

1st Mulberry and the First Lady



We sat there in anticipation, waiting for her. We had come to school early and lined up to take our seats in the Main Hall. The school was busy and bustling, even more full of life than usual. We could hardly wait.

The door opened and she walked in. Everybody was clapping and cheering wildly, but when she stepped up to the microphone, we went quiet instantly. She thanked us for our ‘warm British welcome’, and said to us with a radiant smile: ‘I am so proud of you’.

It was Michelle Obama, the First Lady of the United States, an internationally renowned lawyer and girls’ education activist. She had come to our school, Mulberry School for Girls in Tower Hamlets, London, to launch her Let Girls Learn Campaign. The campaign was set up in response to the fact that millions of girls around the world are not currently going to school: the campaign seeks to get every girl in the world to school by persuading governments to commit to making girls’ education a priority.

Mrs Obama spoke to us about the reasons behind the number of girls who can’t go to school: these reasons vary depending on country and culture, and include poverty, family commitments, lack of facilities for girls on their period and, often, gender stereotypes which lead governments and families to think that girls are not worth educating because it is believed that their place is in the home.

Mrs Obama spoke about the problems that ordinary working class young women in the UK and America face when trying to get their education, and talked about her own background: she mentioned how she had lacked a quiet place to do homework; how family commitments had taken up a lot of her time; and how she had had few people to ask about university and exams because she had been the first person in her family to finish secondary school and go on to higher education. A lot of what she said resonated with us, and it was amazing to feel that she understood us so well.

There was one part of her speech that particularly struck us: at Mulberry, a lot of our pupils are Muslim, and many of us choose to wear the hijab or headscarf. Our headscarves are not just an expression of faith: they are one of the many ways in which we express our identities as young, independent Muslim women. But people often misinterpret them, and can form prejudices about us. Mrs Obama said that she understood some of our frustration when people failed to ‘look beyond

our headscarves’ to appreciate all that we are, because there had been times when she had been judged and discriminated against because of the colour of her skin. She told us to never allow other people’s prejudices to stop us from being ambitious, and from working to achieve our dreams. It meant so much to us to hear this. Many people in the Main Hall were nodding and smiling, and you could see that everybody felt inspired and encouraged.

Mrs Obama told us that getting all girls across the globe into education was ‘our work’ – not just the work of current governments. She told us that young women would lead the way in making sure that education is available to all. She encouraged us to find ways to mentor other girls around the world who have not had the same educational opportunities we have had. Above all, she encouraged us to make the most of our own education.

We felt really inspired after listening to her speech. We all want to do well in school, and we all have dreams we are determined to achieve. Some of us want to be doctors or lawyers, and one of our Senior Section wants to open a bakery and run a business selling cupcakes. We feel motivated to work extra hard now. However, we are also really inspired to help other girls around the world to achieve their dreams – especially those girls who desperately want to go to school, but are held back from doing so.

Being in Guides is helping us to achieve those ambitions. Our Guide Unit (1st Mulberry) opened at our school in September, followed by our Senior Section in June. We have all been in Guiding for almost a year now – some of us have moved up from Guides to Senior Section quite recently. We have had amazing adventures together, from making outfits for a fashion show out of recycled paper, to water zorbing at Chigwell Row, to visiting London Dungeons and having a pizza party. We have grown vegetables in our school’s community garden (our radishes were particularly tasty), tasted sushi together, had a den-building competition on National Den Building Day and explored some Christmas and Easter traditions, as well as teaching each other – and our Guide Leaders – about Ramadan and Eid. We are going to a camp called Wellies and Wristbands in August, and organised fundraisers to raise the money for tickets, including a bake sale and movie night!

We have learned lots of new skills, grown in confidence, and made new friendships which have helped us to grow into responsible, independent young women. We now want to work on ways to help other young women learn and grow. Some of our Senior Section are hoping to train as Peer Educators so we can help out other Guide Units in our County; some have asked to start their Young Leader qualifications; and a group of our Guides recently gave an outreach assembly to Year 8 to encourage other girls to join Girl Guiding in London North East. We are also looking for pen pals so we can learn about other girls around the world, and share our thoughts and ideas about girls’ education.

We know that we are very lucky to have been given all of these fantastic opportunities, both by our school and by Girl Guiding. We would like to see a world where all girls everywhere get the chance to shine – and we are going to work to make that happen!

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