

Sidedoor Season 5, Episode 16: Dress Coded

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: When Jilly Towson was 16 years old, she found it: the perfect skirt.

Jilly Towson: Okay, so I'd been looking for this checkered skirt for months like I actually ordered one previous to that and it wasn't cute enough for me, so I kept looking. (Laughs). Like, I searched so hard for this checkerboard skirt!

Lizzie Peabody: The skirt was high waisted, faux leather.

Jilly Towson: Zipper in the back, it's black and white. It's the checkered board skirt. (Laughs). There's no other way to say it.

Lizzie Peabody: There is no other way to say it. It's the one.

Jilly Towson: Yep.

Lizzie Peabody: Jilly's in college now, but when the skirt came into her life, she was in high school at a public magnet school for the arts in Washington D.C. And clothes were a big part of how she expressed herself at school.

Jilly Towson: I was really, really shy. And so sometimes when you're quiet like that, it makes you feel kind of unnoticed and so I feel like clothes gave me that outlet to like, express how I was feeling and say what I want to say.

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Lizzie Peabody: Jilly had plans for her skirt. She paired it with a super soft fluffy white sweater.

Jilly Towson: And then I also had these knee-high boots that my mom had gotten me for Christmas. And so, I was real cute. I looked good. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: She grabbed her books and her bus pass, said goodbye to her sister, her mom, her dad, and headed off to school, but when she got there...

Jilly Towson: So, we have to go through like metal detectors to get into the school and administrators' kind of wait in the entryway like past that point. So, they're seeing all the students come in. And one of the administrators just pulled me to the side. And basically, told me that my outfit was inappropriate. So.

Lizzie Peabody: The skirt violated the school's dress code. When she held her arms flat against her sides, it wasn't as long as her fingertips. She was told not to wear it again.

Jilly Towson: ...Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: What was going through your head when she said that?

Jilly Towson: I was just thinking that my outfit wasn't inappropriate like, I woke up and I chose to put that on. My mom said it was okay. So, why should there be any problem with this?

Lizzie Peabody: Jilly's school dress code is pretty standard as far as dress codes go. It prohibits tank tops, short skirts, and anything (subjectively defined as) "tight or see-through." The rationale is the same as other school dress codes: these clothes distract students from learning. But that morning, Jilly found herself pretty distracted.

Jilly Towson: I wasn't thinking about class, I was thinking about my outfit. I was constantly like pulling my skirt down because it's like...ugh. I kept thinking about how others were viewing me instead of like focusing on the lesson.

Lizzie Peabody: Jilly says she never wore that skirt again. She actually ended up giving it away.

Jilly Towson: At first, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to let the Smithsonian keep it because I was like this is the checkerboard skirt. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's right she gave it to *us*! Jilly's outfit is part of a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The exhibition is called: "Girlhood (It's Complicated!) - and Jilly's story is one of many that explore the complex dynamics at play for girls as they come of age in America.

Nancy Bercaw: In many ways, our culture has always thought about boyhood: what is it that made men become who they are? but that we really have not given the same kind of attention to girls.

Lizzie Peabody: Nancy Bercaw is a curator at the National Museum of American History, and one of the creators of the exhibition.

Nancy Bercaw: And so how is it that girls learn about what society expects from them, but how do they also learn what they expect from themselves?

Lizzie Peabody: Nancy says, while Jilly's skirt is a standout, her story of being "dress coded" disciplined for violating her school dress code is actually really common. Technically, dress codes apply to all students, they mostly affect girls. And above all, girls of color. So, this time on Sidedoor, the hidden curriculum of dress codes. And how a few rules about fabric hold a mirror up to girls, showing them whose bodies are welcome, and whose bodies are trouble. That's coming up, after a quick break.

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Nancy Bercaw: For some reason, Lizzie, people are obsessed with women's legs.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Dress codes go back a long time. Smithsonian curator Nancy Bercaw says she remembers her grandmother telling her a story about a run-in with her school dress code, as a teenager in Texas in 1919.

Nancy Bercaw: She was expelled from school because she rolled her stockings.

Lizzie Peabody: What does that mean?

Nancy Bercaw: If you're wearing knee socks or something like that, you can roll them down almost like they turn into a doughnut. And girls were doing that with their stockings. And apparently somebody saw that she had done that when she was walking up the steps of school.

