

In September of 2015, I marched towards Camden School for Girls with a spring in my step. Having come from a hippie primary school, it doesn't come as a surprise that on that day I was wearing a button up chequered shirt, a bow tie and a fedora. Although it daunted me that I was being moved from a place of comfort where most of my friends were boys and I was referred to as a "boy-girl", I stepped into Camden School for Girls excited for a new beginning - after 10 attempts at scanning my fingerprint, that was.

However, it saddens me to say that in year 8 I celebrated Founder's Day wearing a dress. Yes, Lulu Brown in a dress. I looked horrendous. A dress, incredibly long socks and hoop earrings big enough to hula hoop in. The truth is, I thought I had to look like everyone else in order to fit in. I thought people would like me more if I dressed in a way I considered then to be "feminine". It is Camden school for girls after all. But notice how I quoted the word feminine there. Looking back to that day in year 8 has had me asking myself one question. What does the word "feminine" mean to me, and how has it changed since being at this school? I would like to take this time to show my appreciation for how the school has turned the word "feminine" into the most beautiful, strong adjective in my vocabulary. And don't worry, you don't have to keep the image of me in a dress in your head much longer.

I hold the school completely accountable for nurturing me back into a mindset in which I am comfortable and confident. The mindset that I can wear what I like, and do the things I like, and still claim the word "feminine", wear it like a badge. When I first joined Camden, I was so happy to be at a school that encouraged me to challenge the gender stereotypes and do the things I loved. Every Friday we would line up in the gym to pick out a skateboard to go and cruise around on in Canteloves SkatePark. Looking back now, those elbow pads saved me from a few near death experiences, so thank you Miss Devine. The school encouraged me to bang drums. Once a week the school runs queer club welcoming anyone who wishes to express themselves and voice their opinions on equality for people in the community. Although it took years of claiming I was an ally as an act of self-denial, I had a safe space gifted to me by the school to be whoever I wanted to be. The school has also always encouraged me to be resilient and determined in all areas of my life, for example in my karate training. A place where I have been able to prove to every man around me that I can kick just as high and punch just as hard as him. I feel so grateful to say that I have been taught from a young age that even if stereotypes and societal expectations for women say that there are some things girls shouldn't or can't do, we kick against them and in some cases, do those things even better. And at the same time, we can do this without losing our pride in the word "feminine".

Founded in 1871 by Frances Mary Buss, the school gave young girls an opportunity which wasn't readily available to them at the time and under her leadership the school became a model for girls' education. These girls wore a traditional uniform of dark green, with blue and green striped ties. The blazer showed a type of ancient sailing ship called a "buss", as presented above us to commemorate Miss Buss' legendary name, with the motto "onwards and upwards". At that time, a girl's education tended

to be social rather than intellectual - boys were educated 'for the world' and girls 'for the drawing room' - but Buss wanted her school to prepare girls 'for any position in life which they may be called upon to occupy'. The ethos upon which the school was created was significant in its moment and Founder's Day is a time to celebrate that. However, the motto 'onwards and upwards' is very fitting when considering the evolution of this school, and its re-evaluation of femininity. While the ethos was indeed significant in its moment, it has over time evolved into a far more substantial and open understanding of the word "feminine". The school encourages its pupils to nurture confidence and a sense of self-worth; to show consideration for others and respect their diverse qualities and needs; to practice tolerance and open mindedness; and to develop individual talents to the full. The school embraces every kind of woman. And encouraged by the abolition of the school uniform here in the mid-70s, Camden school for girls has evolved into a school which encourages every girl to define the word femininity for herself.

Today I stand in front of you in a suit. But I could also be wearing a dress if I wanted to. The truth is femininity doesn't have to be associated with fragility; with softness; with nurture; with elegance. For me, my femininity has been defined by everything I am inside, the challenges I have faced, the journeys I have made, the efforts I put into everything I do. It means taking up space, ensuring my voice is heard, and expressing my opinion. Being loud and strong. I stand before a crowd of beautiful girls, and what makes you all beautiful is your differences. That every one of you has defined femininity for yourself. I thank this school for providing a space in which every girl can discover her femininity and wear it with pride.

Towards the end of her life, Frances Mary Buss wondered what future she and her fellow suffragist campaigners were creating, beautifully enveloped in the quote "*I should like to revisit the earth at the end of the twentieth century to see the result of the great revolution of the nineteenth - the women's rights movement*". I would like Frances Mary Buss to come back and experience Sixth Form Cross-dressing day, to see my peers leave gender bias outside the gates and wear dresses and suits with pride. I would like for Frances Mary Buss to experience the struggles of squeezing through the door of C27 to join the overwhelming crowd at LGBTQ+ club. Perhaps she would rename the school 'Camden School for the whole spectrum of identity'. I would like to hold her hand and skate around Cantelowes with her. If Miss Buss could come back for one day, she would be incredibly proud of every strong and independent woman here.

Although many of us face daunting challenges ahead, with some soon flying from Frances Mary Buss' nest, I know for sure that I will always carry the words "onwards and upwards" with me wherever I go. I will always take up space. I will always be loud. I will always be a proud Camden girl. And I will always be proud of my femininity. Thank You Camden for helping me find it. We only have one more stereotype to break - that being, the abolition of the Camden girl true religion jeans.

