Elizabeth Blackwell
The Word No Never Stopped Her
By Sarah Glasscock

Characters (in order of appearance)
Dr. Carole Jefferson: Narrator
Elizabeth Blackwell: First woman doctor in the United States
Dr. James Hadley: Dean of Geneva College
Dr. Webster: Professor of anatomy at Geneva College
Male medical students 1-4 (nonspeaking roles)
Madame Charrier: Chief of nurses at La Maternité
Anna Blackwell: Elizabeth’s sister, and a well-known journalist
M. Blot: Surgeon at La Maternité
Emily Blackwell: Elizabeth’s sister, and a surgeon
Marie Zakrzewska: Doctor
Family Members 1-4
Crowd Members 1-4 (nonspeaking roles)
James Doogan: A former patient of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell’s
Policeman
ACT I

Scene 1: November, 1847. A classroom at Geneva College in Geneva, New York

Dr. Carole Jefferson: If it weren’t for Elizabeth Blackwell, I might not be a doctor today. Her courage made it possible for other women to attend medical school. In the 1840s, when Elizabeth began applying to medical schools, women students were unheard of. Time after time, she was turned down. Then one day, a letter arrived from a small medical college in New York state. All the medical students had voted to accept Elizabeth Blackwell into the school! Classes had already started so she hurried to Geneva College.

Elizabeth Blackwell: I'm eager to begin classes, Dr. Hadley. I've missed two weeks’ lessons already. I want to catch up.

Dr. Hadley: Yes, well, I've come to take you to your first class. Before we go . . . (He pauses and then continues.) Miss Blackwell, while I admire your determination, I feel I must explain something to you. You see, the students . . . the students—

Elizabeth Blackwell: They all voted to accept me into school here. Have some of the students changed their minds?

Dr. Hadley: No . . . no, that’s not it . . . exactly. You see, the students . . . well, I might as well come right out and say it. They voted you in as a joke.

Elizabeth Blackwell: A joke?

Dr. Hadley: It was a nice spring day, and they were . . . and we read them your letter and asked them to vote on your request. They didn’t take it seriously, you see. They were kidding. We didn’t think you’d actually show up, you see.

Elizabeth Blackwell: Dr. Hadley, you sent me a letter telling me I had been accepted. I've paid you for my schooling. They may have meant it as a joke, but I'm here—and I'm not leaving until I'm a doctor. Will you show me to the classroom, please?

Dr. Hadley: If you’ll wait out here, I'll just go in and . . . prepare the class.

Dr. Carole Jefferson: Dr. Hadley opens the door and enters the classroom. Elizabeth paces back and forth. She can hear him talking to the other students, but can’t make out his words. Finally, the door opens.

Dr. Hadley: Come in, Miss Blackwell. (She enters the classroom.) Gentleman, may I present our new student, Miss Elizabeth Blackwell.
**Dr. Carole Jefferson:** The classroom was totally silent. As the other students stared, Elizabeth Blackwell calmly made her way to her seat. The lectures began, and she soon forgot all about the other students. That night in her diary, Elizabeth wrote, “My first happy day!”

**Scene 2: A few months later. Same classroom at Geneva College.**

**Dr. Carole Jefferson:** Dr. Webster, who taught anatomy, was one of Elizabeth’s favorite teachers. He believed she would make a fine doctor. One evening, Elizabeth received a note from Dr. Webster, asking her not to attend class the next day. An operation was to be done, and some of the teachers felt she shouldn’t see it with the other students. Elizabeth sat down and quickly wrote Dr. Webster. The next day she showed up for class.

**Elizabeth Blackwell:** Did you receive my letter?

**Dr. Webster:** I certainly did. I’m about to read it to the rest of the students. I shall have them vote on whether or not to admit you to the operation.

**Elizabeth Blackwell** (joking): There’s altogether too much voting done at this school!

**Dr. Webster:** Miss Blackwell, I believe you’re right in what you wrote. A doctor must study and see everything that may befall a body.

**Elizabeth Blackwell:** I am willing to compromise. Instead of my usual place in front of the classroom, I would be willing to sit in back. Perhaps then my presence wouldn’t bother some of the students so much.