Lizzie Peabody: And she rolled the stockings all the way down to where? Her ankles?

Nancy Bercaw: No, just to the top of above her knee. That's why I'm surprised that anyone even saw the fact that she had rolled her stockings.

Lizzie Peabody: Hold on. She got in trouble because she rolled her stockings from her upper thigh to her knee underneath her long skirts?

Nancy Bercaw: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. This is blowing my mind.

Marcia Chatelain: So, dress codes are fascinating because they are part, I think, of the larger mechanism of schooling in America that is supposed to teach students how to be obedient, how to follow rules...

Lizzie Peabody: Marcia Chatelain is a professor of history at Georgetown University, and author of the book "South Side Girls: Growing up in the Great Migration."

Marcia Chatelain: I mean, you learn stuff too, but I think school is a lot about introducing control and order. And dress codes are based on this idea that there are rules of propriety that have to be observed.

Lizzie Peabody: These rules told kids what society expected of them. And historically, the only thing really expected of girls was that they would one day become mothers. Curator Nancy Bercaw says that's basically the reason girls were sent to school in the first place.

Nancy Bercaw: As a nation, we first started giving girls an education because they were going to raise future citizens. After the American Revolution, we are shifting from a monarchy to a republic. And that meant that people were going to be participating in their government, but how can you be sure that they're worthy to participate, and that they'll go in with the skills and knowledge to really be good citizens? So, people really began emphasizing the role of the mother. And historians call that 'republican motherhood.' they are 'Mothers for the Republic. And they have a lot of power in their hands because of that.

Lizzie Peabody: And part of making sure that they instill the correct values is making sure they wore the right thing to school?

Nancy Bercaw: Yes. And if the parents aren't making that right decision, the school will make it for them.

Lizzie Peabody: The goal of dress codes was to protect the country's morality. No pressure, right? But as times have changed and fashion has evolved, the specifics of how a "good girl" dresses have too. To get a sense of how far we've come, look no further than the girls' gym uniform of the 1850s.

Nancy Bercaw: It is a full dress that goes all the way down to the ankles. And then underneath it are these enormous bloomers that also go all the way down. (Laughs). And it was only with all of that on that you could go out and exercise.

Lizzie Peabody: Schools did not shy away from stepping in for parents if "rules of propriety" seemed to be falling by the wayside. In 1908 The New York Times reported that the outlandish garb of female students at the Horace Mann School had forced headmaster Virgil Prettiman to forbid "extravagant headwear, elaborate adornments of jewelry" and a number of other things. Frank Leslie's Weekly, a well-regarded newspaper of time, lamented the failures of mothers in 1912. Here's a section of one article:

The freakish fashions which shamelessly display the physical rather than the innocent charms of young girls, are a disgrace to the girls, and put their mothers in equally bad light. With large and amazing hats, transparent waists, skirts reaching but a few inches below the knee, so tight that figure is boldly displayed at every step; Our girls present a very improper spectacle.

Lizzie Peabody: But little by little girls have liberated the leg! There were the rolled stockings in the 1920s, and then in the 1940s...

Nancy Bercaw: The fact that girls were wearing ankle socks, was once again seen as being really disruptive because too much leg was showing.

Lizzie Peabody: In the 1950s, schools began putting dress codes in writing. Professor Marcia Chatelain says that coincided with more boys and girls sharing classrooms.

Marcia Chatelain: When co-education became more and more common in the United States, dress code I think often became the terrain in which people mediated a lot of their anxiety about young people and sexuality. Especially at mid-century where after World War Two more and more people were going to high school.

Lizzie Peabody: A booming post-war economy meant parents could afford to keep their kids in school longer. And high school is where many kids expected to find their future spouses.

Marcia Chatelain: And girls' dress becomes a really, really scrutinized space of making sure that kids are engaging in the kind of social life that people wanted, but they're not crossing any lines.

Lizzie Peabody: Basically, if boys couldn't see girls' bodies, there'd be no hank panky.

Marcia Chatelain: The more and more I think people obsess about what should girls wear, the more and more they're revealing about this incredible power they believe that girls may have, but do not trust them to wield it responsibly.

Lizzie Peabody: Today, ankle socks no longer raise eyebrows, and wearing bloomers to school would definitely be weird, but Nancy says...

