Our first newsletter of 2021 finds us in a new era. Four years of enduring neo-fascist rhetoric and anti-democratic and dehumanizing policies, we witnessed the brutal onslaught onto our Capitol that aimed to destroy the building and target our representatives. These neo-fascist attempts at turning our governmental system into an authoritarian one were clear from the get-go. The former president’s racist, sexist, xenophobic, and ableist antics left no doubt as to what he was preparing the ground for. Emboldened by four years of unbridled rule, toxic masculinity coupled with white supremacy ran rampant on January 6, 2021, endangering the democratic aspirations which we must continue to value.

The failed attempt at overturning our government came at a time when nerves were raw in the Pandemic. We are fortunate that the chaos did not escalate. In spite of our exhaustion from the Pandemic and fascism, we need to do a lot of things: As a country, we need to build better foundations that withstand the assault of undemocratic forces. What is needed now is a thorough investigation of what happened and who was implicated. Secondly, we need to rethink how we want to strengthen the foundations. Last summer’s Black Lives Matter demonstrations have shown the urgency of dismantling and then rebuilding the way we live with each other and govern our shared public sphere and institutions. And finally we need feminism. Feminism offers us the tools to figure out how racism, sexism and economic precarity created this world we are in and it also offers the tools to imagine another world is possible.

In this Pandemic edition of our newsletter, we recap our signature fall lecture “The History of White People and What It Means For Now” by Dr. Nell Irvin-Painter, professor emerita of history at Princeton University. Through her academic and artistic project, “American Whiteness Since Trump,” she shed light on how the Trump era has increased the visibility, awareness, and recognition of whiteness across social strata in the U.S.

In this issue, we also visited with several of our alums who are doing productive work in spite of the Pandemic.

- Lenna Cumberbatch ’00 has been a productive force in diversity, equity, and inclusion in the U.K. and is now pursuing a PhD at the University of St Andrews where she is researching D&I strategic change.
- Shabana Basij-Rasikh ’11 is breaking new ground at the School of Leadership (SOLA), a boarding school for girls in Kabul, Afghanistan. After receiving land from the Afghan government, she and her team are building a new campus, which will hopefully be completed by 2024.
- Though technically not a WS/WAGS/GSFS major, Lynn Ames ’82 wears her feminist heart on her sleeve. In her new novel 46, she presents the hopeful scenario of a female-identified POTUS. In this newsletter, we also look at the 19th century, when two women—Victoria Woodhull and Belva Lockwood—ran for president, even though they didn’t yet have the right to vote.
- Destini Armstrong ’21 reported back about her internship with the Feminist Majority Foundation. Together with fellow student Megan Job, she created the podcast BLCKGRLMGC (link here). Check it out if you have the time.

We are busy planning our spring semester and for the Gensler Symposium on April 30, featuring speaker Alexis Gumbs, author of Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals (https://sites.middlebury.edu/gensler2021/). We hope you can join us.

Karin Hanta
Director of the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis House

Laurie Essig
Director of the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies
Lenna Cumberbatch ’00: “My diversity and inclusion work is not just my job…”

By Matt Martignoni ’21

“I am fortunate enough to be able to do something that matters to me. Something that feeds my brain, and my heart and my soul,” explained Lenna Cumberbatch’00, a Women and Gender Studies (WAGS) alum. Originally from London, Lenna attended high school in Washington, D.C. and was recruited to study at Middlebury, expecting to major in biology and go on to medical school. “We had this thing called Mapquest at the time, and it said that Vermont was 99.7% white, and I thought ‘oh no’,” she burst out laughing. Then, her tone steadied and she noted, sincerely, “it was the absolute best place for me to be.” After a medical leave, her priorities shifted from becoming a doctor; her academic path veered towards Women and Gender Studies instead. “Looking back now, twenty years later, I am selling my WAGS degree everywhere I go,” she noted, smiling. Lenna Cumberbatch is truly extraordinary; her commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ folx and her impactful diversity and inclusion (DI) work are inspiring.