**Dr. Webster:** No, Miss Blackwell, if they make the right decision, you’ll sit where you always sit. Right in front.

**Dr. Carole Jefferson:** Dr. Webster went into the classroom. Elizabeth was again left in the hall to pace. She could hear him reading her letter to the students. After a few minutes, Dr. Webster opened the door.

**Elizabeth Blackwell:** May I come in, Dr. Webster?

**Dr. Webster:** You may, Miss Blackwell. We are particularly honored to have you with us today.

(As Elizabeth enters the classroom, all the male students rise and begin to clap.)
ACT 2

Scene 1: 1849. Inside La Maternité, a French hospital outside of Paris.

Dr. Carole Jefferson: Elizabeth Blackwell graduated from Geneva College—first in her class. She had decided to become a surgeon. The best place to study surgery was at hospitals in Paris, France. None of the French schools would let her in. Did Elizabeth give up? Absolutely not! She took a job in a Paris hospital as a student nurse. Most of the other students were young French women with little education. Still, Elizabeth knew that she would learn a great deal about surgery by watching the doctors at the hospital. She worked long hours; her jobs included cleaning the hospital, caring for patients, and taking notes as doctors and nurses asked their patients questions.

Madame Charrier: Mademoiselle Blackwell, I am going over the notes you took for your teacher. Mademoiselle Mallet says that she did not say all the things you wrote down.

Elizabeth Blackwell (expecting to be scolded): I added some details I had observed about the patient.

Madame Charrier: Yes! Yes! You did well! You are a very smart woman. We have all noticed this. But why are you here, Mademoiselle Blackwell?

Elizabeth Blackwell: I'm here to learn, Madame. There is no better place to do that than at this hospital.

Madame Charrier: True! True! We will make you a fine nurse!

Elizabeth Blackwell: I know you would make me a fine nurse, Madame, but I want to be a surgeon.

Madame Charrier: A surgeon! Oh, mademoiselle, you are too much! I almost believed you!

Scene 2: About six months later. Inside the same hospital.

Dr. Carole Jefferson: Elizabeth got to watch the French doctors perform many difficult operations. The long hours of hard work, however, were beginning to take their toll. She planned to leave the hospital soon, travel for a while and become a surgeon. One night, she was awakened to care for a small baby whose eyes were infected. An accident occurred, and Elizabeth’s eyes became infected, too. The infection invaded her entire body, and she became seriously ill. Her sister Anna came to her bedside.

Anna Blackwell: Elizabeth, how are you feeling today? Your forehead doesn’t seem as hot as it did yesterday.
Elizabeth Blackwell: I’m feeling much better today. My head doesn’t ache. I—Anna! Anna!

Anna Blackwell: What is it? Should I get the doctor?

M. Blot (hurrying in): I’m here. What is it, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Blackwell: My eyes! I can’t see!

M. Blot: It’s all right. You have a film over your eyes to protect them. Let me remove it.

Elizabeth Blackwell: There! I can see your face! And Anna, I see you—no! No! It’s gone! I can’t see!

Dr. Carole Jefferson: Elizabeth lost sight in one eye and damaged the other. A surgeon needs the full use of her eyes. Elizabeth’s dreams of becoming a surgeon were gone, but she was still determined to practice medicine.

ACT 3

Scene 1: 1858. New York Infirmary for Women and Children, New York City.

Dr. Carole Jefferson: After continuing her studies in England, Elizabeth returned to the United States in 1851. She moved to New York City and set up her doctor’s office as well as a free clinic for poor families. But, as usual, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell had bigger ideas. She wanted to open a hospital that would also train women doctors—and she did! In 1858, the New York Infirmary for Women and Children opened its doors. Working with Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell were her younger sister Dr. Emily Blackwell, a surgeon, and Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, who had come to America from Germany to study medicine. Although the hospital was successful, no doctor can make every patient well.

Emily Blackwell: It was a difficult case. You warned the family that she wouldn’t get better. You did everything a doctor could do.

Elizabeth Blackwell: I know, but that’s not what a family wants to hear. They’re taking it very hard. (The sound of people shouting outside can be heard.) Do you hear that?

Marie Zakrzewska (rushing into the room): Come quick! They’ve blocked the doors and the street! We’re trapped!

