



Our History Too

A women's history zine

Frances Kelsey

(1914–2015)

Frances Kelsey hadn't been working at the Food and Drug Administration for long before an application came across her desk that gave her pause. The German company Grunenthal was seeking approval for the distribution of their drug, Thalidomide. Thalidomide was used for a variety of purposes, including the treatment of morning sickness, and was already approved in 46 countries around the world. To Grunenthal, this application was just a formality; they expected it to be rubber stamped. But Kelsey, a doctor and pharmacologist, was concerned after reviewing evidence that the drug might cause nerve damage in adults who used it for a long period of time. She denied their application, outraging the company, who pressured the FDA to overrule her. But they didn't, and Kelsey refused each new application to approve Thalidomide. What she didn't know then was that she had largely prevented one of the worst medical disasters in human history from reaching American shores.

The next year, in 1961, two doctors, one in Germany and one in Australia, identified thalidomide as the cause of thousands of birth defects in children around the world. These included shortened limbs, blindness, deafness, organ damage, and other complications. Many babies died in their first year of life, and the drug likely caused miscarriages and stillbirths as well. Thalidomide was soon withdrawn from most countries and banned in the US. It is still unknown how many lives were touched by this tragedy.

Kelsey went on to lead the FDA's Investigational Drugs Branch, ensuring the accuracy of data used to guide the agency's drug decisions, and the Division of Scientific Investigations, creating new rules to better protect patients in drug investigations. Her work also shaped the modern day drug testing process in the United States. President John F. Kennedy awarded her the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service in 1962.

Frances Perkins

(1882-1965)

Frances Perkins was the first woman to be appointed to a cabinet position in American history, but her legacy began long before that. In 1907, she investigated fake employment agencies at the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association. After moving to New York City, she earned a master's degree in sociology and took up the cause of women's suffrage, joining protests and organizing efforts. When she received an offer to work for the National Consumers Protection League, she took it, excited at the opportunity to support workers' rights. Under the NCL, she fought for the outlawing of child labor and shorter workweeks for adults. Perkins also served on a state committee that led to the creation of a new legislative body that investigated workplaces for safety violations in New York. This came after the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, which took the lives of 146 workers in a preventable tragedy.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was impressed with her work. He had worked with her in New York as governor, and as president, he appointed her to be Secretary of Labor. There, Perkins had the challenging task of realizing the president's New Deal programs. Under her leadership, the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration provided millions of jobs that built public infrastructure and improved national parks. One of her greatest achievements was leading a committee that developed the Social Security program. She also wrote the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the law that outlawed child labor, created a minimum wage, and established the 40 hour work week.

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy

(1946–2025)

In the 1940s, a pregnant beauty shop manager received some advice from a psychic: her baby would arrive early, and her child would be born different, so she should name her something strong and full of character. Turns out, the psychic was right on both accounts. Assigned male at birth, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy came out to her parents as transgender at a young age. They didn't take it well. In her teen years, she was institutionalized multiple times, prayed over, and saw her dresses burned. When none of that worked, her parents kicked her out of their home. She wound up in New York, performing in drag shows and relying on sex work and the kindness of other trans women to survive. When police raided the Stonewall Inn and its queer patrons fought back, she joined the fight, with no idea the event would spark an explosion of activism and culminate in the modern LGBT rights movement.

Griffin-Gracy's life was marked by arrests and police brutality. After police did little to investigate the murder of one of her friends, another trans woman, she and her friend Bunny decided they would look out for each other while they worked. Over time, Griffin-Gracy began looking out for a number of trans women in her community. This tenderness can be seen throughout her life. She recruited her friends, all trans women, to care for gay men dying of AIDS during the AIDS crisis. In San Francisco, she drove a clean needle exchange van. She provided HIV education to homeless trans people and directed a program that helped transgender prisoners transition to civilian life. She raised her biological son alongside adopted runaways and helped young LGBT people whose parents had abandoned them. Griffin-Gracy passed away in 2025, but she left behind a legacy of deep love, commitment, and service to the LGBT community's most vulnerable members.

Octavia Butler

(1947-2006)

Octavia Butler loved stories all her life, especially science fiction. As a shy, lonely kid, reading and writing took her mind off her struggles. At 10 years old, she already carried a large notebook with her for writing. Her dyslexia made school difficult, but a teacher saw her potential and encouraged her to submit one of her short stories to a magazine. This inspired her to pursue a career in writing. As an adult, she took a class with sci-fi writer Harlan Ellison, who encouraged her to attend a science fiction writing workshop in Pennsylvania. There, she developed her writing style and sold her first two short stories.

It took a few more years before Butler found success as a writer. She worked odd jobs to make ends meet, until she finally finished a novel she had been working on. Doubleday bought her manuscript, and she went on to write 13 more books. Her 1979 book, *Kindred*, is considered a modern classic by many. She was a pioneer in the science fiction genre, and her works touched on a wide variety of themes, including power, identity, inequality, and environmental destruction. She helped create the genre of Afrofuturism and expanded the possibilities of science fiction by putting Black heroes front and center. Butler received Nebula and Hugo awards, which honor exceptional science fiction and fantasy stories, as well as a PEN Lifetime Achievement Award and a Langston Hughes Medal. In 1995, she became the first sci-fi writer to win a MacArthur Fellowship.