Lenna did not arrive at DI directly from Middlebury. Instead, she moved between entry level jobs. A former boss recommended she apply for an MBA. “There was an open day at a university in South London on a weekend in February. I went to that one on a Saturday, applied on Tuesday, was accepted on Thursday and started on Monday,” she concluded. Then a mentor at the MBA program suggested Lenna explore her DI work. “She rewrote my CV and I had a job at Cambridge six months later as their diversity and inclusion consultant,” Lenna told me somewhat matter-of-factly.

She started her first major position at the University of Cambridge as an equality & diversity consultant in 2014. There, she facilitated a program called “Athena Swan,” which supported women in obtaining senior roles in academia. Lenna also worked with the LGBTQ+ network, which culminated in the first Cambridge Pride event. Lenna’s early DI work also included a position as a youth and outreach worker at the Terrence Higgins Trust. “I just hung out with young people and supported and engaged them by running workshops. Through that, I transitioned into providing sexual health education. There is nothing like standing in the library and asking people if they want to do a sexual health test,” Lenna laughed again. Additionally, she spent some time working for Galop, a hotline for LGBTQ+ folx who have experienced hate crime, domestic abuse, or sexual violence.

One of her next positions was diversity
manager at the Royal Society, which—founded in 1660—is the world’s oldest scientific academy. At the Royal Society, Lenna produced an unconscious bias animation that, after being widely circulated, sparked the attention of the European Commission. Lenna was subsequently invited to give a presentation on unconscious bias to grant reviewers and was offered a position as expert peer reviewer and monitor. Currently her work at the European Commission includes assessing applicants for the Horizon 2020 grant scheme, which offers multi-million Euro grants for funding work in the sciences. Generally Lenna assesses ongoing projects on how they take issues of gender into account in their work and she guides grantees in reducing unconscious bias.

Lenna is not simply remarkable for recent accolades. Her work in Vermont during her time at Middlebury two decades ago has had a lasting impact as well. In addition to her participation in MOQA (Middlebury Open Queer Alliance), she worked with friends at the University of Vermont to form a community center called “RU12?,” which organized events for the queer community. RU12? was the precursor organization to the Pride Center of Vermont. While engaging with and supporting the queer community was undeniably one major component of her time in Vermont, Lenna also noted the following: “My first diversity and inclusion job was with Middlebury in the ADA office sometime in 1997 or 1998.”

Today, in addition to all of her work, she finds time to run a lesbian website called Gingerbeer. From Middlebury, VT to London, England, Lenna Cumberbatch finds ways to enter a community and leave it better off for her having been there.

Destini Armstrong at the FMF

Last summer, Chellis House partly funded Destini Armstrong’s virtual internship at the Feminist Majority Foundation. Here is Destini’s account:

In summer 2020, I was fortunate enough to land an internship interning at the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF). This foundation is an organization dedicated to women’s equality, reproductive health, and non-violence. Its mission is to utilize research and action to empower women economically, socially, and politically. FMF has a very intensive history of being at the forefront of the women’s rights movement. This internship included some wonderful and bright interns who worked on cool projects. It opened me to learning more about new legislation and policies in regards to women’s rights and equality. I had many opportunities to write news and blog posts and got a chance to write about how COVID-19 has exacerbated racial inequalities. Because of the pandemic, tasks were completed remotely. In spite of this, interns still had opportunities to mingle with other women’s rights advocates and experts from non-profits. Additionally, I was able to work on my long-term goal of focusing on the social determinants of maternal health in Afghanistan. Poverty, political unrest, and insufficient resources are some of the leading causes of poor maternal health and Afghanistan’s high maternal mortality rate. This is an experience that I’ll cherish and with all the tools and skills I’ve gained, I’m excited to use them in the future!
A PASSION FOR EDUCATION

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ‘11 has dedicated her life to girls’ education. In this interview, she reveals exciting plans for SOLA, a boarding school for girls aged 11 to 19 in Kabul, Afghanistan, which she co-founded while still a teenager.

by Ariana Rios ’21
in public settings. I remember that I was shaking so much during my first public talk that some people thought I was crying—that’s not an exaggeration. That’s how bad the fear was. But I kept wanting to talk about Afghanistan and so I kept making myself go up to those podiums … and over time, the fear went away. Today, I feel nothing but energy and excitement when I’m in front of a crowd, and that’s partly due to experience but mostly due to my passion for the stories I bring from SOLA. It’s a gift to have listeners—or readers—who want to know more about how our students are changing the world.

