

Ordinary Women: Extraordinary Lives

This fall I started my tenth year as head of school at Emma Willard. During that delicious decade, I have heard countless compelling stories about alumnae, many of whom I would describe as powerful, successful, extraordinary.

But if I did a Google search on any of their names, very little would turn up; they haven't broken the glass ceiling, amassed significant wealth, or penned a great novel. Yet they live lives of substance, courage, and compassion. Their stories are inspirational, their lives a testimony to competence. They get up every morning, put one foot ahead of the other, and face the day with chins thrust forward. They are extraordinarily ordinary.


You know these women, too. They are your classmates, your Emma friends, and the women whom in you see in the "everydayness" of your life. They are the women who get things done, who juggle the competing priorities of the personal and professional that fill women's lives to overflowing. Their stories thrill us because they are real; they are filled with diapers and carpools, illness and triumph, pluck and luck. Their stories give us hope as they remind us that even we, as ordinary women, have a bit of the extraordinary within us. These are the women who are "just like us," and in being "just like us" they provide the nudge we need to search deep for the strength to address the personal challenges in our own lives.

Earlier this fall, Emma Willard School hosted a panel entitled Women, Power, and Possibility. Seven articulate young women who have tackled thorny societal problems—poverty, illiteracy, human

trafficking, and more—sat on the stage sharing how they found the inspiration day after day to nurture their fledgling organizations despite lack of experience and funds. It was in turns humbling and awesome. They helped me understand a vital truth: We define success for ourselves. No one else gets to do it for us.

It has taken me half a century to realize that simply being "ordinary" is the greatest success of all. To be "ordinary" is to strive daily, to fail once in a while, to find delight in the midst of challenge. To be "ordinary" is to search for balance, find time to celebrate life, and accept when you are having a bad day. To be "ordinary" is, all things considered, quite difficult.

So, I ask you, isn't it about time that we celebrated the power inherent in being ordinary women, the power that all of us have and use in our daily lives? We are raising families, going back to school, managing crises, sustaining relationships, and building lives with the tools we have at hand. We work countless hours per week in and out of the home. We care for aging parents and children with special needs. We are active volunteers and enthusiastic cheerleaders for numerous good causes. What we do is never-ending. What we do calls forth the extraordinary in each of us every day of our lives, even when we do not feel up to the challenge.

Our world depends on insightful, proactive, thinking women who believe that, in simply being ordinary, they can make a difference in arenas both great and small. The power of being ordinary is inspirational, contagious, real. It is my power; it is your power; it is our power. Collectively, just imagine what gets done because we are all, each of us, extraordinarily ordinary. Keep talking to me. (You can email me at head_of_school@emmawillard.org.) 

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