WAPHL letter-writing campaign, says sharing her personal testimony is an effective tool that makes for a convincing argument.

“The current AP curriculum tells the stories of men from a man’s perspective,” says Pyle. “It promotes that men were the important ones in history; they were the ones to create our country, and they have a larger role in the functioning of our society than women. There needs to be an AP U.S. Women’s History class to empower girls from a younger age that they deserve to belong in all places men do... it is important that girls have the opportunity to see themselves in history—to know that they had a role in shaping our society as it is today, and also that they have the power to change it.”

A leader in WAPHL and the SHP women’s group, the largest affinity group on campus with a membership of 150, Helen Nguyen (SHP '25), said asking students like Pyle, “what do you want to learn?” was “really powerful in helping WAPHL develop its platform.”

“Establishing a course like this is pretty timely right now—students want to learn about women’s history, intersectionality, and become involved in advocacy and reform around these issues,” says Nguyen. “We know women were a foundational part of U.S. and world history; it’s important that’s shared not only for girls, but for boys, and for people who are discovering their gender, or who are interested in learning about the diversity of perspectives that helped shape our country.”

PUBLISHING IS GREAT FOR OUR STUDENTS BECAUSE THEY GET TO WORK WITH AND MEET OTHER FEMINISTS AND HISTORIANS. IT’S REALLY EMPOWERING FOR THEM.

Paving the Way

Over the past 10 years, Kelly and Williams have taken hundreds of students—boys and girls—under their guidance and involved them in important feminist scholarship and research projects, resulting in dozens of published student works on Wikipedia and in academic journals and websites, and helped them forge connections with scholars and organizations that often led to internships or other opportunities. They have also brought nearly a dozen students along to co-present at the most important women’s studies, social studies, and history conferences in the nation, including the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, National Women’s Studies Association conference, and National Council for the Social Studies conference, to name just a few.

One alumna, Sierra Burton (SHP '19), recalls presenting at two conferences with Kelly and Williams to argue the importance of requiring comprehensive women’s history curricula in middle school.

“As a Black, Queer woman that attended Sacred Heart and other private, predominantly white institutions my entire academic career, I found it really difficult to feel empowered in who I am. It was not until I met these two brilliant and inspiring professors that I learned there is an entire side of history that has been erased,” says Burton.

The three courses she took from the pair were “the most impactful” of her life.

“[Prior to that], I had no idea about intersectionality, and had never been taught an intensive women’s history course,” says Burton. “I remember how addicting it was to be in a learning environment that taught history from an accurate and holistic lens.”

That led Burton to major in political science in college, create a feminist zine, and pursue “intersectionality, curriculum reform, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)” as career choices.

As a result of Kelly and Williams’ scholarship and research, in which they intentionally elevated the work and voices of students, inroads and relationships with important feminist organizations and scholars have been established that are now serving useful as they seek support for the creation of a new AP course.



L to R: Kristin Kelly, Gloria Steinem, Julia Basnaga (SHP '16), and Serene Williams at the 2015 National Women's Studies Association Conference in Milwaukee, WI

WHAT THEY DIDN'T EXPECT TO UNCOVER WAS... SACRED HEART'S OWN HISTORY OF INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM.

There are two key organizations Kelly and Williams are planning to lobby for support, an important step in gaining the College Board's attention. Williams recently wrote two biographies on Catholic feminist women for The Smithsonian's American Women's History Museum currently being built in Washington, D.C., where Williams also has a contact.

The other is the National Women's History Project, which is the group that established the March National Women's History Month. SHP students have in the past interned with this organization and written suffragist biographies for its website during the 2020 centennial celebration of the passing of the 19th amendment.

"What I'd like to do is have students do this outreach and make the ask—I think that will make a big impression on these organizations," says Williams.

Kelly and Williams expect the petitioning process to the College Board will be a five-year plan. They are looking at two recent examples of new courses that the College Board is considering, namely AP African American Studies, which was piloted in 60 schools nationwide beginning in the fall of 2022, with more schools having been added to the pilot since.