Nancy Bercaw: I'm not sure dress codes really have changed much over the years because the one thing that's really consistent is that they're very concerned with girls' impending sexuality. And the thing is, is that it's never a celebration of girls maturing, but the fact that they suddenly become a distraction in school.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But apparently, not all girls are equally distracting.

Jilly Towson: So, I'm a pretty bony person.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Jilly Towson again, of the checkerboard skirt.

Lizzie Peabody: You said, 'a pretty bony person??'

Jilly Towson: I'm just awkwardly built. (Laughs). So, I didn't get dress coded as much for wearing like, certain shorts that my other friends would get dress coded for. I feel like I definitely got away with more.

Lizzie Peabody: Because you have a less curvy...

Jilly Towson: Because I'm bony. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: So, you do feel like your body type had an effect on how the dress code was enforced for you?

Jilly Towson: Yeah, I do.

Lizzie Peabody: Jilly's not alone. I asked around and heard from a lot of women who found themselves on the other end of this equation: girls who were targeted because of the way their clothes fit their bodies. And these women still remember how that attention made them feel.

Anita Flores: Yeah, I mean, it was humiliating for sure.

Lizzie Peabody: In 7th grade, Anita Flores got pulled out of class by the vice principal of her school for wearing a tank top with thin straps.

Anita Flores: There were other girls and one in particular who I remember, also had a spaghetti string tank top on and never got dress coded.

Lizzie Peabody: What was the difference between the two of you? Why do you think that was?

Anita Flores: I mean, the difference was I developed quite early and with large breasts, I would say for a girl in middle school.

Nancy Bercaw: Curves are dangerous.

Lizzie Peabody: Nancy Bercaw again.

Nancy Bercaw: So, girls with fuller figures are subject to this kind of regulation much more so than a very thin girl.

Lizzie Peabody: When Julianna Bradley was 11 years old, her math teacher stopped her in the hallway for being “provocative.” But Julianna remembers her jean shorts were the exact same length as her friend’s.

Julianna Bradley: And I think that’s when I first realized like, ‘Oh, they probably just did that to me because my legs are bigger and more muscular.’ This definitely was like the first time that I considered my legs to be anything negative. like how could legs be negative? They just walk you around!

Nancy Bercaw: As a child, you’re moving from childhood through adolescence and your body is changing which is mystifying enough. But to have everyone call attention to the fact that your body is changing and to say that that body is trouble, I think is a lot for a small person to manage.

Julianna Bradley: Like after it happened, I didn’t want to talk about it. I was so embarrassed and ashamed.

Lizzie Peabody: Anita Flores again.

Anita Flores: I got my period when I was 11 in sixth grade. Things were just happening at such a fast speed, and it definitely felt like I was being punished for that. It was very much like I was connecting the way I looked with doing something wrong.

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Lizzie Peabody: Marcia Chatelain says, bound up in all of this is the way we judge maturity in girls: from the outside in.

Marcia Chatelain: So, I think for a long time, we have mistakenly understood age and life stage as very much rooted in the body versus rooted in the kind of emotional development that everyone needs care during. And so, when girls experience early puberty, there are a set of experiences that they have yet to have because of their age, but because of what they look like, this dissonance leads to leads to a deep desire to then mark these girls as grown-ups or grown women.

Nancy Bercaw: As soon as your body starts developing, because dress codes are paying such close attention to that, the child is taught indirectly that they are no longer innocent.

Lizzie Peabody: In place of that innocence, Jilly says, she felt guilt.

Jilly Towson: It made me feel like I was a distraction, because that’s the excuse people always use that, like “oh you’ll be distracting to boys.” It made me feel like... like, I could control how others will react to my presence. When that’s something that you just don’t have control over.

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Lizzie Peabody: I’m going to play the devil’s advocate. I imagine, some people might say: This is the reality of the world. Young women’s bodies have power and the sooner they realize it and

dress accordingly, the safer they'll be, like, you know, if you don't learn this in school from adults who care about you, you'll learn it the hard way later. What do you make of that perspective?

Jilly Towson: My body does have power, but for people to turn my personal power into something that's sexual without my permission is wrong. And the fact that people put it under this guise of like, 'you're doing this because you care about me,' it doesn't feel like you care about me it feels like you are protecting boys from having to take accountability for their actions.

Nancy Bercaw: I hear what you're saying in terms of this is going to be the reality that they confront. But I don't think that should be upheld in schools that maybe there should be more work being done on respecting one another, rather than really blaming girls for their bodies.