AR: Does your family continue to play a big role in the work you do?

SBR: Very much so. I have several sisters and brothers, and all of them are very important to our work at SOLA—perhaps none more so than my sister, Freshta. You may be familiar with the story of my childhood under the Taliban, when I dressed like a boy and walked with my older sister to secret schools in Kabul; the older sister in that story was Freshta. Today, she’s SOLA’s principal (as well as a fellow MiddKid!), and I’m not joking when I say that SOLA wouldn’t be the success it is without her—and while I’m on the topic of Middlebury and sisters, I can’t forget to mention my younger sister Marjeela, who did Freshta and me one better by not just graduating from Middlebury, but by also getting her master’s in environmental studies at MIIS in Monterey.

As important as my siblings are, there’s nobody who’s ever been more important to my work than my parents. Everything that I am, I owe to them, period. I talk about walking to those secret schools, but the only reason my sister and I went there at all is because our parents decided we should go. They knew the risks, which were severe for us and extreme for them, but they thought that the greater risk was raising uneducated girls. They shaped my entire outlook on education, and they both remain incredibly supportive to this day.

AR: What are some upcoming SOLA projects you are excited about? How can the Middlebury community support you?

SBR: We’re building a new campus in Kabul. Just writing those seven words is so exciting for me. Stage 1 of construction is raising a perimeter wall around our property, which is what we’re doing right now. This is a significant undertaking—the wall will be close to 10 feet high and 3 feet thick, and we expect to have this stage 1 construction completed by early 2021. That’s when stage 2
begins: constructing the main campus. Stage 2 is projected to run through 2023, and in 2024, we'll start the school year on this new campus. It'll take a few years for us to be at full capacity, but when we are, we'll have well over 200 students living in the dorms and more than 100 faculty, staff, and administrators. We'll have a beautiful mosque, a 350-seat auditorium, a makers’ lab, several art rooms and science labs ... it will quite literally be like nothing else in Afghanistan, and it'll be for girls.

SOLA is registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and we're always looking for financial support for all aspects of what we do. We're so thrilled to have a very generous matching grant opportunity going into effect this year—please feel free to email me at president@sola-afghanistan.org and I'd love to tell you more about it—but we're also so happy when people talk about SOLA with friends and relatives. Sharing our message is one of the most powerful things you can do.

AR: There is a sense of urgency from the newest generation to create change and act. What is some advice you would give people who are seeking to create change in their communities?

SBR: Believe that you'll succeed, and then act on that belief. Sounds simple, I'm sure, but this is the philosophy that's taken me to where I am right now. Believe, and act on that belief. SOLA is known around the world. I've given speeches on three continents, and I'm not saying that to make myself sound important; I'm saying it because it speaks to the eagerness so many people have to hear stories from SOLA—not my story, but the stories of our students. People believe in SOLA's model, and I hear this in Afghanistan, too: I've had meetings with very important, very high-level officials in my country who tell me how impressive SOLA is ... and then they tell me what a shame it is that I'm wasting all of this on girls. A two-sided tale, isn't it? But I'll tell you, it doesn't matter which side I find myself on: I listen to my audience, I thank them for their words ... and I push myself even harder. Our supporters strengthen my belief. Our doubters strengthen it even more. Anyone who wants to create change in their society is making the argument that the way things are aren't the way things should be—and that's a hard argument for some people to hear. You're going to meet doubters out there, but that shouldn't worry you. Listen to them, thank them for their opinions, and push yourself harder.

AR: There is still a gap in education. How do we close the gap?

SBR: There's not an easy answer to this question, because closing the gap depends quite a bit on where the gap is located. In Afghanistan, for instance, several million girls do not attend school and the illiteracy rate for teenage girls is 63%. I think many people look at statistics like these and assume that they're due to the influence of the Taliban, or to the decades of violence Afghanistan has had to endure, and these factors are absolutely important—but many people are surprised when I tell them that the single most important factor that keeps Afghan girls from getting an education is the lack of female teachers.