That course gained momentum through student advocacy as well. "It got 100,000 signatures, and the College Board was very responsive to that," says Williams. "It got picked up by the New York City Department of Education and expanded from there, so that's the kind of backing we need as we consider organizations and institutes that could lend support. Our students and their parents have incredible connections to organizations like The Smithsonian, important college committees, and boards of Fortune 500 companies, so we're hopeful that we can make progress."

As part of the five-year outreach plan, the pair is currently working on conference proposals to attend and present with students about the course and their efforts at more than a half-dozen upcoming conferences, including those held by the National Women's Studies Association, American Historical Association, National Council of Social Studies, Intersectional Inquiries Conference, Seneca Falls Dialogues, Berkshire Conference for Women, and culminating in the 2024 College Board conference.

Conferences are where they make connections with other academics doing similar work, says Kelly. "Essentially we have spent the past decade on the conference circuit, talking about religious feminism within education," she says. "All of this enhances our curriculum that we teach day-to-day here at SHP, as we have always incorporated intersectional feminism, particularly religious feminism, into our courses."

The College Board conference "will put us right in front of other AP educators as well as the leadership at the College Board," says Williams. "It's hard to get a response from the College Board. It's considered radical to have a new course proposed and designed—more frequently it's a course redesign."

And redesigning AP U.S. Government and Politics' CED—Kelly and Williams' original goal coming out of their fellowship—is still a part of the plan.

"We would like to release an open letter to the College Board for the government course this year, 2023, to coincide with the centennial of the ERA being introduced to Congress in 1923," says Williams.

Another key piece associated with the letter is a student-led project to write biographies about RSCJ and their activism work over the past many decades.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT GIRLS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THEMSELVES IN HISTORY, TO KNOW THAT WOMEN HAD A ROLE IN SHAPING OUR SOCIETY AS IT IS TODAY, AND ALSO THAT THEY HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE IT.

"We want to write biographies and give credit to the RSCJ who worked for the ERA while the centennial of the ERA is happening," says Williams.

Those, in turn, could become Wikipedia pages or blossom into a larger student-built website database useful to Sacred Heart schools worldwide. "Publishing is great for our students because they get to work with and meet other feminists and historians—it's really empowering for them," says Williams. SHP students have been involved in the Wikipedia Women in Red project for the past five years—an initiative to create Wikipedia pages for important women in history where they did not exist before—and have created 16 Wikipedia pages so far.

Researching the progression of RSCJ activism will not only help preserve history, it will allow students to tap into a vast holding of archives located in the Main Building on the SHS campus. A year ago, a dozen students launched a special archival project guided by Kelly, Williams, and SHP instructional librarian Sheila Chatterjee to scan and catalog 125 years' worth of photographs and documents into an online archival database. Each student involved is trained in PastPerfect Museum software and learns how to use a new, large-format scanner housed in the Lucas Family Library.

"Our school and RSCJ have such an amazing legacy," says Kelly. "It's something we should be proud of and highlighting constantly. It resonates with these kids and helps create a more deeply connected Sacred Heart family in a way."



Scan the QR code to view and sign Kelly and Williams' petition to the College Board

In the Library

Kelly and Williams' experience inside the Schlesinger Library itself proved to be more complicated than they expected as they requested source materials to potentially incorporate into the new AP course curriculum.

"We thought we could just go to the library and request all these documents, and if we wanted to do something with them we could just say, 'courtesy of the Schlesinger Library,' but we quickly discovered each document is owned by different families and descendants, so gaining permission to access or use the documents is very complicated," says Williams.

"I feel like I got a degree in coding because of how complicated it was to get these archives," says Kelly with a laugh. "It took me two weeks to figure out how to ask the correct permission."

While up to 10 boxes of documents could be ordered at a time, they could only be accessed one at a time. And Kelly and Williams could not look at them together. "So, when I saw something that I wanted Serene to look at, I had to take a picture of it and text it to her," says Kelly. "I have so much newfound respect for scholars who write books and do this kind of research daily."

An interesting experience, Williams says, was reaching out to the husband of a prominent feminist writer and activist, the late Andrea Dworkin, for permission to view her papers.

