

Making ESSEX PROUD

To mark International Women's Day on March 8, Holly Louise Eells speaks to six inspiring local women who are making our county a better place to live

ELSA JAMES artist

WHERE DO I begin with introducing the conceptual artist and activist Elsa James? A force to be reckoned with, the British African-Caribbean artist was named one of the 50 Most Influential People in Essex in 2021, a finalist for the prestigious Freeloads Award with Focal Point Gallery and the first black woman artist to have her work permanently held at Beecroft Art Gallery. She also coined the term 'Black Girl Essex' to initiate a way of interrogating the historical 'White' Essex Girl term – and this is just for starters. Nevertheless, the most inspiring aspect about Elsa is demonstrating that you are never too late to achieve your dreams.

'For 20 years, I had this dream of wanting to be an artist,' Elsa says. 'When I left school in 1984, I lived in West London and always wanted to go to Chelsea School of Art. My parents were part of the Windrush Generation and my mum told me to get a trade. My two older sisters left school and went straight to work at 16.'

'I remember thinking if I did fashion, I would learn how to sew, which is a trade and I can still draw; that was my rationale. At school, I didn't do well academically as I was dyslexic (diagnosed at university),

but I was always good at drawing.' And Elsa never gave up on her dreams. 'I put a "practicing artist" on both my children's birth certificates,' she laughs.

After having her second daughter in 2006, she started working towards a new career. 'If they didn't run the course part time in the evening and I didn't have a supportive spouse, I wouldn't have been able to do it,' she says. Aged 38, Elsa loved being a mature student. 'I knew I wanted to create my work on social issues and being a black woman,' she says. 'I got a first, too!'

Elsa has exceeded new heights in her career. 'There are things I want to say that people don't like or feel uncomfortable with. My job is to tell the truth and unapologetically be myself.'

This year, Elsa is focusing on new themes that concern contemporary narratives of the Empire and the UK's role in the transatlantic slave trade. 'I have spent the last four years making work about Essex and what it means to be a person of colour in this county. The exhibition at Focal Point culminates everything I need to say for now. I'm excited about the next chapter.'

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Photo: Andy Delaney