Many families will not allow their daughters to be educated by men once their daughters reach puberty. Afghanistan has 34 provinces, and in 17 provinces—half of the total—less than 20% of the teachers are women; in some provinces, that figure is as low as 1%. I'm sure you can see how these two facts correlate: a girl in a rural province, once she reaches puberty, very often will not be able to find a female teacher. Without a female teacher, she won't grow up to be an educated woman who could, perhaps, become a teacher ... and the cycle perpetuates itself. Fewer educated girls means fewer educated women which means fewer educated girls. So in Afghanistan, the key to closing the gap in education is to train more female teachers. In the U.S., the key may be very different.

AR: What is your response to the disinvestment of schools in the United States and the continuous slash of budgets?

SBR: You get what you pay for. That's true in the
marketplace and it’s true in education—the difference is that, in the marketplace, you pretty quickly see the results from spending less for a quality good. In education, it’ll take years to see the results, but delayed doesn’t mean deferred.

AR: Have you noticed big changes from when you founded SOLA to now? Is there more support globally, back in the community?

SBR: We’ve always had wonderful support from the global community, from our very first day. Within Afghanistan, especially with the current peace talks going on, I think there’s a growing feeling that the progress Afghan women have made over the past two decades can’t be jeopardized. Consider this: 20 years ago, it would have been illegal to do what I do. I’d have been breaking the law by running a girls’ school and educating young women. 20 years isn’t a long time, but we as Afghan women have come a long way. We’re speaking up, too: you may be familiar with social media campaigns like #MyRedLine and #AfghanWomenWillNotGo-Back, where women from across the country are sharing their stories with the world. Women in Afghanistan are finding their voices in ways that have never before happened, and it’s beautiful to see.

AR: What is your advice to folks like me who are working to be educators? How do we become better educators for the community and our students?

SBR: Be the teacher you always wanted to have. I think that’s the challenge we should set ourselves. It’s easy to try to model ourselves after a great teacher, and of course it’s valuable to use a great teacher as a role model. But I think role models can cut both ways. We’ve all had great teachers... but if we’re honest, we know that we’ve all had teachers who weren’t who we wanted them to be. As educators, we should think about who our great teachers were, and work to emulate them—and we should think about our teachers who, for whatever reasons, weren’t our great teachers, and use those experiences to help us avoid pitfalls and complacency in our work.

AR: You once said the solution to problems in Afghanistan must come from Afghans. What are the ways in which you have seen the Afghan community support women pursuing education? Who are your biggest supporters?

SBR: I’m very happy you mentioned this. I cannot stress enough how important it is for change in Afghanistan to rise from the bottom-up, rather than be imposed from the top-down. Afghanistan is a very male-dominated society. As an example, an Afghan girl who wants to get an education will need the permission of her father, without any question whatsoever. It’s almost certain that she’ll need the permission of her uncles, and her grandparents, and her brothers, and all of her immediate male relatives. Depending on where in Afghanistan these men live, they might be under considerable societal pressure to keep their girls out of school.

But these men – and these fathers in particular – decide to educate their girls anyway. I don’t want to be overly dramatic, but some of these men take very real personal risks to do this. These fathers, in many ways, truly are our biggest supporters. Their bravery is what inspires their daughters to be brave—and these daughters, who come to Kabul and study so hard and return home to demonstrate to their community all the skills they’ve learned, these daughters inspire their fathers with their own bravery. I talked earlier about a negative cycle involving female teachers … this is a positive cycle that reinforces itself year after year.

AR: Why did you choose to major in International Studies and Women and Gender Studies?