Kalpana Chawla

(1962–2003)

Kalpana Chawla was born in Haryana, India, in 1962. As a kid, she was fascinated with space and dreamed of becoming an astronaut. As an adult, she followed those dreams, moving to the US and receiving a doctorate in aerospace engineering and a pilot's license. In 1988, she joined NASA, conducting research on the impact of air flows on flying aircraft. She also studied aerodynamics through a non-profit research group. In 1997, after gaining her American citizenship, she became the first Indian woman in space, serving as a mission specialist and robotic arm operator on mission STS-87. The crew conducted microgravity experiments and research on the sun's outer atmosphere.

In 2003, she flew on the space shuttle Columbia, where the crew worked 24 hour alternating shifts to complete over 80 experiments in just 16 days. Unbeknownst to them, however, a small foam piece had broken off of the shuttle upon launch, striking the left wing. Damage from the impact caused the shuttle to break apart upon re-entry. 37 miles above Texas, all 7 crew members died. This horrific tragedy changed NASA's approach to safety. The organization made numerous technical and organizational changes, including efforts to improve its safety culture by encouraging those with dissenting opinions to speak up.

Chawla has never been forgotten. Through stories about her life, awards, and honors (including an asteroid with her name), her legacy lives on. Chawla advanced aeronautic research and broke barriers, but perhaps the most beautiful legacy she left behind was her awe and wonder at the beauty of our world and her belief that we must protect it. When asked about her defining moment in space, she said, “The sunrise and sunsets. It is almost as if everything is in fast forward. It is totally dark. Then dark to violet, to orange and red – all this right at the thin band of the atmosphere – and then it's sunrise. At the sunset, there was a moon – its crescent was razor sharp and its color was dusty silvery. Then the moon raced away from us and was lost in the glow of the earth's curvature. Almost like a story book that you read as a child. Gosh, I enjoyed every moment up there.”

Lynn Conway

(1938–2024)

Despite Lynn Conway's important contributions to computer design at IBM, she was still fired in 1968 after announcing her intent to transition. After her transition, she found a new job under a new name at Xerox PARC, hiding her trans identity from her coworkers to avoid discrimination. There, the computer scientist and engineer worked with Carver Mead to invent Very Large Scale Integration (VLSI), a new way of designing computer chips to make them faster and more powerful. This innovation made today's electronic devices possible. Conway and Mead went on to write a foundational textbook on VLSI, and Conway taught the first course about it at MIT. Less than 10 years later, 120 schools also taught the subject.

Unfortunately, Conway joined a long line of women whose computing innovations were ignored in the 20th century. For many years, Carver Mead was given more credit for their joint work. For example, he received awards for the invention while Conway didn't and was celebrated at an event at the Computer History Museum in Silicon Valley, which Conway was not invited to. In 1999, she decided to tell her story, coming out as a transgender woman. She began advocating for the acceptance of transgender people and started a website to support members of the trans community, especially women who wanted to come out and felt alone. In 2014, she was finally added to the Computer History Museum, 12 years after Mead. IBM also apologized for her firing and awarded her their Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020, one of many awards she received for her work. The year before her death, Conway took her place in the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

Ellen Church

(1904-1965)

In 1930, a registered nurse named Ellen Church walked into the Boeing Air Transport Office. She sought to fulfill her long-held dream of becoming a pilot. Although she was qualified, the airline turned her down. They only hired male pilots, they said. But manager Steve Simpson mentioned something else that interested her. They were planning to hire male flight attendants, like some European airlines had. Church proposed an alternative. What if they hired her instead, and she used her nursing skills to ease the fears of nervous fliers? Boeing headquarters agreed, giving Church and 7 other nurses a 3 month trial to test the concept. Those 8 women were some of the first American flight attendants.

The nurses faced strict requirements. Early planes could not hold much weight, and stewardesses had to navigate narrow aisles, so they could not weigh over 115 pounds. To avoid banging their heads on the low ceilings, they could not be taller than 5'4. But some requirements had nothing to do with their ability to do the job. For example, the women could not be married or older than 25. At least it paid well. The flight attendants worked 100 hours a month, performing a variety of duties. As the Federal Aviation Administration notes, these included "... caring for sick and frightened passengers, taking tickets, loading and unloading luggage, helping fuel the plane, passing out lunches, cleaning inside the plane, and tightening the bolts holding the seats to the floor." Despite these challenges, Church and her crew performed brilliantly, and passengers liked the service. The trial was a success. Other airlines soon hired their own female flight attendants, creating job opportunities for women in aviation.

