

A sisterhood of learning for students and teachers

By [Lauren Daley](#), CONTRIBUTING WRITER, October 05, 2010 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — On a warm September afternoon, a class of 13 sixth-grade girls in khaki skirts or pants and baby blue polo shirts are gathered on the lawn outside, reading "Walk Two Moons," by Sharon Creech.

"All right, girls, for tomorrow, I want you to read Chapter 3," announces their teacher, 23-year-old Marla Feldman, as the girls line up to head back inside to Our Sisters' School in New Bedford.

"Hey, remember last year when you used to collect sticks?" one girl asks another, holding up a stick from the ground.

"I most certainly do not!" answers the other girl in a pretend British accent, sending the rest of the group into a flutter of giggles.

They skip, hold hands and play march back inside, this group of preteen friends in Chuck Taylors and ponytails.

Once inside, they stand obediently behind their desks, each desk bearing their nametag: "Bre'Anna," "Trinity," "Jewel."

"Alright, ladies, let's get changed for soccer!" Feldman announces, and the girls rush out to their lockers to grab their shorts and cleats.

Ms. Feldman will now become Coach Feldman.

In all, Feldman — and every teacher at Our Sisters' School — will spend nearly 12 hours with the girls, from 7:15 a.m. when they gather for "Morning Wellness," until 6:30 p.m. when they finish "Evening Study."

It's remarkable to see a group of girls so confident being themselves at an age where many aren't sure who they are, or if they should speak at all.

It's touching to see a group of preteen girls so friendly, at an age where many form cliques.

And it's inspiring to see a group of young teachers, most of them 22 or 23, who are willing to forgo a paycheck to help make it happen.

"I believe in the benefits of an all-girl education," said Stephanie Cosantino, a 23-year-old eighth-grade English/Language Arts teacher from New Jersey.

"I went to Wellesley, and I realized that women find strength in numbers. The fact that this was an all-girl school is what sold me immediately. I feel it's the best way to foster young girls," she said.

"Not to be cliché, but this is a sisterhood. There's a bond in all-girls schools that I never found in co-ed schools. The girls are so confident. There's less distraction," she said.

"You can really target the self-esteem issues, the body-image issues, the self-confidence issues. I really believe that girls are far more willing to raise their hands in an all-girl environment."

The eight volunteer teachers work 12-hour days. They are here through a two-year program through AmeriCorps. They're given room and board and health insurance, along with a \$325 monthly stipend during year one, and \$525 during year two.

Four of the teachers share a house on Cottage Street, and four of them share a house on Rounds Street; each house is about a mile from school.

Through AmeriCorps, they receive \$5,000 after the first year and another \$5,000 at the end of the second. The money can only be used to pay off school loans or for graduate school.

Cosantino usually rides her bike to school each day, after waking somewhere between 5:30 and 6 a.m. She'll get to school around 7:30 a.m. From 7:15 to 7:45 a.m., the girls have "Morning Wellness," when they either walk or do yoga.

From 7:45 to 8:15 a.m., they have "Morning Meeting," where they listen to classical music, and listen to community members, who come in twice a week to speak about their careers and experiences. Each day, the Meeting ends with the school community sharing their worries and wishes for the day.

The first class begins at 8:15 a.m. The girls have art every day. They also have social studies, science lab, math and language arts.

At 3:45 the teachers and girls change into athletic gear. Because it's fall, they'll have either volleyball, soccer, Frisbee or cross country until 4:45 p.m. In the winter, it might be basketball, dance or yoga. Then it's snack time, and evening study until 6:30 p.m.

On Friday, they have clubs — either Young Authors' Club, Knitting Club, Art Club or Improv Club.

"This school blows my mind in terms of what being a teacher means," Cosantino said. "You're a mentor, a coach and a friend. You get to know the girls as people, not just students.

"Not only that, but we live with all the other teachers, and have relationships with them. Everybody here cares. The teachers care; the kids care. You can't invest this many hours out of your day without really caring," she said.

"The energy among the girls is amazing; everyone in all my classes is so passionate and driven. It's amazing and how women find strength in one another," she said.

In 2007, the idea of a middle school for the inner-city girls of New Bedford was just that — an idea. Only three years later, it is a very real, almost utopian, all-female community.

In September 2008, Our Sisters' School opened its doors to a select group of 30 fifth- and sixth-grade girls from the greater New Bedford area.

Today, the school has 53 fifth-through eighth-grade students. Most of them are Cape Verdean, Latina or biracial, but many are also Portuguese, African-American and Chinese. Their first graduating class of 10 will accept their diplomas in June.

Our Sisters' School mission is simple: "To educate and inspire middle-school girls from the Greater New Bedford area to reach their full potential in a safe, supportive and challenging environment."

According to their press packet, the cost to educate one girl at the tuition-free school is \$12,000 per year— and it is done entirely through private donations, foundations and grants.

"The AmeriCorps teachers at Our Sisters' School are the heart of our school's community," said OSS Executive Director Lisa Yates.

"Their energy, passion, dedication and persistence are both humbling and amazing to see in action. These teachers truly believe that each and every student has the potential to excel, and they do whatever it takes to make learning happen," said Yates.

"They simply never give up on children. It is an honor to have them teaching in our program, and we thank them — on behalf of the students, families, and our community — for giving us the gift of their time and service in New Bedford."

But Yates also wants the teachers to get something out of their two years of service.

"Through a comprehensive professional development and in-service mentoring program, we hope they will learn and grow every day, and that they will have the opportunity to transform lives in the process."

"I am a feminist. I am very involved in activism," said Krissy Dolce, 22, a seventh-grade English/Social Studies/Health teacher from New Milford, Conn.

"I really believe that educated women raise up their families. Girls in middle school barely speak at all in front of boys. I know they wouldn't be asking me the same questions — never mind asking me about their periods," said Dolce, who graduated from UConn in May.

"I received an e-mail from my Women's Studies professor about this school, and I fell in love with it," said Dolce, who plans on going to grad school after her two years at OSS, to eventually become a professor of Feminist Theory.

"At the end of the day, I go home exhausted, but I love my girls. I love spending all day with them. My life has a new sense of purpose since coming to New Bedford — a child's education is in my hands," she said.

Added Marla Feldman, "My typical day is hectic — teaching, advising, coaching — but I love the teamwork and community feel of my job.

"All the teachers here work together as a team to fulfill the school's mission. And everyone here is free to be themselves," said Feldman, who heard about OSS through a career program at Union College in Schenectady, NY.

Feldman said that working for a non-profit has made her want to earn her master's degree in Public Policy.

Heather Cyr, 21, a co-teacher with Feldman, has two reasons why she took this job:

To help "raise up girls," and to "help the city I came from," said the 2006 New Bedford High alumna, who graduated from the University of Rhode Island in May with a degree in marine biology.

"I fell in love with this place. I wish it was here when I was in middle school," said Cyr. "It's a very supportive atmosphere. The type of environment the girls have here you won't find anywhere else, that's for sure. We push them to the limit, but we're there with them every step of the way."

Our Sisters School is located at 145 Brownell Ave. in New Bedford. For more information, call (508) 994-1255 or e-mail info@oursistersschool.org. You can also visit their Web site at <http://www.oursistersschool.org/html/welcome.html>.