SBR: It’s funny when I think back, because I came to Middlebury with a career path very clearly in mind: I was going to go on a pre-med track and become a doctor. This plan had everything to do with being a student in Afghanistan: in our society, if you’re a top student (and I was), you attend medical school, and then you become a doctor. That’s simply how it is. Two surprises were waiting for me when I arrived at Middlebury, one pleasant and
one not-so-pleasant: I was introduced to the liberal arts, a new arena of study for me ... and I was confronted by the fact that, although I was one of the top students in Kabul, my educational system hadn’t prepared me to compete on the international level. You don’t know what you don’t know, as they say—and Middlebury showed me what I didn’t know. I just didn’t have the foundational skills that my American peers had. So I studied. I worked hard. And, as you know, Middlebury asks you to take all sorts of different courses to meet your distribution requirements—and this is how I came across classes on writing theory and sociology and gender studies. Gender studies, in particular, was fascinating to me in ways that I think wouldn’t have been the case for an American student. I was introduced to conceptual frameworks that my classmates were very familiar with: the -isms, for instance, like racism and feminism ... I understood the concepts, of course, but the study of the frameworks was new to me. I learned that American women couldn’t vote until the 1920’s ... I was astounded. I actually remember going out and meeting some local women for coffee and tea. These weren’t my classmates or my professors—these were women in their 60s and 70s who lived in Middlebury. I’d talk with them about their lives when they were young, and the struggles they faced. I really felt very close to these women.

So, gender studies made sense for me—and international studies made sense because it was so comprehensive, and would be so beneficial for someone who thought as I did (briefly) that I’d go into diplomacy. I studied Arabic since I knew how valuable the language would be when I traveled outside of Afghanistan, and I knew it would be valuable in Afghanistan too, especially when I had discussions about the rights of women. A major shift from pre-med, wasn’t it? A major shift and, for me, the right one.

**AR: What is some advice you would give to international or first-generation college students that are struggling in higher education?**

**SBR:** Persistence pays off. Education, in my family, was
so highly prized—both my parents are college graduates, and both were very successful in their careers (my father in the military, my mother as an educator), and both made it very clear to all their children that they expected us to achieve even more than they did. That said, even though I had this strong family support, I was still an Afghan woman living in Middlebury, Vermont—a long, long way from home. I feel a lot of empathy for international students, and for students who are the first in their families to make this huge step to college … in a sense, they’re a long way from home too.

So, if you’re an international student or a first-generation college student, I understand what you’re feeling. And my advice to you is: persistence pays off. You’re where you are because you’ve earned it. Never forget that. Never lose sight of your goals, and never be shy about asking questions and asking for help. Talk with your classmates, and if you can talk to your classmates’ parents, talk to them too. Talk with professors and take advantage of all the resources on campus. During orientation, you hear so much information and it can be overwhelming, so revisit it all after a while, and take stock of what’s around you. Career services, innovation labs … make use of all of it. This may all be new because of where you come from—it certainly was new to me—but now you’re here, and it’s all here for you.

**AR:** What was your favorite part about Middlebury? What should students take advantage of while here?

**SBR:** Two words: midnight breakfast. Is this still a thing at Middlebury? I really hope it is, and if it is, you don’t need me to tell you why I loved it: we all line up with friends during finals, the dining halls open their doors, we all stream in and get breakfast in the middle of the night. The food was great, but it really wasn’t about the food—it was about taking a break and checking in with everyone, making sure everyone’s doing okay. So much fun. But speaking of food: this may no longer be the case, but when I was at Middlebury, we didn’t have to swipe in when we went to the dining halls. You could go at any time, to any dining hall, and have as many meals as you wanted. I wasn’t into the party scene, so one of my favorite things to do was meet friends for two different lunches or two different dinners, and eat light and catch up. Sometimes small moments make deep impressions.

**AR:** How can the Middlebury community support SOLA?

**SBR:** You’re supporting us right now. You’re reading this piece because you’re interested in what we do and why we do it, and that’s what makes you some of our most powerful ambassadors. I hope you’ll talk about us with your friends. I hope you’ll go home on holidays and share our story with your families. If I’ve said something that touched a nerve, or if you’ve learned something you never knew, I hope you’ll spread the word about SOLA. It’s up to you now. I’m so proud of my connections to Middlebury. Some of you may know that, in recent years, SOLA has co-designed a program with Middlebury that brought several Middlebury students to India during the month of January to work with SOLA students as part of SOLA’s intensive Winter Program. COVID is keeping us from running a Winter Program in 2021, but I’d love to be able to resume this work once public health allows. And of course, we’re always looking for **new tutors** for our girls and we’re always looking to **sign up new donors** as we move ahead with this year’s matching grant – remember, you can email me anytime at president@sola-afghanistan.org to talk more. It’s incredibly meaningful to me to have members of the Middlebury community among our supporters. Thank you for believing in our students, and in the world they’ll create. We’re so happy to have you with us.

