In the best RFK tradition, these three women asked, 'Why not?'

KEN HARTNETT

"We've got to stop talking about this," Ms. Clarke recalled them saying to each other during a Lakelove hike in mid-2006. "We really ought to do this. It's the right thing to do.

The very next day, Kate Feenstra of the Women's Fund came flying in 30 minutes late to a Trips for Kids meeting with Ms. Clarke, the Trips director.

"I just met with a woman from Boston who wants to start a girls' school in New Bedford," she said in explanation. "It got chilly," said JoAnn Clarke. That Boston woman was Lisa Alford, of course.

Ms. Clarke had earlier heard her name from Toby Baker, a man with a wide range of civic interests here and in Boston.

More convergence. The Baker family has seats next to the Schmidt/Alford family seats at the symphony in Boston. Both Toby Baker and Lisa Alford are also members of the New Bedford Whaling Museum board. They talk. Lisa mentioned to Toby her seriousness about the girls' school. Toby told Lisa he knew two people she should talk to. He scribbled down two names: JoAnn Clarke and Doreen Lopes, two names she had already gotten from Kate Feenstra of the Women's Fund.

Sometimes in August 2006, the three women met for the first time in Kate Feenstra's office at the Community Foundation. Immediately, they clicked.

"What can I say," says Lisa. "It was chemistry ... Nobody ever said, 'Why do this?' It was always, 'Why not?'

Meeting after meeting ensued. More and more people joined the circle of advisers. The highly organized JoAnn Clarke soon gave up trying to introduce work sheets and timelines. The energy didn't flow that way.

Lisa Alford, with a Rolodex of influential, began pulling in an impressive group of advisers, including her husband Joel, ex-president of the Shawmut Bank, a variety of education experts, and business and financial people from the tonier suburbs.

Doreen Lopes, a retired New Bedford community leaders, including Bernadette Souza of the Boys and Girls Club, immigrant advocate Helena Marques and Gail Ford of the YWCA.

Meanwhile, Doreen's life was changing dramatically. The wife of Luis Lopes, school superintendent of the Southeastern region's vocational schools, Ms. Lopes had volunteered to help out at Nativity Prep with her management savvy. Before long, she was being recruited as the successor to Barry Hynes, who announced he would retire at the close of the school year in June 2007; she was also pregnant with her first child. She still had ample energy for the girls' school project, which was quickly taking shape.

Lisa Alford became the chairman of the board; JoAnn Clarke, the vice chairman. Committee tasks got assigned to a roll of talented people who got things done.

By May 2007, papers were filed to form a non-profit corporation. Soon afterwards, the executive director, Lisa Alford, was named as the executive director of a school that would be called "Our Sisters" after the New Bedford women who sailed with their husbands on whaling ships back in the 19th Century.

More convergence. Lisa Alford is the longtime board chair of Urban Improv, a crime prevention program in Boston that uses theatrical techniques to teach young people about the negative effects of drugs. She learned about Lisa Alford, who happened to be in New Bedford at the Charter School. "She's organized, smart and focused," says Lisa Alford of JoAnn Clarke.

And so the school is about to open in September at its temporary home at Tifereth Israel Congregation with an initial group of 36 girls, 15 in both the fifth and sixth grades. Fifteen more will be added next year with a seventh grade. An eighth grade will arrive in the third year, with the same 15-student limit assuring individual attention.

Now nothing but the opening is certain. Each child in the school comes with a price tag of $7,500 that must be paid through a fundraising effort. Sponsoring an individual child is a great way to contribute, by the way, if you have the means.) The economy is shaky these days, and the competition for dollars to support the city's many non-profit institutions is keen.

Some people worry that the girls' school will weaken the funding stream for Nativity and vice versa. So far, says Doreen Lopes, that hasn't happened. She says so far each school has a distinct group of donors. Each school also has a distinct board of directors. Both schools are committed to single-sex education. While they are likely to work together, they are unlikely to merge without a fundamental change in the belief that boys and girls are different and learn differently.

The biggest question going forward, Ms. Lopes says, is the degree of community acceptance. "If the community doesn't adopt the school, it won't succeed," she says. If parents can see the advantages the school offers and its value to their daughters, they will support it as best they can. The community's got to take ownership," says Ms. Lopes, now pregnant with her second child and settled in as Barry Hynes' successor at Nativity.

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