Unfortunately, Church's own stewardess career was short-lived. An injury from a car accident grounded her, and she returned to nursing. But she wouldn't stay down long. She joined the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, assisting with air evacuations of wounded soldiers. She was even chosen to train other evacuation nurses for D-Day in 1944. Church received several medals, including the Air Medal, for her achievements in flight.

Joycelyn Elders

(1933-)

Joycelyn Elders was born to a family of poor sharecroppers in rural Arkansas. The eldest of 8 children, she grew up in a 3 room shack without plumbing or electricity. She and her siblings began working in the cotton fields at age 5. They attended a segregated school 13 miles away, often missing class during harvest time. Despite these hardships, Elders graduated first in her class and earned a scholarship to Philander Smith College, an all-black school in Little Rock. Her parents couldn't afford the bus fare to the city, so her siblings did extra work to earn the money. One day, Elders attended a talk by Edith Irby Jones, the first Black student to attend the University of Arkansas Medical School. She walked away feeling like a career in medicine was possible. After a stint in the army, she used the GI bill to attend the same medical school Irby Jones had. There, she found her passions, and by 1976, she was teaching at her university and conducting research at her pediatric endocrinology practice.

Elders published over a hundred research papers in two decades, specializing in childhood growth disorders and juvenile diabetes. Her observations on the health risks for young, pregnant women with diabetes inspired her to study sexual behavior in teens and help young patients prevent pregnancy. In 1987, governor Bill Clinton chose Elders to lead Arkansas's Department of Health. She rose to the challenge, advocating for comprehensive sex ed in schools, to the ire of some religious groups. Elders' fierce advocacy paid off when the state passed a law requiring schools to implement sex education and substance abuse prevention programs. Under her leadership, the state saw a ten-fold increase in childhood health screenings. Vaccination rates for 2 year olds nearly doubled. Access to HIV testing and counseling, breast cancer screenings, prenatal care, and home care for people with chronic and terminal illnesses improved. In 1993, she became the first Black Surgeon General under President Clinton. During her 15 months in office, she advocated for universal health care, sex education, and the legalization of abortion drug mifepristone. She was unafraid to speak her mind, even when it cost her her job. Elders still champions sex ed and reproductive rights to this day.

Ofelia Zepeda

(1952-)

Ofelia Zepeda was born in a tiny town in the Arizona desert. As a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, a Native American tribe, she grew up speaking the tribe's language, O'odham. She learned English in elementary school. As a sociology student at the University of Arizona, she wanted to learn to read in O'odham, a language she could only speak, so a tutor encouraged her to study linguistics instead. Zepeda took him up on the offer, working her way up to a doctoral degree. Along the way, she wrote one of the first grammar textbooks, *A Papago Grammar*, on the O'odham language. The book was written to help Native people learn the language and provide context for linguists seeking to understand it. This was an important moment in the endangered language's preservation, and only the first step for the young author. She began teaching O'odham language classes, incorporating students' own poems and songs as teaching materials.

After earning her doctorate, Zepeda became a professor at her alma mater, continuing the fight to preserve endangered languages. From organizing conferences to advising UNESCO to helping tribes build their own language programs for schools, she has dedicated herself to Native American language preservation and education. Zepeda even played a key role in the passage of the Native American Languages Act of 1990, which furthered these efforts. In 1999, all of this work earned her a MacArthur “genius” grant. In the following years, she and a fellow professor started work on an online version of the *Tohono 'O'odham-English Dictionary*, which a Texas professor finished with her class some time later. Zepeda still teaches O'odham language courses at her university and directs a training program she co-founded that supports Native language preservation efforts.

In addition to academic research, she has published poems in both O'odham and English. Her work reflects her tribe's history and culture and what it's like being Tohono O'odham today. She also edits a Native American literary journal called *Sun Tracks*.

Chloe Kim

(2000-)

Chloe Kim's father encouraged her to try snowboarding at a California ski resort, so she did, at age 4. Her snowboarding career began not long after. After training in the Swiss Alps and joining a developmental team back in California, she tried her hand at the 2015 X Games. At only 13, she became the youngest medalist in X Games history, earning silver at the superpipe event. The following year, she tried the games again, taking gold. She also landed back-to-back 1080 jumps at the US Snowboarding Grand Prix, a first for female boarders.

Kim's Olympic career might have started in 2014, but she wasn't old enough to participate. By her first Olympics in 2018, she was already the one to beat. The young boarder had won multiple gold medals at superpipe in the X Games, earned the highest half-pipe score in Youth Olympics history, and ranked highly at half-pipe at the 2017 World Cup. In the Olympic half-pipe, she had a strong first run, but fell in her second. Fortunately, Kim's lead was so strong she earned gold anyway, making her the youngest half-pipe medalist in history. She also repeated her feat from the US Snowboarding Grand Prix, something no female Olympian had done before. As US Ski & Snowboard notes, Kim was the first person to earn titles at “ . . . all four major snowboarding events: the Olympics, Youth Olympics, X Games, and World Championships.” She now holds 2 gold medals and 1 silver at Olympic half-pipe.

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