



The Girl Puzzle Monument in NYC (Photo by Irina Hague)

Amanda Matthews' Speech for the United Nations
o.b.o. Circle of Women Ambassadors to the UN
March 9, 2025

Esteemed guests, I am honored to be standing with you today on behalf of women everywhere. And I am proud to be standing in front of my work, The Girl Puzzle Monument. It is one of the world's largest monuments honoring diverse women. How fitting to speak of Nellie Bly and the women and girls she advocated for on this day, at the launch of the 69th United Nations session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Some people rise to greatness by breaking world records. Some, by showing undying empathy for their fellow human beings.

Nellie Bly did both!

Bly began her career in journalism at age 20 by disturbing societal standards that keep women subordinate. Her first published work in 1885, titled *The Girl Puzzle*, was a bold and unvarnished response to bigotry. Through this title, she was saying... Women are not a monolith. Our value is not determined by our service or servitude but is inherent to our humanity.

Nellie Bly was intrigued by faces and refers to them throughout *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, a memoir inspired by her experiences while incarcerated on this island. Bly describes people "with stories printed on their faces of hard lives, abuse, and poverty." She noticed the heartbreaking look of distress on the faces of her companions also headed to the asylum.

But a pivotal moment for Bly was when the first patient in the Asylum questioned Bly's insanity, stating, "It cannot be seen in your face." Bly had fooled everyone from police to judges to doctors, but she was exposed by a woman deemed incapable of understanding reality.

Bly realized in that moment the complex nature of the surveillance and confinement of women. She said many women were taken “without their consent from a free world,” perhaps for not conforming to a patriarchal society. And they were punished for it. Bly described the abuse of the helpless women and girls, who “were in the power of their keepers” and who would “weep and plead for release.”

Bly famously stated, “I determined then and there I would try by every means to make my mission of benefit to my suffering sisters.”

By advocating for others, she gave a face and a voice to women with no visibility or prominence in society. She empowered women to inhabit new spaces. Her poignant descriptions of marginalized women remind me of people I know. Complicated, diverse, and magnificent women who represent many facets of humanity. Women and girls who have been broken by sexism, racism, classism, ageism, ableism, by religious persecution, by society, and by governments. But these women have mended themselves in ways more beautiful than before.

The best way to honor Nellie Bly is to continue her great work. Susan Rosenthal knew this when deciding to honor Nellie Bly on this island. I, too, have made it my mission to benefit my suffering sisters.

We all know people reflected in Bly’s words—written 140 years ago. These are faces of my friends and family, who represent marginalized women and girls and offer us hope for something better.



On the back of each face is a quote by Nellie Bly that reminds me of that person...

“While I live I hope...”

This face is inspired by my daughter, Natalie, who is a member of the queer community. Like many others, she lacks equal representation under the law and lives in fear of being stripped of her freedoms, rights, and protections. Her face is aged forward 50 years, portraying the hopeful trajectory of her life showing long-lived happiness. It reflects a perpetual desire for equality and acceptance of all LGBTQ+ individuals.

“I gave a despairing farewell glance at freedom...”

My dear friend, Mioko, who recently passed away at age 100, inspired this face. Of Japanese descent, she was an American by birth and was 18 years old in 1942, when an Executive Order by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt removed her from her home. She was taken to a racetrack to live in a horse stall and later

interned at Rohwer—a 500-acre concentration camp with barbed wire and armed guards—and was not reunited with her family for years.

Mioko is facing the south end of the Island, toward the sculpture of President Roosevelt’s face in Four Freedoms Park. This is to remind us that Mioko and President Roosevelt were unequal in their power but equal in their value and dignity as humans.

“I walked with the grace of a queen...”

Nellie Bly resisted being harshly handled by an attendee at the asylum. Once freed from his grip, she stated, “I walked with the grace of a queen past the crowd that had gathered, curious to see the new unfortunate.”

My dear friend, Cutia, inspired this face. A strong, intelligent black woman who has dedicated her life to helping others, Cutia endured unimaginable grief when she lost her infant child and later lost her brother, due in part to racial bias in our medical system. Cutia knows first-hand the structures of dominance and the urgent need to eliminate systemic racism. The emotion in her eyes speaks volumes about the pain and trauma endured by generations of human beings.

“I dreamed of my mother...”

A young girl had been institutionalized in the Asylum for 4 years. She spoke to Nellie Bly *every* morning and said, "I dreamed of my mother last night. I think she may come today and take me home."

Such pain and loneliness are apparent as this abandoned child kept clinging to a trace of hope that her lot in life would change. This face is inspired by my youngest child, Audrey, who as a teen, was the subject of an emotionally crippling court case in which they were marginalized and silenced while begging to be heard within a flawed legal system.

How much has changed - and how little?

- We need more “Nellie Blys” in this world who are moved by the plight of a single young girl.
- We need more “Nellie Blys” in this world to help dismantle systems of oppression.
- We need more “Nellie Blys” who say, “Here would be a good field for believers in women’s rights.”
- We need more “Nellie Blys” to help buttress the pillars of freedom.
- We need more “Nellie Blys” to speak truth to power!

As the 69th United Nations session of the Commission on the Status of Women begins, let us continue Bly’s great work by remembering that we are imperfect purveyors of the perfect notion that “All human beings are born Free and Equal in Dignity and Rights.”

Bly began her life in obscurity as the granddaughter of immigrants. She dared to claim her agency, spoke up for herself and others, and became known globally for her brave humanitarian work. By doing so, she offers us a framework for solving The Girl Puzzle. Let us continue this great work by fighting for gender equality, for the security and safety of women and girls, for reproductive rights, for the expression of gender diversity, for the elimination of poverty, for inclusion in peace processes, and for equal representation in board rooms, courtrooms, and governments so our voices are heard around the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, leaders...**Now is not the time to be silent!**



THE GIRL PUZZLE

Nellie Bly

©Amanda Matthews
www.thegirlpuzzle.com



Amanda Matthews is an internationally recognized sculptor and designer of public art, renowned for conveying advocacy through art. She is a writer, public speaker, filmmaker, and CEO of Prometheus Art, a Design/Build Firm in Lexington, Kentucky. Matthews holds a Bachelors in Studio Art & Philosophy from the University of Louisville and studied Fine Art and Architecture in Paris, France. A commitment to gender equality, fairness, human rights, community, and accessibility is central to her work. Amanda serves in prominent positions on multiple boards and commissions. She has received 24 grants for her work and many awards, including the Governor's Award in the Arts for Lifetime Achievement. She regularly speaks at universities and conferences, including the United Nations Foundation Global Leadership Summit for the Girl Up Division in 2022. Her work resides in several notable collections, including the New York City Public Art Collection, and has been featured in broadcast and print media around the globe.

Amanda Matthews
PO Box 12023 Lexington, Kentucky, USA 40579
prometheusartfoundry@gmail.com
www.prometheusart.com



Publicist, Caleb Phelps, Good Night Communications