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Find out more about SOLA at [https://www.sola-afghanistan.org/](https://www.sola-afghanistan.org/)
Investigating Whiteness through Art

Nell Irvin Painter’s lecture, “The History of White People and What it Means for Now” on October 9th, 2020 focused on the changes in conceptions of American whiteness since the publication of her 2010 New York Times bestseller book, *The History of White People*. Dr. Painter is the Edwards Professor of American History Emerita at Princeton University. Since her retirement, Dr. Painter has earned a BFA at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and an MFA in painting from Rhode Island School of Design.

Dr. Painter centered her art as a means to discuss the evolution of American whiteness in the last ten years. Her artist’s book entitled *American Whiteness Since Trump* served as the centerpiece of her talk. Dr. Painter combined illustrations, collages and texts in this work, which she completed at the Bogliasco Foundation in Italy in February and March of this year. The piece aims to highlight the major shift in whiteness during the Trump era. First differentiating between the historically-located terms whiteness and white supremacy, Dr. Painter argued that the Trump era has increased the visibility, awareness, and recognition of whiteness across social strata in the United States.

Throughout the talk, Dr. Painter went page-by-page through her artist’s book, tying it to and expanding upon our understanding of whiteness. Dr. Painter began the book with a play on Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again,” translating it to “Make America White Again.” Subsequently, she addressed some prominent and vocal Trump supporters in 2016, including white nationalist and neo-nazi Richard Spencer, who organized the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville in 2017. In addressing this issue, Dr. Painter turned to the idea of hair. First, she pointed to the commonly held belief that Trump’s hair is fake. Then she noted how Spencer’s “fasci” hair was modelled on Nazi hair styles from the 1930s. She subsequently discussed White House aide Stephen Miller, who stood up for protecting a Robert E. Lee monument, and KKK...
leader David Duke, whom she scratched out in her depiction because Donald Trump claimed not to know him.

Next, Dr. Painter depicted the book *Camp of Saints*, which propagated anti-immigration sentiment and on which many Trump supporters have fixated. Her treatment of Charlottesville continued as she spoke about Heather Hayers, the counter demonstrator who was murdered, and how the rally’s leadership fell apart due to lawsuits, alcoholism, and doxxing. She noted specifically that Hayers’ murderer was convicted, that Richard Spencer’s wife left him, that he lost his income stream and that only Stephen Miller was left in power. After addressing Charlottesville, she pointed to a 2018 *New York Times* article by Emily Bazelon that addresses how white people have become aware of their whiteness, which is emblematic of our times.

Painter argues that this change in consciousness has also been shaped by the rise in Black nationalism and increased visibility of anti-Black policing. White people are also becoming more aware of how “white space” is policed, she noted. White space refers to places where non-white people are harassed for not being white, such as areas that featured exclusionary signs during the Jim Crow era. These are the places where individuals such as Tamir Rice and Ahmaud Arbery were murdered. “Trump moved racism from the euphemistic and plausibly deniable to the overt and freely claimed,” quoted Dr. Painter in a page of her artist’s book. This movement, she argued, has shifted America’s consciousness surrounding race.

Finally, Dr. Painter summed up the significance of these events and reiterated her initial point: whiteness has become “visible in conventional political wisdom” and this increased visibility of whiteness has profoundly shifted American understandings of racial identity. This ultimately is an important step towards an anti-racist future.

To watch the recording of Dr. Painter’s talk, go to go/NellPainterTalk/ or visit:

https://midd.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Sessions/List.aspx#folderID=%22af2fdfa6-6b0b-4178-8337-ac5c012cbdbc%22
As part of a continued exploration of the suffrage movement following the centennial of the 19th amendment, the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis House hosted the zoom talk “A Woman Presidential Candidate – In 1872 and 1884” in collaboration with the Burlington branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. The event took place on October 23, 2020 and featured author, lecturer, and activist Dr. Sally Roesch Wagner. She discussed two female activists, Victoria Woodhull (1838-1937) and Belva Lockwood (1830-1917), who ran for president in 1872 and 1884/1888, respectively—at a time when women did not even have the right to vote.

