

PUBLICATION

The Fight for the Noblest Democracy: Women's Suffrage in Alabama

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Baker Donelson attorney Jenna Bedsole wears many hats. She is a shareholder in our Birmingham office, Practice Group Leader for the Firm's Labor & Employment Group, wife and mother to two daughters and filmmaker. Jenna became a first-time filmmaker in 2015 when the Alabama State Bar requested volunteers to prepare three-minute videos on inductees into the Alabama State Bar Lawyer's Hall of Fame. The only woman being inducted was Nina Miglionico. After reading about Nina, Jenna volunteered to create a video that turned into the 56-minute feature-length documentary, *Stand Up, Speak Out*. The film was shown on Alabama Public Television and featured at the 2016 Sidewalk Film Festival. Her latest film, *The Fight For the Noblest Democracy: Women's Suffrage in Alabama*, was selected for the 2020 Sidewalk Film Festival and has been broadcast throughout the state and beyond to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

How did you decide to produce and direct a film on the suffrage movement in Alabama?

After the success of the documentary on Nina Miglionico, the Alabama State Bar approached me about creating a film on suffrage in Alabama. The film was to be part of the State Bar's celebration of the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

The planning for the 100th anniversary celebration began about two years ago. The committee planned several celebratory events throughout the state and the film was part of those plans. Once the pandemic hit, most of the events were cancelled so the film had even more significance. The state and local bars showed the film on the anniversary of the formal adoption of the 19th Amendment, August 26, 2020, and it can still be seen on the websites for the Alabama Bar and Alabama Public Television.



How did you research for the film?

I did the majority of research on my own by using the resources from several different libraries. Due to my work on the documentary about Ms. Miglionico, I had developed relationships with the archivists at the University of Alabama School of Law and the City of Birmingham's Public Library. The archives at those libraries were key to my research. One of the greatest resources was a thesis that was written in 1949 by an Alabama graduate, John Irving Lumpkin, about the equal suffrage movement in Alabama.

How was this different from your first film?

This was the first time I ever wrote a script, which really pushed me outside of my comfort zone. Lumpkin's thesis was very helpful in identifying key points I wanted the narrators to make during the film. We had a very small budget, so I had a few local actors but relied primarily on friends and colleagues to help tell the story.

What did you learn about the suffrage movement?

I learned so much, which is why I love creating documentaries. I knew about the famous suffragists such as

Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Carrie Chapman Catt, but what I didn't know about was all the fascinating side stories, many that didn't even make it to the film. It was interesting to learn about the women fighting for suffrage in a state that wasn't particularly interested in granting them that right. I learned about the Tennessee legislator, Henry Burn, who was the youngest member of the state legislature and leaned to the anti-suffrage camp. The morning of the vote on the Amendment, Burn received a note from his mother that said, "Be a good boy and help Mrs. [Carrie Chapman] Catt put the 'rat' in ratification." Burn was the deciding vote and Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment, making women's suffrage legal in the United States.

Because I am a lawyer, I was also fascinated to read about the Susan B. Anthony trial. Ms. Anthony was arrested when she knowingly illegally voted in a federal election. The judge did not allow the jurors to discuss the case, but instead directed them to find Anthony guilty. He sentenced her to pay a \$100 fine and she defiantly said she would never pay a dollar of the fine ever and she never did. She even had people who tried to pay on her behalf, and she refused. President Trump posthumously pardoned Susan B. Anthony on the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

One thing I have learned from both films is that real change requires "the other." In order to have women's suffrage, it was necessary to have men support it.

Any other women's issues you would like to address in a documentary?

I am working on a screenplay for a narrative feature that focuses on four strong women characters.

You may access *The Fight for the Fight for the Noblest Democracy* [here](#). The recording of the panel discussion about the film and to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of Congress' passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution is available [here](#).

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