"I wrote to him explaining our project, saying we're trying to get more women in AP government courses—we think Andrea Dworkin's story is important to that—would you grant me permission to see it? And he did."

Williams was looking for specific documents on when Dworkin appealed to the Supreme Court with an argument that pornography was a form of violence against women and violates the Civil Rights Act as a form of discrimination. "She couldn't get it to the Supreme Court, and in her papers, it shows her inner turmoil. She overcame a lot of self-doubt, while in public she was so confident. Her husband lovingly protects her privacy, which is so interesting. That was a highlight for me—getting permission from him to research her, and then figuring out how to message that story, with all its complicating factors, for high school students. The students find it very interesting because the anti-pornography movement is often described as one of the least successful social movements in recent history, because society went the opposite way with a body/sex positivity argument."

For Kelly, the most interesting documents were those of the late Gerda Lerner, feminist scholar and pioneer of the field of women's history, who they include in the AP U.S. Women's History curriculum.

"I love seeing the personal lives of my intellectual mentors because it humanizes them," says Kelly. Particularly of note, as a teacher, was observing her report cards, in which she received Bs. "I was surprised because she was such an accomplished academic, to see her not getting As." Lerner

KELLY AND WILLIAMS' INDEFATIGABLE DRIVE TO BRING AWARENESS ABOUT LESSER-KNOWN WOMEN FIGURES IN HISTORY, AND THE PIONEERING WORK OF THE RSCJ, HAS THE POTENTIAL TO EFFECT LASTING CHANGE BOTH ACADEMICALLY ON A NATIONAL SCALE, AND WITHIN THE NETWORK OF SACRED HEART SCHOOLS WORLDWIDE.

Catholic Feminist Support for the ERA

Coinciding with the Schlesinger Library fellowship, Williams received a separate 2022 summer sabbatical from SHS to research Catholic women religious and RSCJ at Notre Dame University, resulting in a paper co-written by Williams and Kelly that has been submitted to *Feminist Studies in Religion*.

While support for the ERA in the RSCJ order was not public, in the 1970s many RSCJ individually backed constitutional gender equality. During the 1978 congressional hearings for an extension to ratify the ERA, Sister Judith Cagney, RSCJ, publicly lent her support. RSCJ were also vocal on social justice issues such as immigration, poverty, and human rights in war-torn Nicaragua.

In the documents the pair requested to review at the Schlesinger Library were small, typewritten postcards that the Catholics Act for ERA organization mailed to various religious orders, including the RSCJ, that sisters could individually return to indicate their support. "Part of my research was looking at the resulting list of names and checking which were RSCJ," says Williams.

As Kelly and Williams' research has uncovered, RSCJ Mary O'Callaghan was a member of the organization National Sisters Network, which endorsed Catholics Act for ERA. Also mentioned in numerous archives is Faine McMullen, RSCJ, who was a board member of Catholics Act for the ERA and was politically active in supporting many feminist causes.

RSCJ Maggie Fisher was another Catholics Act for ERA supporter; her name was included in a list sent to "Friends of Equality," a feminist group whose first member was Susan B. Anthony, grandniece of the original Susan B. Anthony. Fisher and Sister Kathleen Keating, SSJ, also co-signed a letter circulated to supporters that read, "Catholics Act for ERA brought Catholic support for the Equal Rights Amendment alive in Illinois. Efficiently organized, highly visible in the media, perpetually active, this group was extremely effective in mobilizing grassroots Catholics behind the ERA."

was also in her late 40s when she obtained her Ph.D., and "the random jobs she had to do to put herself through her Ph.D. program were fascinating—she worked at a cleaners, and as a substitute teacher—she kept all of her pay stubs."

Another figure they researched for inclusion in the new AP course was Civil Rights activist and gender equality advocate Pauli Murray. "A lot of people are looking to research Pauli Murray as a non-binary figure, and the Murray papers are so desirable that we would read some, turn them back in, and someone else would be waiting for them and immediately check them out," says Williams.

While they brushed shoulders with other researchers, there was no sense of community among them at the library.

