



Norwich High School for Girls supports pupils to be confident and resilient enough to reach their goals

Picture: EASTERN LIGHTCRAFT

# 'I want to teach my girls that they are the agents of their own fortune'

**Y**ou might think there are few similarities between being a soldier under fire in the Iraqi desert and being the new head of an outstanding girls' school in Norwich. Having been both, I would beg to differ.

In 2003, the year before becoming the first female officer of the Honourable Artillery Company, I was deployed to Iraq on Operation Telic. One of the roles I was assigned to was to act as a sentry, providing cover for the headquarters I was working in. The buildings were surrounded by a sand wall (berm) and my job was to keep watch over the berm, rifle in hand, and take action if we came under attack.

Being a head in a global pandemic can feel a bit like standing behind that berm again. Rather than looking for the approaching enemy, I sit behind a computer screen waiting for the next piece of Government guidance on exams or reopening. Putting that advice into action, to ensure our school was ready to

**Alison Sefton**, the new head of Norwich High School for Girls, believes her past career as a soldier has equipped her well for life as a head. This International Women's Day, she says her mission now is to empower her pupils to take on the world.



open safely to all students today, is not unlike a military operation.

I have deployed all the skills learned in my varied career in these past months. Skills such as resilience, adaptability, determination – forged and put to the test in that desert – are the skills I call on now as I deal with the demands of my headship.

On International Women's Day, a day when we recognise the enormous contribution of women everywhere, it is these skills I want to pass on to the girls now in my care.

I became head at Norwich High

School for Girls six months ago. In that time, we have all been bombarded by messages in the media around 'lost learning', the need for 'catch-up teaching' and gloomy predictions of a 'lost Covid generation'.

Yes, times have been tough, but they have been tough before and they will be tough again. Today, with students returning to schools, there really is light at the end of the tunnel. What matters now is that we support children to develop the skills to survive and thrive when life is challenging.

I have talked to the girls in

assemblies recently about life's pathways; rarely are they straight. Mine certainly hasn't been – from chemistry degree to accountant to soldier to school leader. Every interaction on the way, positive or negative, has shaped my career and who I am today as head.

I want our girls to be confident and resilient enough to reach their goals and everything we do here supports them with that.

At Norwich High School we give girls the tools for a future world of work that will be skills rather than just knowledge based. From design thinking, to coding, and problem-solving together online, we empower them for many different types of careers.

Each girl has her own iPad and is well prepared for using the Google Education suite – significant skills recognised in receiving Apple Distinguished School status. Daily collaborations with teachers and peers can all be done on one device and live online lessons were a natural progression during lockdown.

What is most important in any

school is an understanding of the individual student. Knowing what each student needs to flourish, what we can do to support them, both academically and pastorally, is the reason we become teachers.

This is what we do, engaging, encouraging and enabling each girl to be the best she can be. Norwich High School is part of the Girls' Day School Trust, a family of pioneering schools where girls learn without limits. This is the ethos we live by.

So, this International Women's Day, I stand before each and every girl at Norwich High School as a former soldier and a head and tell them they are the agents of their own fortune. Life isn't linear, it's not just about grades, it's about using your skills, experience and a little bit of verve to get where you want to go.

Do what you want to do, don't accept the conventional path, adapt and do it differently. We create confident, fearless, forward-thinking girls at Norwich High School, and I have great faith in all their futures.