Emily Blackwell: Who has?
Marie Zakrzewska: The woman who died—her family! They’ve got shovels and axes!

Elizabeth Blackwell: We must keep calm. Our first duty is to make sure our patients are safe. Emily, you and Marie check on them. I’ll go outside and talk to the family.

(Emily and Marie hurry out of the room. Elizabeth goes to the front door and opens it.)

Family Member 1: There she is! Woman doctor! Take that! (He hurls a rock at the door.)

Family Member 2: You killed my cousin! (More rocks hit the door.)

Family Member 3: We’ll make sure she doesn’t hurt anybody else! Come on! Let’s get those patients out of there!

(James Doogan and a policeman make their way to Elizabeth.)

James Doogan (to Elizabeth): There, there, doctor, you’d better make yourself scarce.

Elizabeth Blackwell: No, this is my hospital. This is my problem.

Policeman (shouting): All right, you hooligans! Back off! The paddy wagons’ll be here in two minutes, and we’ll haul the lot of you off to jail!

Family Member 4: Two minutes is all we need! Just hand her over! We want to practice a little medicine on her!

(The family and mob move toward Elizabeth.)

Policeman (to Elizabeth): You’d better get inside, doctor, or you’ll be stitching up your own head.

(Elizabeth reluctantly goes back into the hospital.)

James Doogan: What’s your beef with the good doctor here? How many of you has she helped? How many of you has she helped for free? Is this the way you thank her?

Family Member 1: She didn’t help my sister! She killed her!

James Doogan: And that’s a sad thing, to lose someone you love, I know that for a fact. I also know how sick she was. Dr. Blackwell made her last hours comfortable. She sat right beside your sister’s bed, didn’t she?

Family Member 2: She did. What’s that got to do with anything? Doctors aren’t supposed to sit! They’re supposed to make people get well!
James Doogan: And what did Dr. Blackwell tell you? Did she say that she could cure your sister?

Family Member 3: No . . . but

James Doogan: I didn't think so. She tells the truth. She tells you what you’re in for. Am I right? How many of you are alive today because of her? I am. Didn't she help me when I had pneumonia?

Family Member 4 (mumbling): She came in the middle of the night to look after our baby.

Policeman: It’s not safe for a woman to be going out at that time of night, but that didn’t stop her, did it?

Family Member 4: No. No, it didn’t. I guess I’ll go home and see my baby.

(The family and mob look at each other, and begin to drift off. Elizabeth opens the front door.)

Police: All’s well, Miss—sorry—Dr. Blackwell.

James Doogan: It’s a hard road women doctors have.

Elizabeth Blackwell: The more of us there are, the easier it will be. You’ll see. Soon people won’t think twice about going to a woman doctor.


Carole Jefferson: During the Civil War, Elizabeth helped the war effort. She chose women to train as battlefield nurses. The hospital, too, overflowed with people from both sides, Union and Confederate. When the war ended, she turned her sights on bigger ideas. In 1864, the New York State Legislature voted in favor of a women’s medical college. Two years later, on April 13, 1866, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell opened such a college. Fifteen women began the study of medicine. Women could now study medicine in Boston and Philadelphia. But Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell still had work to do.

Emily Blackwell: Can you believe that it’s been twenty years since you graduated from Geneva College? You were the only woman doctor in America. You aren’t alone in your profession anymore!

Elizabeth Blackwell: Still, my work’s not done.
Emily Blackwell: Of course not. The school’s growing every year, and so is the hospital.

Elizabeth Blackwell: Oh, I think my work here in the United States is done. Europe, though, could use my attention.

Emily Blackwell: Europe! You’re not going there? Why? You have everything here in America that you fought so hard for.

Elizabeth Blackwell: That we fought so hard for. If I went to England, I know the hospital and school would be in good hands. You’re not only a fine surgeon, Emily, you run things here very well.

