

Speech by Liverpool Echo Editor, Maria Breslin, at the unveiling of the Blue Plaque to commemorate the Willmer Sisters – Wellington Rd, Sept 19, 2010

I am privileged to have been invited here today to join you in honouring two such inspirational and pioneering women.

Laura and Jane Willmer, Jane perhaps better known as Jeannie, led fascinating lives. I loved reading about their cycling trips through Europe, their voluminous skirts as they rode their bikes and the eyebrows they must have raised as they vacationed in France, Germany and Italy. They were free spirits and strong women.

They witnessed incredible things. Laura experienced the Austrian Prussian War while studying in Heidelberg and Jeannie also studied in Germany. Laura was a search assistant with the Liverpool Marine Biology Committee and studied art at the Liverpool School of Fine Art. They were women of their time and their class.

But as newspaper editors they were pioneers and amongst the first in the country. I love the recollections of Laura talking to the dockers, a strong independent woman wearing dark silk dresses sitting in her rocking chair editing the Wallasey News.

Jeannie was described as 'tall, upright, progressive in politics as business'. Both of them helped shape what being a woman is today. They joined the suffrage processions and it is only because of these brave and fearless women I have the right to vote.

Which takes me back to today. For 141 years the Echo has fought for communities, held authorities to account and told the stories of Merseyside's remarkable people. Only now it has its first woman editor and I am tremendously proud to be that woman. I relish the opportunity to bring a different perspective to the news agenda.

But we have to ask why, more than 100 years after the Willmer sisters, that is the case. Perhaps men were the better candidates? But perhaps we women weren't given a fair chance? Both of the Willmer sisters were members of the Women Citizens' Association. Yet the gender pay gap remains a concern today and it is something I will campaign to eradicate as long as I am in this role. And as well as gender equality genuine inclusivity remains a priority.

We can only properly represent the communities we serve if our workforce is made up of people from those communities and diversity remains an issue and one which I want to help solve. We are making inroads but we have, undoubtedly, some way to go.

And that takes me back to the Willmer sisters - women who cared for their communities and realised their real purpose. If I needed any reassurance about the value of local journalism then the past eight months have vindicated my beliefs. Covid and the lockdown that followed saw unprecedented numbers of readers turn to the Liverpool Echo. They asked questions, raised concerns and they shared their stories.

And I was passionate at ensuring every question was answered, every tip investigated and a home found for every rainbow picture. These unprecedented times have illustrated the value of local journalism and I have been humbled by the help we have been able to give and the trust our readers have shown.

For me, in a new role, I have learned a lot from the story of the Willmer sisters. I know to enact change I need to be brave and fearless. And I know being actively involved in our communities is the only way to enjoy an engaged and active relationship with our readers. Gender equality remains a bigger challenge but I take inspiration from Laura and Jeannie Willmer and hope to follow, in some small way, in their historic footsteps.