Dr. Roesch Wagner was awarded one of the first doctorates in the country for her work in women’s studies at UC Santa Cruz and instituted one the country’s first women’s studies college-level courses (CSU Sacramento). She is also the founder and executive director of the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center for Social Justice Dialogue in Fayetteville, New York.

In her talk, Dr. Roesch Wagner contextualized Woodhull’s and Lockwood’s attempts at winning the presidency through an overview of the work women’s suffrage organizations were doing at the time. She first noted the widespread nonviolence and civil disobedience campaign organized by the National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA), which began in 1868 and culminated in the 1874 Supreme Court case Minor v. Happersett, in which the court ruled unanimously that the Fourteenth Amendment—which granted citizenship and equal civil and legal rights to African Americans and formerly enslaved people—did not grant women the right to vote. Perhaps most notably, the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment—which granted African American men the right to vote—spurred a schism between white women’s suffrage organizers, with the NWSA splitting away from the American Women’s Suffrage Association (AWSA).

The NWSA argued that incremental changes—allowing first Black men to vote and addressing women’s suffrage later—were counter-productive. When Victoria Woodhull—the first woman to set up a brokerage firm on Wall Street, a communist and a newspaper editor—declared her candidacy for President of the United States on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872—with Frederick
Douglass as her running mate—she was doing so within this larger framework of the suffrage movement. Woodhull’s legacy, and the controversy that shaped it, ultimately resulted from an article published in her newspaper *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*. Woodhull never ran a campaign and her legacy came to be shaped by her time in jail on obscenity charges on election night.

Dr. Roesch Wagner detailed the events leading up to Woodhull’s arrest, turning first to Anthony Comstock, the official U.S. press censor, who arrested her. Woodhull, associated with the NWSA, publicly embraced “free love” and, consequently, this label came to be associated with the NWSA. Henry Ward Beecher, the first president of the AWSA, capitalized on this to critique the NWSA. Beecher, a famous preacher and brother of the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, condemned “free love” from the pulpit, but simultaneously practiced it. When Woodhull published this in an exposé, she was arrested for having committed an “obscene act.” This, Dr. Roesch Wagner argued, ultimately led to her downfall and she faded into the background.

“The only way for women to get their rights is to take them. If necessary, let there be a domestic insurrection,” Belva Lockwood—the second female presidential candidate profiled in the talk—proclaimed in a campaign speech. Lockwood, who ran in 1884 on the Equal Rights Party (ERP) ticket, was a lawyer who brought her experiences in that profession to her campaign. She was denied entry into some higher courts—as a married woman who could not be sued—and so she wrote legislation, lobbied with Congress with the support of the NWSA and eventually practiced before the Supreme Court.

A major component of Lockwood’s campaign was ending all wars by 1900. She advocated for all nations to end war and instead enter mandatory binding arbitration of disputes. Her party stood for equal and exact justice for all citizens regardless of color, sex, or nationality. It called for the self-determination of indigenous Americans, civil service reform, and ending monopolies. On election day, she received 4149 popular votes and won the entire electoral vote of Indiana; her votes, however, were not acknowledged by the Senate.

In the end, Dr. Roesch Wagner expanded our knowledge of the suffrage movement by detailing its complexities. Through mobilizing this history, feminists today can engage in more substantive campaigns and further advocate for justice.
THE FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT

In her novels, Lynn Ames ’82 writes women back into history. Her latest one, 46, presents a hopeful scenario: a POTUS who identifies as female.

By Elissa Asch ’22.5

Lynn Ames ‘82 has the breathtaking wit, resilience, and heart of a truly wonderful novelist and a truly wise feminist. During her time at Middlebury, Ames was a history major and a member of the SGA, she played tennis and softball, she wrote for The Campus and was the news manager of the Middlebury student radio station. She found room to explore her intellectual passions, gained lifelong friendships, and began to heal from a childhood of intense abuse. “[Middlebury gave me] a chance to reinvent myself,” she said. In terms of her sexual identity, Ames describes a very different Middlebury culture than the one we have today. “I’ll say it was a very different time … most of us were just trying to stay alive and get through the day. We weren’t loud and proud … we stayed deeply hidden in the closet.”

