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Mayor Jacobs Highlights Tennessee's Historic Role in Women's Suffrage

KNOXVILLE, Tenn.—Attorney Wanda Sobieski serves as president of the non-profit Suffrage Coalition, an organization that works to preserve the history of the women's suffrage movement. While she may be an expert today, she did not learn much about the fight for women's voting rights in school.

"In high school, the whole suffrage movement was covered with one sentence in our history book that said, 'In 1920, Congress gave women the right to vote.' And it was not given. It was taken by the women in a 72-year battle. It was hostile," said Sobieski.

Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs delved into the history of the women's suffrage movement with Sobieski for the latest episode of Knox Narratives. Sobieski was a leading force in designing, funding, and building multiple statues in Downtown Knoxville that honor Tennessee figures who fought for suffrage.

"I was on the statewide suffrage commission for the 75th anniversary of Tennessee's vote to ratify the 19th amendment," said Sobieski. "I was shocked to discover in 1995, Tennessee did not have anywhere in the state even a plaque recognizing the incredible work of the women who made Tennessee 'the perfect 36,' the final state necessary to give us the right to vote."

The Women's Suffrage Memorial at Market Square in Downtown Knoxville features three prominent suffragists, one from each region of Tennessee. Front and center is Lizzie Crozier French of Knoxville, who persistently fought more than 40 years for the right to vote.

"She [Crozier French] did it in such a disarming way that even the people who were violently opposed to her beliefs were charmed by her," said Sobieski.

Mayor Jacobs and Sobieski also spoke in detail about the dramatic letter from legislator Harry Burn's mother that swayed him to vote in favor of suffrage. A statue of Burn and his mother was built next to the East Tennessee History Center where the letter is preserved in the McClung Historical Collection.

"In my heart, I believe Southern women are due some special credit for working in suffrage because in the South, the culture was really more difficult for women," said Sobieski. "So, those are some pretty feisty women in the South."

You can watch the full Knox Narratives episode featuring Sobieski on YouTube and Facebook.