Lizzie Peabody: Dress codes have less to do with clothes than with the bodies inside them. And they teach some girls that their bodies can get them into trouble. While other girls - they don't have to think about it. Essentially, it reinforces this idea that some bodies are good, and others are bad. When we come back, how dress codes send the not-so-subtle message that to be good is to be white.

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Lizzie Peabody: We're back, and we're talking about dress codes - because of their role in a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History called "Girlhood, (It's Complicated!)" And it certainly is. Dress codes can teach us a lot about how girls' bodies are schooled from a young age, especially girls of color.

Kayla Patrick: It is very clearly a racial stereotype, right? So, black girls are often the victims of hair codes and grooming policies.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Kayla Patrick. She co-authored a report from the National Women's Law Center in 2018 that explored the impact of dress codes in Washington D.C.'s Public schools. Before this report, nobody had taken a large-scale look at dress code data, and Patrick and her colleagues found that dress codes feature gender and racial stereotypes that overwhelmingly affect black girls.

Lizzie Peabody: Can you give me some examples of dress code rules that were based on racial stereotypes?

Kayla Patrick: Yeah so, in a code of conduct you might find a hair code or a grooming policy where schools will explicitly ban hair extensions, hair braids, locs are prohibited. And really, things that we identify as cultural things that we would typically identify as something that is a part of cultural expressions, especially in the black community like hair wraps... hoop earrings and long necklaces,

Sharon Bryant: Our earrings, they couldn't be studs or hoops bigger than a quarter.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sharon Bryant, member of the Sidedoor editorial team!

Sharon Bryant: Black girls, we're known for like big hoop earrings, bamboo earrings and those sorts of things. So, when I got to school, I was like, 'Wait, I can't wear my favorite earrings to school?' I had no idea why.

Kayla Patrick: And the typical explanation that if you push back or ask why that exists is they'll say that type of thing is 'distracting...' So, really, what you end up saying to young people is that their culture and identity is distracting and not welcome within school buildings.

Sharon Bryant: I don't know how like my earrings could distract anyone from doing anything. Like I just didn't understand it, but also it was like 13 so I didn't really question it I just knew I couldn't wear my favorite earrings to school so I would just have a little...boring stud.

Lizzie Peabody: Kayla says another justification, particularly for hair codes, is professionalism.

Kayla Patrick: They are told that having natural hair or having hair extensions or braids is unprofessional. And so, what we're really telling girls is that they have to present themselves as white to be professional, to be frank, and really have to make themselves as white as possible in order to be welcomed in school or professional spaces.

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Lizzie Peabody: Statistically, Black girls hit puberty earlier than white girls, which makes them more likely targets of dress code enforcement. But Marcia Chatelain says it's not just about physical development - it's also about racism. Black girls face adults' stereotyped perceptions that they're less innocent, and more grown up than their white peers.

Marcia Chatelain: African American girls are perceived as older than they actually are. And this has been a historical reality that black girls and their advocates have had to fight against. If we look at issues like sentencing for juvenile crimes, black girls are more likely to be met with punishment in the traditional sense. And white girls are more likely to get help for addiction or mental health counseling when they, you know, breach some type of rule.

Lizzie Peabody: Dress codes show girls, at a formative time in their lives, who is protected at school, and who is punished.

Lizzie Peabody: What are some common ways students are punished for dress code violations that you've seen over the course of your research?

Kayla Patrick: We've seen many things.

Lizzie Peabody: Kayla Patrick:

Kayla Patrick: One thing that I think about often is a couple of girls were made to wear bright orange or bright yellow vests, like a street crossing vest.

Lizzie Peabody: But that doesn't even cover you up very much.

Kayla Patrick: No, it's about shaming and policing girl's bodies, right? It's about control not really about what they're wearing. So really, it creates a system of shame, fear and really unfocuses students on what really is important, which is school.

Lizzie Peabody: When students are thinking about being judged or punished, it's very hard to learn. But it's even harder to learn when you're not in class. And the National Women's Law Center reports that in 2018, 74% of DC Public Schools authorized students to be pulled out of class or sent home as punishment for violating their dress code.

Kayla Patrick: In DC, we talked to girls who were sent home for wearing the wrong color shoes, right? there's too much black on their shoes or too much white. We've also seen girls be sent home because they wore the wrong color pants to school.

