

Lifestyle

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## The finishing touch

Stand up straight. Make eye contact. Leave the napkin on the chair. A new breed of Melburnians are turning to deportment schools to polish up their image.

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Ms Chrissy and Ms Kim place their hands on their hearts and lead a group of 40 women in a solemn oath: "Thou shalt always endeavour to wear red lipstick. And to ensure that our seams are straight ... We promise to give frequent compliments, and make an effort to spend a few moments of each and every day on ourselves."

They look like postwar housewives, but the pair are vintage emissaries from the Gold Coast, on a regular trip to Melbourne as The Lindy Charm School for Girls. The school travels to a different city each month, offering three-hour workshops, at \$60 a head, that aim to transform modern women into '50s bombshells.



At the Lindy Charm School For Girls. ARSINEH HOUSPIAN

A retro take on traditional "finishing courses" that prepare teenage girls for their social debut, the school capitalises on the current nostalgia for all things 1950s. It's also one of several new enterprises aimed at helping adults "polish" their image.

Along with vintage glamour workshops, Melburnians can attend "image development" courses that focus on etiquette, posture and communication; hire personal "image tutors" to instruct them individually; or undertake a corporate makeover with their colleagues. While these courses vary dramatically in their objectives, they all have one thing in common — they each respect the poise and politeness of the past.

In a keyboard world increasingly turned towards faceless social communication, this return to chivalry and etiquette in some quarters is pleasing those who have long advocated for a revival of good manners. Media doyenne Ita Buttrose, for one, whose *A Guide to Australian Etiquette* was published in February, says she is not surprised that finishing courses are becoming more popular among adults.

"A lot of 30-plus men and women who are ambitious in their careers want to present the best possible image," she says. "A lot of it is to do with self-confidence and becoming more of



Afternoon tea at the Windsor with Imogen Lampert. SIMON SCHLUTER

do with self-confidence and your image on yourself. If you learn how to do things correctly, you don't have to worry, and you actually become more self-confident because you know you can handle yourself."

Donna Leigh, chief executive of the Suzan Johnston school, says demand from mature adults is swelling as more people find themselves in unfamiliar social situations. "They might have had a relationship end and are starting to date again, or are changing career, or have a big event ahead," she says.

Others are struggling to cope with, or understand, modern manners. "Now, more than ever, I think there's so much confusion about manners," she says. "In the past, it was very black and white, children were seen and not heard, and you opened the door for a lady ... That went out the window in the revolutions of the '60s. Now chivalry is making a comeback; we're all opening doors for each other."

Debutantes at the Lindy Charm School will certainly be expecting doors to open after their transformation. At a Richmond pub one Saturday afternoon, they are grouped in a long room and groomed in the "traditions of our foremothers", lauded by the mistresses as "hardcore".

Key "foremother" skills include the arm-straining art of setting your hair in pin-curls, caking on your foundation to look like an MGM movie starlet and achieving the holy grail — the perfect red lip. Excerpts from a 1950s grooming guide school them further, with pearls of wisdom such as "when you wear slacks, remember you're feminine, and refrain from striding like a man".

While such advice might be delivered by MsChrissy tongue in rosy-red cheek, amid the girly giggling, it's clear she takes her vintage life seriously.

"Try to get your elbows together at the back," she says, earnestly. (A part-time assistant at a Gold Coast marina, MsChrissy wears a late-'40s hairstyle, make-up and clothing every day). "It doesn't matter where you are, I want you to make an effort."

Curiously, whether they're 18 or 50, none of the debutantes is averse to being told to stand up straight and offer compliments. But it's clear that their main reason for enrolling is to learn the tricks behind the bombshell look of the late '40s and '50s, which has moved from the rockabilly and burlesque scenes to the fringes of fashion.

"I came because I'd seen the look around and I wanted to try out some different hairdos," says Lucy Geddes, 31. "It's quite fun ... I think they're just trying to remind women to look after themselves and take pride in their appearance."

Georgia Collins-Jennings, 18, brought her friend to the course as a birthday surprise. "I guess the attraction for us is the vintage look. It's not what clothing you wear, it's how you make do with what you have," she says. Unlike modern fashion, she adds, "it doesn't have to be like you're selling yourself".

By the end of the afternoon, the room is wafting with musty Cedel hairspray, everyone has red lips and high hair, and several women sport fringes like the roofs of bull-nosed verandahs. "Has anyone seen my sheep?" says one woman, batting her shepherdess coiff off her face.

But as the debutantes emerge from the dark room into the pub's beer garden, the men are clearly impressed. "S'cuse me? Sorry for interrupting," says one awestruck bloke. "I've just got to say, between the lot of you ... that's some pretty rad hair."

The intention, however, is not to impress men, says MsChrissy. "It's about encouraging women to have confidence and poise; to carry themselves with grace and stand tall."

Melburnian Candice DeVille, a vintage model who wears a '50s look daily, and who conducts her own vintage workshops (as well as helping at the Lindy Charm School), still welcomes the attention. "Talk about an elixir of youth," she says. "You get about five strangers a day telling you how fabulous you look."

DeVille's workshops are aimed primarily at prospective vintage models and beauty queens on the retro "pin-up" pageant scene. She also consults with brides on "vintage" weddings; and blogs and lectures on vintage style.

