

Historian, author, political commentator Doris Kearns Goodwin speaks at OSS fundraiser

By Lauren Daley, New Bedford Standard Times Contributing Writer, August 01, 2011



Students Carolina Madeira, Elena Bartolomey, Tashianna Pires and Gheorghita "Georgi" Battaglia from Our Sister's School speak with Doris Kearns Goodwin at a fundraiser on Sunday evening in Westport. Photo credit: Lauren Daley/Standard-Times special

WESTPORT — "We're about to win, but I'll mute it," said Doris Kearns Goodwin, pulling her eyes away from the Red Sox game on TV yesterday afternoon to talk to a reporter.

Goodwin, 68, is a Pulitzer-Prize winning author and presidential historian who has written six New York Times best-sellers; she's an MSNBC and CNN political analyst, and a huge Red Sox fan.

She was in Westport last night as the featured speaker for the first-ever fundraiser for Our Sisters' School, an all-girls middle school in New Bedford.

"Doris is an example of what any woman would want to be; she's the Woman of the Year for us," said Lisa Schmid Alvord, president and co-founder of Our Sisters School.

"She's one of the country's greatest historians. She's an example of what we'd like our students to grow up to be."

Founded in 2006, Our Sisters' School is a private middle school for under-privileged girls, mostly minorities, in Grades 5 to 8. All the girls come from families who qualify for fuel assistance, Alvord said.

The girls' education is paid entirely by private donors— including those who attended "An Evening with Doris Kearns Goodwin" at Alvord's Westport estate Sunday.

Goodwin was the first female journalist allowed into the Boston Red Sox locker room, and was featured in Ken Burns' PBS documentary, "The History of Baseball." Her New York Times bestselling memoir, "Wait 'Til Next Year" (1997), chronicles her girlhood as a baseball fan.

She appears frequently on NBC, MSNBC, PBS and "Meet the Press." She's appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart." She's been interviewed for PBS and History Channel for various documentaries on the Kennedys, Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln.

At 6 last night, the sun was still beating down hard on the rolling green acres of River Rock Farm. Some 200 donors — men wearing white pants, and women in their best cocktail dresses and jewelry — and four OSS students in uniform took their seats on a lush green lawn, surrounded by picturesque stone walls, tiger lilies and horse pastures.

Goodwin talked for 45 minutes, discussing Eleanor Roosevelt's and Abraham Lincoln's triumphs over adversity. She then fielded questions.

"Eleanor Roosevelt grew up in the age where the most that many women wanted out of life was to look good at debutante balls. Eleanor's mother told her she had an ugly face," Goodwin told a reporter before the event.

"But she went to an all-girls school in London — similar to (OSS) — and the head mistress took Eleanor under her wing. And she came back to the U.S. with the courage and self-esteem not to care about debutante balls. And it was that confident attitude that attracted (Roosevelt)," Goodwin said.

"Life is about triumphing over adversity. For these girls, Our Sisters' School is a chance for them to gain confidence in themselves in a small-school setting, get a solid education and have a really good experience," she said.

All the teachers are AmeriCorps volunteers who teach 12-hour days at the school — classes and after-school activities — in exchange for only room and board and a small monthly stipend from AmeriCorps.

In June, OSS graduated its first class of 10 eighth-graders, some of whom earned full scholarships to Bishop Stang High School in Dartmouth; Tabor Academy in Marion; Phillips Academy in Andover; St. George's School in Middletown, R.I.; The Wheeler School in Providence; and the Lincoln School in Providence.

Goodwin is currently working on a new book about FDR, and recently sold the rights to her Lincoln book to Steven Spielberg.

Dreamworks Production has slated "Lincoln," based on Goodwin's "Team of Rivals," for release December of 2012. Daniel Day Lewis will star as Lincoln. Sally Field will play Mary Todd Lincoln, with Tommy Lee Jones as Thaddeus Stevens.

The girls in attendance last night said it was "cool" to meet Goodwin — and the people who pay for their schooling.

"They're the ones who buy us art supplies, like glue and scissors," said Elena Bartolomey, 11.

"The donors allow us to have more programs," said Gheorghita "Georgi" Battaglia, 11. "My wish is to make OSS an awesome school for girls with no annoying boys."

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