"It was a very rules-driven, cloistered space," says Kelly. "We went in thinking there might be a common area, or that researchers might eat at the same place together, and we could share about our research with other Schlesinger Library fellows, but there was none of that. At least we had each other."

Project Dedication

This project is dedicated to Sr. Fran Tobin, a well known, politically active RSCJ Sister and retired lawyer who advocated for feminist causes.





AS SHS CELEBRATES 125 YEARS THIS FALL, PRESERVING THE HISTORY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF RSCJ SISTERS IS ESPECIALLY TIMELY.

While students learn about the ERA in current AP government course offerings, if they learn anything about Catholic women, it's about the conservative Catholic viewpoint, says Williams. "That's a misrepresentation, as there were many faith-based feminists who were working on the ERA and this campaign for constitutional gender equality."

Their proposed new AP U.S. Women's History curriculum aims to change that; a section within the Feminist Waves & Backlash of the 1973 to 1991 period deals specifically with the ERA and Catholic feminist nuns, as well as the Catholic-affiliated Grass-roots Group of Second-Class Citizens.

Telling the stories of women religious is "essential to a comprehensive understanding of the political struggle for the ERA," write Kelly and Williams in the Religion Matters piece. "They are certainly as important to the women's liberation movement as more famous feminists like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan."

With SHS celebrating 125 years as a school this coming fall, preserving the history and contributions of RSCJ sisters is especially timely. Kelly and Williams' indefatigable drive to bring awareness about lesser-known women figures in history, and the pioneering and courageous work of the RSCJ, has the potential to effect lasting change both academically on a national scale, and within the network of Sacred Heart schools worldwide. Perhaps more importantly, the pair serve as an example to our students that change can come from within—an entire movement can begin with just one spark of inspiration. As Saint Madeleine Sophie famously stated, "For the sake of one child, I would have started the Society." For 200 years, the legacy of Sacred Heart has held steadfast to a solemn mission of nurturing the lives of young people, so they may go out into the world knowing that their commitment to serve others can be truly transformative. ■

Elizabeth Nixon is the associate director of communications and public relations at Sacred Heart Schools, Atherton, and an award-winning journalist. Her work has appeared in a wide range of outlets including Entrepreneur Magazine, The Washington Post, Business Insider, and MSNBC. She has a bachelor's degree in feminist studies from UC Santa Cruz, where she founded the women's desk for the university newspaper, City on a Hill Press.



Serene Williams

SHP educator Serene Williams earned her bachelor's degree in political science from Purdue University, and her master's degree in political science from San Francisco State University. For nearly 20 years she has taught a wide variety of political science and history courses at the high school and collegiate levels, 14 of those years at SHP. A reader for both AP U.S. Government and Politics and AP Comparative Government and Politics exams, Williams has also written curriculum for many unique University of California-approved honors women's history courses, including History Seminar Honors: Women in U.S. History and Advanced Topics in Women's History & Women's Religion. A frequent invited guest speaker for conferences and meetings, she has presented on teaching intersectional feminist political history at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, National Council for Social Studies, and the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, to name a few. An active scholar, Williams is an independent researcher of the California women's suffrage movement, and has authored original profiles of lesser-known suffragists published in the Women & Social Movements database. A prolific Wikipedian, Williams has written and contributed numerous pages about the California women's suffrage movement and feminist politics in general, and most recently, she completed the Wiki Scholars Program—a partnership of the Wikipedia Education Foundation and the National Archives—where she wrote about suffrage history to become a certified Wikipedia suffrage scholar.



Kristen Kelly

SHP educator and active scholar Kristen Kelly has taught all high school levels at Sacred Heart for the past 16 years, notably designing the Gender & Sexuality in the Bible course and co-teaching interdisciplinary Women's Studies courses for the past several years. Currently, along with colleague Serene Williams, Kelly co-teaches AP Comparative Government & Politics. An outstanding and eager collaborator with scholars and teachers alike, she has presented at The National Women's Studies Association Conference, The National Council for Social Studies, and The Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, among others. Kelly holds a master's degree in cultural historical religion from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and loves teaching religion and history from an intersectional lens, focusing especially on gender and sexuality issues.