Once she graduated, Ames signed on to work as a radio broadcast journalist in Albany, NY. “I began … the day after I graduated from Middlebury. Six months later I became their news director.” After around 5 years, Ames moved to the other side of the microphone and became the press secretary to the senate minority leader in New York at age twenty-six. This was the mid-1980’s when the AIDS crisis was one of the primary societal and political issues. “[AIDS activists] were protesting in the hallways outside the governor’s office, and to go to my office I would have to step over, essentially, my friends. I wasn’t out at work, so they would acknowledge me with a look, I would acknowledge them [back]. And what I would say to them is there are two ways to affect the system: […] from without—which is what you are doing, protesting and standing up for what you believe in—[but also] […] from within.”

Later in her career Ames became the spokesperson for the New York state prison system (the third largest in the country), the first woman to hold such a role in New York state. She also created her own public relations firm “with a specialty in branding and image and crisis communications.” Throughout all of this, Ames made a point of speaking to many groups about childhood sexual abuse. “I never asked the question: why me? I asked the question: what am I meant to do with this? And the answer that I came back with is that I was meant to be the voice that other people can’t have. I was meant to give them voice, give them power, and send them love.”

And now, as a novelist, Ames uses her extensive knowledge of history, journalism, politics, media, feminism, and activism to give voice to strong women characters, who are often lesbians. She believes that there are “still so many young women and girls out there who need to see representations of strong female characters who don’t recognize the boundaries that are being put in front of them, but push through those boundaries anyway and prove that it can be done in realistic ways.” One of the ways Ames does this is by writing historical fiction. “I’ve written us back into the race for the atomic bomb in a book called Secrets Well Kept, which is about the women at Oak Ridge, Tennessee in WWII who created the fuel for the atomic bomb but did not know what they were doing. You can’t tell me that there were
75,000 women who worked at this place and not one of them was a lesbian, I won’t believe you. I wrote that back into history. I wrote about the Women Airforce Service Pilots, also WWII era, who flew every plane the men flew before the men flew it, and they never got credit for it. In fact, they were kept classified until 1977. Never in my Middlebury history education did I hear about those women.”

In her newest novel, 46, Ames introduces us to Emma McMasters, the 46th president of the United States and the first woman and lesbian to be elected as such. 46 gives us a hopeful look at a woman who knows no limits, as Emma works tirelessly to navigate the complex politics of the White House along with her personal life. By not shying away from these different facets of life, Ames intentionally creates Emma, as well as her other characters, to be flawed, resilient, and real in the most lovely and startling way.

The novel focuses on two primary themes, the first of which is a love story between Emma and Palmer Estes, the highest ranking woman in the military, and only the second woman to become a four-star general. “I wanted a strong protagonist, someone who is not any less than Emma. A woman who is strong in her own right, who has broken her own glass ceilings, who has risen to the highest levels in her profession. And I want to show that you can be that and also find ways to be romantic, to be together, to have a full life.”

The second main theme of 46 is political. While thinking on the current polarization of our nation, Ames began to think about what the next president might have to do, who they would have to be, to succeed in uniting our country. “I wanted to show people a way out, give them a road map, a way back to humanity, [...] to caring, [...] to hearing each other, to listening, to healing, and a way to find hope again.” Ames believes adamantly that there is more that unites us than divides us as people, and that “if we can get rid of the anger and the animosity and see each other as human beings then we can begin to heal and begin to find a path forward that’s constructive, not destructive.”

Ames plans to continue writing novels, writing women and lesbians back into history, and giving representation and voice to the voiceless, “As long as I can think, I have stories to tell,” she said. With these stories, as well as in her own life, Ames hopes to embolden women, to lay a path for them and to show them they are not alone. “I hope in the end that that’s what my legacy is—having opened doors for other women, other minorities, other LGBTQ+ people, to walk through with their heads high and with more ease than I was able to do.” Her valuable advice to Middlebury students is this: “Dare to be yourselves, dare to step out. Don’t be afraid of being criticized or ostracized. Be your very best, most authentic self and know that that is beautiful and it’s more than enough.”