

The Pantsuit

Lorene Rexwinkel

The year was 1971. It was my very first year of teaching at a middle school in a small rural town. I was the new Home Economics teacher fresh out of college and ready for that first job. I was also a newlywed. I was assigned to the 8th grade Home Economics (that was the extent of the middle school offering) and to make my contract full-time, I had Social Studies on the 7th and 8th grade level. My new Home Economics room has been added as an addition to the building, so I was responsible for ordering supplies and equipment for the room.

As a college student at Iowa State University, our dress code in the college of Home Economics was “dresses or skirts” only. If it was below a certain temperature outside, we were allowed to wear pants or tights under our dresses but most of the gals opted for wool knee-high socks. I owned a royal blue pair of stretch pants (with stirrups) that I often wore with a blue and white striped sweater and skirt. Quite the outfit!

Our professors stressed professionalism in dress which did not include pants! I had an adequate supply of skirts, jumpers, and dresses to wear while student teaching and for my first teaching contract. Of course, nylons, pantyhose, socks and fancy shoes were the accessories. Don’t we all remember wearing heels to teach? Mine were never more than two inches as I didn’t want to be any taller than I was! Pantyhose was part of my budget as I tended to acquire “runs” quite easily.

As the Home Economics teacher and 22 years of age, I was extremely interested in fashion. One of my favorite idols was Jackie Kennedy. I followed her fashion wardrobe like it was my own. The only problem was that she had money to spend on a terrific wardrobe and I did not. I loved my teaching job and most of my wardrobe was hand sewn by me. I enjoyed teaching my students to sew and a fashion style show was my way of attracting parents to the school. I had approximately 15-20 students in my Home Economics classroom, so our show

attracted people in the community as well as parents. All girls were required to model their garments.

As the year progresses, I noticed in magazines and witnessed on television that women were starting to wear fancy pantsuits...slacks and jackets/tops that matched. I saw warmth in those as well as ease in getting on hands and knees. I decided to do some retail shopping at Christmas time in Sioux City. Being tall it was difficult to find anything long enough. I decided to go to a clothing store that carried tall sizes with a high-end price tag. I fell in love with a wool, double knit, tan colored pantsuit. It fit perfectly and was totally out of the budget! I purchased it and decided to wear it for church and special occasions. One morning while dressing for school, the pantsuit was my choice. Afterall, I needed to professional dress for work, and I was going to be the first to wear a pantsuit on the job. The girls in my classes loved it!

My day was progressing nicely, and I heard a knock on my door! I went to the door and received a note from the principal asking me to stop in during my planning period. I wasn't sure what he wanted but I didn't think I had done anything wrong, but it bothered me anyway. So, after class...I headed to the principal's office. When I got to the office, Mr. K. asked me to sit down. He said to me, "I noticed you are wearing pants today. Do you feel that is appropriate dress for teaching??" I was a little flustered to say the least.

I need to preface my response by describing my principal's appearance. His sport coat was thrown on a chair, his white shirt tail was hanging out, and his tie was loose and askew on his neck. He had an extra 20 pounds on his frame, so the belt was extremely tight on his pants. Do you have a picture?

I held my tongue and politely said, "Mr. K., I am the Home Economics teacher, and my students look to me as role model for fashion. Pantsuits and pants in general are in fashion and practical for young ladies." I think I caught him off guard because I was not going to apologize for wearing pants. He simply said, "Well if that the way you feel!" I walked out. Within a few weeks, other women faculty members started wearing pants. More and more girls started wearing pants to school. Most of the girls' attire was stretch pants with blue jeans becoming

popular in later years. I share this story just as a remembrance of my first year of teaching. I was young and extremely concerned about my appearance on the job. Certainly, teaching apparel has changed throughout the years.