Emily Blackwell: I know better than to say “No, you can’t do that” to you. The English don’t know what’s about to hit them!
Elizabeth Blackwell
Teaching Guide

“All doubt as to the future, all hesitation as to the
rightfulness of my purpose, left me, and never in after-
life returned. I knew that, however insignificant my
individual effort might be, it was in a right direction.”
—From the diary of Elizabeth Blackwell

Biography
Elizabeth Blackwell was born on February 3, 1821, into a
progressive English family. Of her eight siblings, a sister
Anna was a well-known journalist, a sister Emily became a surgeon, and a brother, Henry,
moved the suffragist Lucy Stone. The Blackwells were deeply involved in the abolitionist
movement. Their father Samuel, owner of a sugar refinery, moved his family to the United
States after a fire destroyed his factory. He died a short time later. Elizabeth began her
quest to attend medical school in 1844. As the rejections flooded in, she convinced several
doctors to teach her privately. Finally, in 1847, a small college in New York state sent an
acceptance letter. Elizabeth set out immediately for Geneva Medical School only to learn
that her unanimous acceptance by the male students had been a joke. No one expected
her to show up. She stood her ground and was allowed to attend classes. Two years later,
Elizabeth Blackwell graduated at the head of her class. Determined to become a surgeon,
she sailed for Paris, which at the time had the best medical facilities in the world. No
French school or doctor would agree to teach a woman. Undeterred, Elizabeth applied to
La Maternité, a hospital for women outside of Paris, for training as an apprentice midwife.
Despite long hours cleaning the hospital and caring for patients, Elizabeth was able to
observe many difficult procedures. One night, she accidentally squirted fluid from an
infected baby into her eyes and became seriously ill. The illness caused permanent dam-
age: she lost sight in one eye and damaged the other. Her dreams of becoming a surgeon
were dashed. In London, Elizabeth was able to further her medical studies, and in 1851,
she returned to the United States to set up practice in New York City. In 1858, Dr.
Elizabeth Blackwell, with the help of her sister Dr. Emily Blackwell, opened her own hos-
pital, the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. In 1866, the first medical school
for women in New York state was established at the hospital. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell
moved to England and worked successfully to open the field of medicine to women there.
She died on May 31, 1910.

Take a Closer Look
The First Woman Doctor by Rachel Baker (Scholastic, 1971)
Elizabeth Blackwell by Jordan Brown (Chelsea House, 1989)
The Life of Elizabeth Blackwell by Elizabeth Schleichert (TFC Books, 1991)
Activities

Never Give Up
People kept saying “no” to Elizabeth Blackwell, but she never gave up her dream of becoming a doctor. If anything, the constant rejection made her more determined than ever. Do your students believe that perseverance and determination can overcome any obstacles? If so, encourage them to provide specific examples. If not, question students about the kinds of obstacles they feel are insurmountable and ask them to give their reasons why. Talk about how the story of Elizabeth Blackwell affected their beliefs.

The First One
When Elizabeth Blackwell began to attend medical school, people stared at her. Children followed her around town. She found it difficult to find a landlord or landlady who would rent a room to her. By the end of the first term, Elizabeth Blackwell had earned the respect of her classmates, teachers, and the Geneva townspeople. Open a discussion about the positive and negative benefits of being the first person to do something. Encourage students who have personal or first-hand knowledge of being the first to do something, to share their stories with the class.

I Want to Be—
Although your students have a few years to decide, ask them what careers appeal to them now. Have them write down the necessary qualifications for their careers in the form of an employment advertisement. If you wish, bring in copies of employment ads from the newspaper for students to study. What qualities do students think their career of choice requires? Which of these qualities do they feel they possess? Draw a template for an employment application on the chalkboard. Include a space for a personal statement where the applicant outlines the unique personal qualities that make her or him perfect for the job. After copying the form on a piece of paper, students should fill it out.

A Job Survey
People are drawn to different jobs for different reasons. Invite students to conduct a survey to find out about people and their work. You may wish to have students work together in groups of three or four to come up with a series of questions to include in their survey. They may survey family members, friends, neighbors, and/or school workers.

Is There a Doctor in the Community?
How many doctors serve your community? How many of them are women? Bring in the yellow pages of the telephone directory for your city or town, or direct students to look up the heading “Physicians” at home to answer the questions. Students may present their data in a bar or circle graph.

Other Firsts for Women
Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman in America to go to school and become a doctor. Many other American women have been the first to accomplish their goals, too. Begin this activity by asking students to design an award that honors the firsts of American women. Then, have them conduct research to learn more about trailblazing women. On their awards, students should write the women’s accomplishments. Each award should be accompanied by a brief biography.