

Charity Feature

It's Saturday night and the local night club is awash with young women, their skin glowing an unnatural shade of orange and their peroxide blonde hair extensions swishing at waist level. This could be a presumptuous and stereotypical view of all twenty-first century girls found anywhere in the UK. But throw in some white stilettos and the image of girls dancing around their handbags and the location becomes more obvious. The classic example of an "Essex Girl" has been created.

The Essex girl: most people have a view of one, even if they do not know one. People wouldn't know about the Hampshire girl, or the Sussex girl, but somehow the Essex girl stereotype has made a name for itself all over the world.

"Why do Essex girls wear so much hair spray? So they can catch all the things going over their heads."

A cleaner, less vulgar example of the widely known Essex girl jokes. But do people actually believe in this image? Do people outside of Essex understand it is only a stereotype and Essex girls are the same as any other girl? And if so, how are Essex girls to have any future when they have been branded as promiscuous trash?

A solution may well have arrived. The Essex Women's Advisory Group (EWAG) is a brand new charity wanting to banish the tarnished image that Essex girls suffer with. On their website it says their primary aim is "to empower the girls who live in Essex, to broaden their vision, self-worth and belief, and hopefully to inspire them to reach further, higher and live the dream of an enhanced future regardless of their stereotyping".

Essex local, Daphne Field and Essex County Council Chairman, Elizabeth Hart have set up EWAG as they believed it was time to take action to stop the demoralisation of young girls.

"Our girls are bright and fun, but then you see them crumble when people start putting them down for where they come from," Mrs Hart said.

Charlotte Jackson, 19, has lived in Essex her entire life. "I previously didn't think it was a bad thing to come from Essex, I thought the Essex girl jokes were simply that, jokes," Charlotte described. "It was only when I went on holiday a couple of summers ago with friends that I first realised differently. A boy chanted 'STI, STI, STI' at myself and my female friends, upon finding out we were from Essex. I was shocked. The suggestion we were unclean and diseased purely because of where we live was very embarrassing. I laughed it off at the time, but I was actually quite insulted and have not forgotten it".

Charlotte is not alone in suffering from abuse because of the Essex stereotype. Mrs Hart tells of an experience of someone close to her heart, "When my daughter was 20, she told someone at a job interview she was from Essex and she could almost see him turn his nose up."

Daphne Field, 70, says, "Essex girls often claim to come from anywhere but their real county. It is not unknown for them to answer that they come from East Anglia or outside London, rather than from Essex. But there is nothing wrong with being an Essex girl."

It was the chance watching of an episode of The Weakest Link that triggered Elizabeth Hart to become involved in the group. Ann Robinson was being particularly disrespectful to a contestant from Essex asking questions such as, "Do you have white stiletto heels? Do you dance around your handbag?" The irksome flippancy of the comments encouraged Mrs Hart to take a stand.

And so the group was set up and fundraising began.

The group endeavours to promote the name of Essex girls in a positive light. Essex girls such as Dame Maggie Smith, Denise Van Outen and singer Pixie Lott are all included on the website as examples of success stories, proof of what can be achieved.

As well as holding events to promote the group, EWAG are also raising money to help other interests close to the heart of Essex. "We have now raised £38,000," described Daphne Field, "and it is benefiting the women's refuges in Essex for vulnerable women, as well as

the Girl Guides and the girls in the Essex Prince's Trust. We are raising money for these specific things.”

As the staggering amount of money raised in only a short period of time shows, the group is already a success. Daphne is very touched by all the positive feedback she has received - over 200 messages of support, and hopefully this is just the beginning.

On the 10th of July Daphne, Elizabeth and the rest of the EWAG team will be holding an event in Hylands Park, Chelmsford, to promote the successful business women from around the county. The event is entitled “A day for the Girls of Essex” and will be “a celebration of girls and women and the role they can play at all levels of society, and to publicise ‘Essex Girls’ past and present as role models.” Business women have been invited to attend, to showcase their businesses and give careers advice to the young people in attendance. Competitions are being organised in which schools or individuals can take part. There will be a competition to make a film about a notable Essex woman/girl; an art competition to create a souvenir book cover based on the three Essex female saints; and a poetry/prose competition. The day is set to be a fun day for all, so Daphne encourages “anyone who is proud of their county” to attend.

Throughout all the negativity shown by the Essex girl reputation, the question still remains as to where this image cropped up from in the first place. Daphne believes that it originally started with the popularity of the BBC sitcom ‘Birds of a Feather’, which followed the goings-on of Sharon and Tracey from Chigwell. The Essex girl jokes soon followed. In recent years the image has been epitomised further by such celebrities as glamour model Jodie Marsh and Big Brother contestant Chantelle Houghton. These ‘stars’ play up to being icons of fakery, and do nothing to dispel the reputation.

The Essex Women’s Advisory Group may not have the power to completely banish the Essex girl name, but their campaigning is drawing attention to the prejudice. It is politically incorrect to be racist or sexist, so perhaps people will think twice before cracking a joke about a girl’s stupidity due to her hair colour and place of birth. But the message EWAG

want to extend to all girls, is they must do it for themselves. Empowerment and self-belief is the key to reaching life goals and putting an end to the stereotype.