

The importance of positive female role models: Beyond Celebrities!

International Women's Day 2024

On this International Women's Day, I would like to put the spotlight on female role models in a slightly different way. It is undeniably vital for young women to have positive female role models for a multitude of reasons, spanning personal development, societal progress, and the cultivation of a diverse and inclusive culture. First and foremost, positive female role models provide young women with tangible examples of success and achievement. These role models showcase that women can excel in various fields, from academia and business to sports and the arts. By seeing other women break barriers and reach new heights, young women are encouraged to aspire to greatness themselves, fostering ambition and self-confidence. Each year, pupils will recommend women who they look up to. Beyoncé Knowles, Michele Obama and Olivia Coleman being some of the most popular.

Positive female role models contribute to the creation of a more diverse and inclusive culture. By showcasing the richness and diversity of women's experiences, these role models celebrate the unique talents, perspectives, and contributions of women from all backgrounds. This diversity not only enriches our collective understanding but also fosters empathy, understanding, and solidarity across communities. Dr. Lee's recent assembly, where she highlighted the remarkable journey of Mercedes Gleitze, serves as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that positive female role models can have on young women.



Mercedes Gleitze's story is one of perseverance, resilience, and triumph over failure. Born into a relatively modest background, daughter of a teacher and a baker, Mercedes did not have the privilege of huge wealth or social status. However, what she lacked in material resources, she made up for with sheer grit and determination. Despite facing numerous obstacles along the way, she remained steadfast in her pursuit of achieving her goals. Her unwavering resolve propelled her to achieve remarkable feats in swimming, setting multiple records in the sport of endurance and long distance swimming, and after 8 attempts, successfully

swam the British channel on October 7, 1927. She became the first woman to complete this challenge and completed several other noteworthy swims, subsequently to this, including swimming the Straits of Gibraltar, the Northern channel (between Ireland and Scotland), conquered many other international bodies of water, and became the first person to swim to Robben Island and back to Cape Town.

What makes Mercedes' story so compelling is that she defied the odds stacked against her. When her trainer warned her about the cold sea and extreme fatigue, stating it was a challenge even for the strongest men, Mercedes responded, 'Well, thank God I'm a woman'. She refused

to be bound by societal norms or limitations, forging her own path to success and refused to give up after setbacks and failed attempts. When faced with claims that her success in the English Channel had been a hoax and her integrity was questioned, she remained determined to prove to the disbelievers that she was the real deal. Her journey serves as a beacon of hope for young women everywhere, showing them that greatness knows no boundaries and can overcome hurdles or barriers placed in their way. Regardless of background or circumstance, anyone can achieve their dreams with perseverance and determination.

Gleidze's story is certainly one to remember, however, in a world where the media often glorifies celebrities and public figures, it is sometimes easy to overlook the everyday heroes, the women in our lives who quietly inspire us with their resilience, determination, and kindness. These unsung heroines, our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, teachers, coaches and friends, play a vital role in shaping our identities and aspirations. Their stories of triumph over adversity resonate deeply with us, providing a source of motivation and empowerment.

Miss Robinson's initiative to encourage students to reflect on positive female role models in their own lives is a commendable one. It prompts us to look beyond the glitz and glamour of celebrity culture and recognise the unsung heroines who shape our daily lives. These women may not grace the covers of magazines or command millions of followers on social media, but their impact is immeasurable. They are the ones who quietly inspire us with their strength, compassion, and resilience.

In solidarity with this initiative, I would like to share my own example of a positive female role model: my friend, Laura Cooper-Wortley. I am blessed to have a number of inspiring females in my life, from whom I could choose. However, I have chosen Laura because, as well as being genuinely inspirational, she is significantly younger than me, a fact that often means we are less likely to recognise someone as a role model.

Laura has worked in a number of roles for a variety of companies in the time that I have known her, but she has always worked. Her expertise is in the health care sector, and perhaps that is an indication of the type of person that she is. Alongside working in an industry that is challenging and requires long hours, over the last few years, Laura has been completing a history degree in her spare time. In addition, she has planned her own wedding (and the majority of mine!) and navigated the ups and downs of buying and renovating a house in the village where she grew up. She is the proud owner of two of the bounciest dogs you are ever likely to encounter, and they take up a good deal of her time. Last year she decided that this was not sufficient and took up Golf, dedicating many hours to practise and quickly becoming proficient enough to keep pace with her husband who has been playing for the last 25 years!





As if this combination of achievements were not enough of a demonstration of resilience and pushing for more, in 2022 Laura recognised a significant need in her local area and set up a registered charity to tackle period poverty. This venture has grown rapidly and her charity, A bag for Flo, now serves communities across Daventry, Northampton and Towcester, with the possibility of it moving to neighbouring counties in the coming months. It has developed to include maternity products for new mums and this is a current area for expansion. If you would like to know more about 'A bag for Flo', or would be interested in supporting them in any way, please follow this link to find out more - <https://www.abagforflo.com/>.

On top of all of this, Laura also deals with her own health concerns, successfully managing an auto-immune disease that periodically forces her to drop everything and simply be for days at a time. How she manages to keep so many balls in the air at one time and manage her health and still have time for cups of tea, trips to the garden centre and dinners at the driving range with friends, I will never know. One thing I do know, however, is that she is an inspiration for me and many others and she is a fantastic role model for women in a huge number of different ways.

So whoever they may be, family member, friend or celebrity, positive female role models serve as mentors and guides, offering valuable advice, support, and encouragement to young women navigating their own paths. These role models provide invaluable insight and guidance, helping young women overcome challenges and make informed decisions about their futures. Beyond individual growth, positive female role models play a crucial role in driving societal progress. By challenging stereotypes and defying traditional gender roles, these role models pave the way for greater gender equality and inclusivity. Their presence in leadership positions and influential roles sends a powerful message about the capabilities and contributions of women, inspiring broader societal change and breaking down barriers for future generations.

In conclusion, the importance of positive female role models cannot be overstated. They serve as beacons of hope and inspiration, guiding young women through life's challenges and empowering them to realise their full potential. While celebrities may capture the spotlight, it is the everyday heroines, the women in our own lives, who truly make a difference. I look forward to seeing who our pupils choose to recognise as their own positive female role models over the coming weeks. So, let us celebrate their contributions and honour their legacies by striving to be positive role models ourselves. Together, we can create a world where every young woman feels empowered and supported to achieve her dreams.