



## Performances of the Past Encourage Women's Dreams of the Future

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Employees of CBP and other federal agencies gathered to celebrate National Women's History Month today at the Department of Commerce auditorium. The hour-long program, "Women's Education—Women's Empowerment," sponsored by the Federal Triangle Partnership, was filled with music, poetry, and a dramatic one-woman show that brought several historical female role models to life.

"This morning we will have performances from two very talented women—designed not only to educate and entertain, but also to illustrate the power of women," said Carla Koppell, the senior coordinator for gender equality and women's empowerment for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Koppell welcomed those attending. Marilyn Franklin, a native Washington writer and actress who works for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, opened the program with one of her poems, "The Plight of Women." Touching on the common experiences women share, Franklin spoke from the heart. "It doesn't matter whether you're black, brown, yellow, red or white—women have been fighting a long time to preserve their rights," she recited.

Audience members were then mesmerized by a masterful performance by Kate Campbell Stevenson, a veteran actress who portrayed three significant women in American history—Lucy Stone, a 19th century suffragist; former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a great humanitarian who dedicated her life to championing the well-being of the less fortunate; and Bessie Coleman, the first African American to obtain an international pilot's license. Through first person dramatic monologue, Stevenson, the writer, producer, and sole performer of the show, paid tribute to each of the women.

"All three of these women were fighting to be heard," said Stevenson. In 1847, Lucy Stone graduated from Oberlin College, becoming the first Massachusetts woman to earn a college degree. Stone was asked to write the valedictory speech, "but she couldn't deliver it because she was a woman and women couldn't speak in public at that time," said Stevenson. The actress portrays Stone 40 years later, in 1883, when Stone was invited to come back to the college to give the commencement address.

Bessie Coleman, one of the first African American aviators in the 1920s, wasn't able to learn how to fly in the United States. "She wasn't able to find an aviation school in the country that would accept her,"

said Stevenson. Coleman refused to give up her dream. She saved her money and in 1920 sailed for France to attend an aviation school there.

In the case of Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady struggled to find her voice. “She took what was one of her worst attributes, her high-pitched, squeaky voice, and turned it into her greatest asset. She became a voice for the voiceless,” said Stevenson. Stevenson’s historical performances began as a personal quest to inspire her children. When Stevenson’s daughter was in fourth grade, the actress noticed that her daughter was holding herself back so that she would fit in with her peers and not appear too intelligent. “The girls hold themselves back. They don’t participate in school as much and limit themselves,” said Stevenson. “I remember doing that when I was in elementary and middle school. When I saw this happening to my daughter, I said, ‘Whoa, I have to do something—not just talk about it. I have to take action.’ That’s what triggered my gumption to go out there and put a one-woman show together.”

Stevenson’s son was also a catalyst. “I realized that my son’s history books highlighted the same five women as when I was in school. We need to have women’s stories in the forefront. We’re 50 percent of the population and we’re anonymous,” said Stevenson.

“The women depicted in Kate’s performance today illustrate the diversity of women’s achievements,” said Vadrienne Starks from CBP’s Office of Diversity and Civil Rights, who coordinated the agency’s participation in the program. “Women make history every day,” said Starks. “As we celebrate the future, we must not forget our past — for it is our past that connects us to our present and provides the foundation for our future.”

Women’s History Month became a national celebration in 1981 when Congress established National Women’s History Week, an event commemorated during the second week of March. In 1987, Congress expanded the week to a month. Every year since that time, Congress has passed a resolution for Women’s History Month and the president has issued a proclamation.

The Federal Triangle Partnership is comprised of four federal government agencies headquartered in the District’s Federal Triangle area, CBP, EPA, USAID and Commerce.

—*Marcy Mason, CBP Office of Public Affairs*