



## NEW BEDFORD WOMEN OF THE YEAR

Pair creates a place  
where girls can

# RAISE THEIR HANDS

By **BRIAN BOYD**

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NEW BEDFORD — Education changes lives and shapes the future.

This is a belief Lisa Schmid Alvord and Lisa Yates share. Their interest in education has taken different forms, but they have come together to help create a tuition-free private school for girls.

Ms. Alvord is president of Our Sisters' School, an all-girls school for fifth- and sixth-graders that opened in September, and Ms. Yates is its executive director.

The school is supported by private donations.

For their efforts in establishing an innovative educational option in the city, they have been named The Standard-Times' 2008 New Bedford Women of the Year. Nominations for the award came from the community and members of the newspaper staff. Recipients were selected by a news-room committee.

"I think education is the most transformative aspect in a child's life," Ms. Alvord said. "If you can make sure your educational system is powerful and strong, then you know you're going to help create great citizens and a great country. It is the basis for everything."

Ms. Alvord, 59, of Westport is a documentary film producer who has made several films on education, including the Peabody Award-winning documentary "Somerville High." She is a cofounder of Urban Improv, a violence prevention program in Boston schools.

Before taking the helm of Our Sisters', Ms. Yates, 30, of Acushnet was a teacher at the New Bedford Global Learning Charter School.



Photo by **PETER PEREIRA**/The Standard-Times

**Lisa Schmid Alvord and Lisa Yates** helped to create Our Sisters' School, an all-girl tuition-free private school that opened in September in New Bedford.

She said she always wanted to be in education, and that she was drawn to the field because it is a long-term investment and a way to affect the future.

"New Bedford's young people have so much to offer each other, their community and the world at large, and providing opportunities for them to do so, and to be active citizens and shapers of the future, is really exciting," she said.

More than two years ago, Ms. Alvord conceived of the school with JoAnn Clarke, executive director of Trips for Kids, and Doreen Lopes, executive director of Nativity Prep School of New Bedford, an all-boys school that served as a model for Our Sisters'. Ms. Alvord credited Ms. Yates with helping turn the idea into a reality.

"I've never seen them down," said Toby Baker, a member of the board of directors, of Ms. Alvord and Ms. Yates. "They're always enthusiastic."

Currently, 26 students attend the school, located at 145 Brownell Ave. Looking ahead, Our Sisters' will add a seventh grade next year and an eighth grade the year after next. The school ultimately will have 60 students.

The name of the school refers to "sister sailors," a name for wives who joined their sailor husbands on long journeys.

By providing a single-sex middle-school experience, Our Sisters' is helping girls at a critical time in their development, when they lose some of their confidence and start having self-esteem problems in their adolescence, Ms. Yates said.

At a single-sex school, the girls are in an environment where they are always the leaders, she said.

"By the time they go out to high schools, they will be confident and will maintain that sense of self for the rest of their academic careers," she said.

Empowering girls can benefit the whole community.

"When you educate a girl, you not only educate a girl, but you educate her family, and in turn, you end up educating the community, and it has this ripple effect by educating this one girl," Ms. Alvord said, borrowing from oft-spoken sentiment.

The Women of the Year attributed the school's success to the hard work of staff members and the many volunteers supporting the project.

"We really are the tip of an iceberg of just so many people who came together to make this possible, and it's really a wonderful example of community," Ms. Alvord said.

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LISA SCHMID ALVORD, president of Our Sisters' School