Lizzie Peabody: Kayla Patrick points out that money plays a role here, too.

Kayla Patrick: Many families don't have extra resources to buy clothes repeatedly when children grow out of clothes in the middle of the school year. And a lot of girls talk to us about wearing hand me downs and that type of thing. And really, we're sending kids home for actually being low-income.

Lizzie Peabody: ...which is kind of the opposite of what public schooling is supposed to do: provide an education to all American children, regardless of their economic circumstances.

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Lizzie Peabody: The National Women's Law Center reports that current dress code policies are "cause for grave concern." Discriminatory codes pull students out of the classroom for superficial reasons, causing girls to fall behind in school, worsening long-standing racial and gender inequalities. Nationally, black girls are already six times more likely to be suspended and four times more likely to be expelled from school than their white peers. Sometimes, for dress code violations.

Kayla Patrick: School should be about learning, and when we comment on girls' bodies and what they're wearing, we're really communicating to girls that what they're wearing is really more important than what they're thinking and what they're learning.

Lizzie Peabody: Jilly Towson says, if it were up to her, she'd eliminate the dress code all together. And I have to admit my knee-jerk reaction was to be skeptical.

Lizzie Peabody: So, if you didn't have a dress code, what would you do if someone came to school like, basically in a bikini?

Jilly Towson: Might be kind of cold. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: But like, is there a line? Obviously, someone coming completely nude would be somewhat of a distraction. So, where's the line?

Jilly Towson: I think there's definitely a line, but I think before I would like quote, unquote, dress code that person, I think it would be more important to pull them aside and like, see how they're doing and see what's going on because you don't just come to school in a swimsuit for no reason.

Lizzie Peabody: ...that's a good point.

Jilly Towson: There's got to be something going on.

Lizzie Peabody: Kayla Patrick says some schools are revamping their dress codes, with the help of students. And she says some states are taking legislative action.

Kayla Patrick: We're starting to see states really change dress code legislation around what schools can suspend and expel students for when it comes to dress codes. And that's really, really important.

Lizzie Peabody: But she says, if it were up to her, she'd make it really simple.

Kayla Patrick: Tell them to 'wear clothes to school,' right. I think most students know what that means! and know that they should be clothed, and really, we should be signaling to students that what they're wearing really isn't that important.

Lizzie Peabody: 'Wear clothes to school.' I like the simplicity of that statement!

Kayla Patrick: I mean, it's as simple as that! (Laughs.) We are putting too much of an emphasis on policing students. And we should really be putting an emphasis on curriculum and making students feel safe and included in school buildings.

Lizzie Peabody: If you take a dress code and hold it up to the light, it becomes a prism illuminating a whole spectrum of expectations for girls, showing that their gender, body type, culture and race will all affect how they're treated by the world, and how they will view themselves. And Nancy Bercaw says, girls have been living with this reality for a long time.

Nancy Bercaw: One thing I've really noticed is how things don't really change that much over time for girls. And I think dress codes kind of points that out- that you can't walk through the world without being really self-conscious about what you're wearing and what your body might be saying. And that changes the way you walk through the world.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you'd like to see a photo of Jilly's checkerboard skirt, we'll include a link to the online exhibition in our Newsletter! You want to see this skirt. Just ask Nancy!

[MUSIC]

Nancy Bercaw: Yeah, Jilly Towson's outfit is really cute.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You can also see those less-than-cute gym bloomers from the 1850s. Subscribe to the Newsletter at si.edu/sidedoor. That's si.edu/sidedoor.

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Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks to the many people who reached out with their dress code stories, including Anita Flores, Julianna Bradley, and Sidedoor's very own Sharon Bryant!

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Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks to our colleagues at the National Museum of American History - Project Director Kathleen FrAHNz, members of the communications office, Clara dePablo, Melinda Machado and Valeska Hilbig as well as the entire team behind "Girlhood(It's complicated). The exhibition opens to the public on October 9th, 2020.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, Sharon Bryant, and Tami O'Neill. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John, Jason, and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music is by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

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Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

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Lizzie Peabody: Are you gonna go visit your clothes in the Smithsonian once it reopens?

Jilly Towson: I hope so. I'm really excited to see my clothes and like my friend's clothes and see the checkerboard skirt. I almost didn't want to give it to the Smithsonian. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: Go visit that skirt!