She believes vintage looks are popular because, by contrast to modern fashion, they're surprisingly easy to get right. "My instinct is that it gives people an easy reference point on how to dress with elegance and glamour. They look back to the era that epitomised that for answers." \*\*\*

Over at Suzan Johnston, there is also a thirst for answers.

"My son's getting married later this year, and so I really need to know how to stand; how to walk in heels," says Louise, 57, to fellow students at an "image

development course' for women 25 and older. The school has adapted the finishing course it offers to teenagers for adults, charging \$525 for a two-day program.

Participants attend for any number of reasons. Helen Karamitros, 29, a community health worker, says hers are mainly professional. 'I will be changing jobs soon so I'm looking for interview and presentation skills. I find it a little bit uncomfortable when I first meet a new person, how to initiate conversation.'

Sharron, an 53-year-old mother of two, simply says: 'I have feral hair. And bad manners.'

The course promises instruction in posture and deportment, wardrobe, communication, etiquette, skincare and make-up. Instructor Amberlie Cameron-Smith, a tall woman with cropped hair and fabulous legs, is impressively attractive without being intimidating.

She begins by discussing the basics of good posture, for "without it, nothing else matters". After the usual corrections to sway backs and rounded shoulders, the women take turns walking down the catwalk. The aim is to 'make the seas part' by 'looking confident, standing tall and making eye contact'.

It's a rigorous exercise. 'Adopt a slight brace in your bottom area and lengthen in the waist area,' Cameron-Smith says to one woman after her fifth turn down the catwalk. 'Now ... arms falling to the side, eyes up. And *breathe*.'

There are discernible improvements; the more reticent women look up, rather than at the floor, and smile as they walk.

Later, during the communication lesson, they complain of feeling uncertain in social situations. Asked to list social 'props', Sam, 48, says: 'I just use my husband as a prop. He is a fantastic conversationalist. I just stand there like a ninny.'

To assist, Cameron-Smith shows the women how to enter a crowded room of strangers and start a conversation. 'First thing to do is a little check in the loos first. Give yourself a little confidence boost,' she says. 'When you come in, don't make a fuss of closing the door. Find a prop — go to the buffet or the bar. Then pick your group to approach — people that look open, but not old friends.'

She also offers modern etiquette tips, several of which recall *Seinfeld's* social conundrums. There's 'double-dipping' your corn chip (forbidden); the 'close talker' (adjust your stance, placing a foot in the way) and the 'kiss hello' (not compulsory; try a shoulder pat if desperate).

But old-fashioned etiquette is still the main game: spoon your soup away from your body; 'close' your plate with your knife and fork; break your bread instead of cutting it; and leave your napkin on your chair, not the table, if you go to the toilet.

A week after the two-day course finished, the students report feeling better about themselves. 'I'm much more aware of my behaviour and of others around me,' says Helen. 'I do feel more confident now, knowing what to do in group situations.'

It's all very well for the ladies for whom deportment and grace have always mattered in one way or another. But for the opposite sex, it's an entirely different story.

While the Suzan Johnston school also offers an image development course for men, with gender-specific etiquette, deportment and presentation advice, men in the course account for only about 5 per cent of students at the school.

Male students have included doctors, businessmen and tradesmen who want advice about manners and style. 'A lot of them have no idea about things like wardrobe and skincare,' says Donna Leigh. 'But it's not their fault. Women have got so many magazines, so many places they can turn to for advice. There isn't really that much around for men. Who are they going to ask?'

Men may prefer an individual approach when it comes to overhauling their image.

'I don't have much time; I'm a busy man, and I'm always big on asking those who know,' says Dave Pearce, 41, who recently hired image consultant Imogen Lamport. After completing a personality quiz and a chat over a coffee, he and Lamport hit the shops one Saturday, buying more than 20 garments to give Pearce a more polished look. 'I'm now wearing clothes that fit me better, that feel nice to wear, and are sharp and interesting,' he says.

Lamport says while she had no male clients when she started her business a decade ago, they now account for about 20 per cent of her clients.

Many finishing schools, including Suzan Johnston, are doing more one-on-one consultations with men. while groups such as Melbourne's Image Group

International offer intensive corporate makeovers, including dress and etiquette, starting at about \$1000.

Lamport's consultations start at \$550 for a full day, and address a client's dress and general appearance. She assesses body shape and colouring, helps with shopping and also general presentation and grooming.

Most of her clients are 35 and older. "It's a very youth-oriented world and I think people feel as they get older they can get put on the scrap heap. People are also much busier and have just become used to outsourcing things."

Another client, Alisha Dunsford, 27, says the sessions have ultimately saved her time and money. "It's just about being more efficient in the way you dress," she says. "I have started really investing in my clothes, and they're lasting a lot longer."

Pearce says that for him, employing Lamport was just one element in a self-improvement journey. "In the past three months, I've taken up yoga and meditating and started seeing a nutritionist, as well as using Imogen's services. I know it seems odd that clothes are part of that, but it's all about feeling better; feeling good on the inside."

Indeed, while the renewed focus on good grooming, personal presentation and etiquette draw on traditions of the past, the distinguishing feature about Melbourne's new rage for deportment is that people are seeking improvement for themselves, not others.

"It's all about developing a really strong sense of self," says Leigh. "Not just following fashion blindly, and not feeling intimidated about other people. But finding a voice, a style, and knowing the etiquette, so whatever situation you're in you know what to do and can relax."

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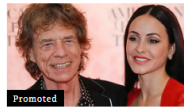
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