

Making Your Mark

AJWO Sixth Form Conference

22nd March 2017

Sponsored by the Association of Jewish Women's Organisations (AJWO), the first Sixth Form Conference for Girls was attended by 145 students from Hasmonean, JFS, Immanuel and Yavneh and was hosted by Hasmonean School.

The event was designed to enable young women to be inspired by other women in the community who have found different ways to use their 'girl power' to make a difference. Representatives from a wide range of organisations attended to share their own experiences about how they have made their own mark.

AJWO is a cross communal organisation, transcending barriers to enable each organisation to fulfil its potential. The conference was organised by Anne Lyons, Deborah Nathan and Ruth Nyman, and was modelled on similar events created by Barbara Maddison of the National Council of Young Women. Both Barbara and Ann Hardiment of the NCW were present.

The afternoon began with a short quiz about a woman's place in politics, education and the workplace, moderated by Deborah Nathan of British Emunah. This certainly met with an enthusiastic response!

Nicky Goldman, Director of LEAD at the Jewish Leadership Council chaired the afternoon. She introduced the three inspirational women: Gillian Merron, Jacqueline Nicholls and Ella Rose.

Gillian is the Chief Executive of the Board of Deputies, having previously been MP for Lincoln. In her opening words, she explained that it was never her intention to 'make her mark' but life has a way of causing one to end up doing so. She has been a Minister across about 5 departments, including Transport. Describing how she was able to make her first speeches, she recalled how a friend texted her to say 'just be fabulous'. This gave her the confidence to stand up tall, answer the questions and not allow fear to stop her. This mantra, of not allowing fear to hold her back, has remained with her ever since.

The students did not hold back from firing a swift barrage of questions which included topics such as women only short lists, the current situation of the Labour Party, Theresa May and Brexit.

Jacqueline Nicholls is a London-based fine artist who co-ordinates the Art Studio and other Art and Culture events at JW3. She trained to become a medical artist, loving the tactile nature of working with art materials. Having studied a subject which was so rule bound, she has become a strong advocate of the view 'Know the rules, then you can break them'. Her art certainly does this. She is currently working on a Daf Yomi project using a wide range of media. Issues of gender and sexuality have also been explored through her feminist questioning and challenging of texts.

An intriguing Q&A session ensued, where she was asked if her art was more expressive or regimented. Ms Nicholls response was that deadlines actually set you free, and the discipline of a deadline creates a sense of focus. This was a strong message for the Sixth Form audience, all of whom face frequent essay deadlines!

Ella Rose, the youngest speaker, is a quite remarkable young woman. She is the Director of the Jewish Labour Movement, having been Public Affairs Officer at the Embassy of Israel and a former President of UJS. She told the girls that 'It is ok if you have not yet found your 'thing'- once you have

found it, you will know it is right'. Opportunity is important- you should take every single chance that comes along as thus will develop you as a person and provide you with experience- as well as help you to find your vocation. It is also fine to make mistakes as they create learning moments and help build up resilience.

She was asked 'What was the moment when you realised that this was what you wanted to do?' It was at an NUS conference when she spoke about the need for a Jewish state. This was when she had clarity. Ella has faced tough campus battles, and remarked that the hardest part of her work is when she is a target of abuse.

All three speakers presented different paths to empowerment, and the question sessions showed that all our girls are well on the way to being empowered women.

It is hoped that this will become an annual event, hosted by different schools and attracting inspiring and exciting speakers.

By Janine Ellerman, Hasmonian High School