

The prominent women with skills we can all aim for

Neil Walker



I HAVE been thinking recently of the multitude of awards and 'person of the year' events.

As we approach the end of the academic year, schools often reflect on who may embody some of the characteristics and traits that we have been extolling through the last three terms.

I am a member of an organisation devoted to ensuring the best education for girls, particularly in a single sex-environment, known as the Girls' Schools Association, or GSA. This summer the president of GSA has introduced an award for a woman currently in the public domain who has inspired and influenced female students nationwide.

The shortlist of strong, influential and important females has a huge variation in age and backgrounds. Some are at the very start of their careers while some are established; some are well known in the UK, others less so. Each one has particular characteristics which make them someone worth emulating. Despite their differences it is important that the girls consider what characteristics each individual has that make them admirable.

As GSA schools we have been asked to consult our student leadership teams (head girl, prefects, etc.) on who they would choose and these votes will be combined nationally.

■ Adwoa Aboah. Inspired by her own battle with drug addiction and depression, she established a platform for discussion of mental health, body image and sexuality. She produces podcasts and events, and publicises the work of other women.

■ Jacinda Ardern. As New Zealand's prime minister she is the world's youngest female head of government and only the second elected head of government to give birth while in office. Following the Christchurch attacks she introduced stronger firearms policies and famously refused to say the gunman's name.

■ Katie Bouman. She developed an algorithm for imaging black holes, aged just 29.

■ Orla Doherty. An expert in underwater filming, she pro-

duced the Deep Sea episode of Blue Planet II and produces popular factual television, including Grand Designs. She spent 10 years at sea studying the remote coral reefs of the Pacific Ocean.

■ Stacey Dooley. The TV presenter and journalist has made social issue-themed television documentaries for BBC Three concerning child labour and women in developing countries.

■ Katie Piper. Since an acid attack in 2008, the former model underwent pioneering surgery to restore her face & vision and waived her anonymity to increase awareness of burn victims. She created a foundation which helps victims of burns and other disfiguring injuries.

■ Greta Thunberg. The teenage climate change activist started her personal protest outside the Swedish parliament aged 15 and initiated the school strike for climate movement last November. This has since spread to more than 100 countries. She has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

■ Serena Williams. As well as being world No 1 in tennis eight times, she has created a successful fashion company and set up the Serena Williams Foundation, supporting education for underprivileged students. She is an active campaigner supporting Black Lives Matter.

■ Malala Yousafzai. Aged 11, she wrote a blog for BBC Urdu about life under the Taliban. She was attacked and critically wounded but recovered to set up the Malala Fund and co-author I am Malala. She was the co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize.

I think it is interesting to consider what it is about each individual that makes her someone worth looking up to, whether it is her courage, resilience, ability to speak in public or ability to persuade. I asked my pupils to think about how that person has developed that characteristic and what they have done to get better at it. I hope that they can see this is not just a popularity contest but an opportunity to learn something from each of the shortlisted people.

Neil Walker is head of Westfield School, Gosforth.