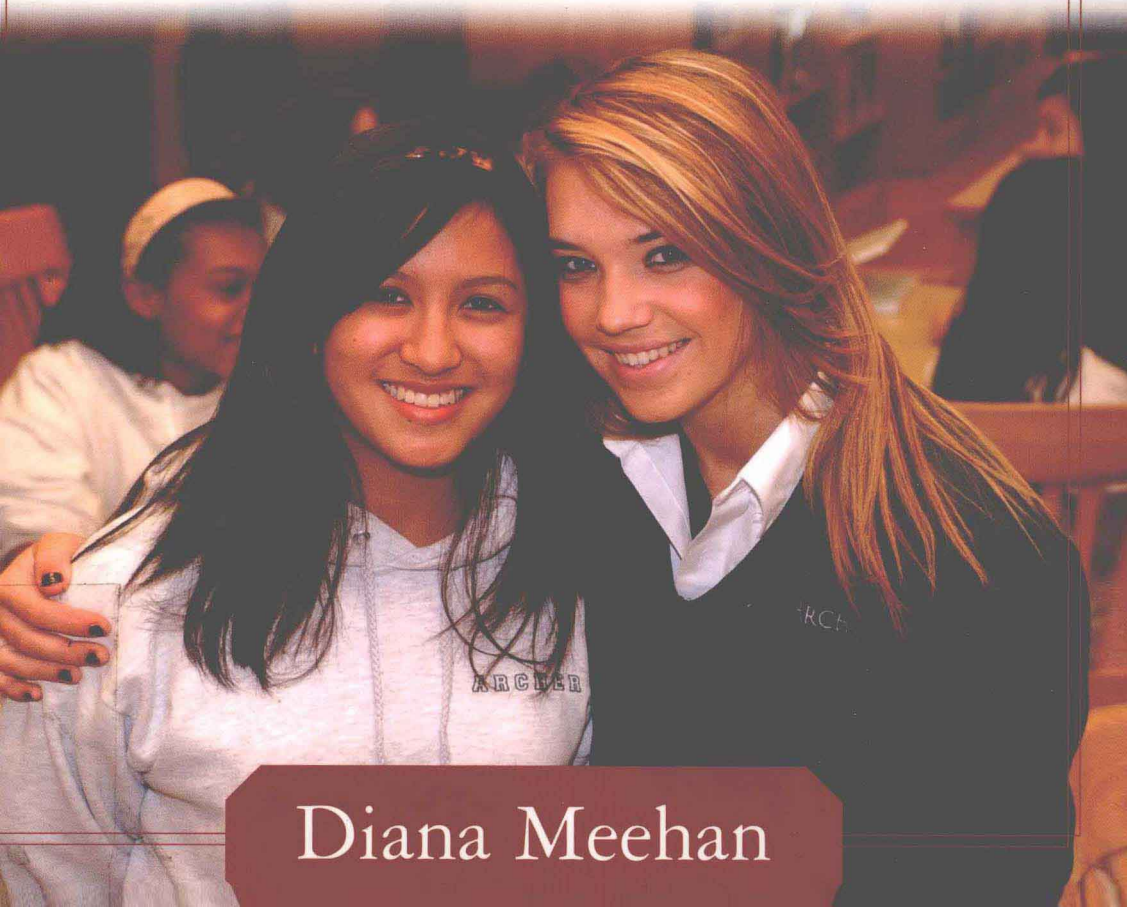


# Learning Like a Girl



EDUCATING OUR DAUGHTERS IN  
SCHOOLS OF THEIR OWN



Diana Meehan

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 PUBLICAFFAIRS  
New York

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Book Design by Timm Bryson

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meehan, Diana M., 1943–

Learning like a girl : educating our daughters in schools of their own / Diana Meehan. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58648-410-1 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1-58648-410-9 (hardcover)

1. Girls' schools—United States. 2. Girls—Education—United States. 3. Educational equalization—United States. I. Title.

LB3067.4.M434 2007

371.8220973—dc22

2007002176

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Learning Like a Girl

## Praise for *Learning Like a Girl*

“There’s no place like a girls’ school to recognize ways to tap talent, engage intellect, inspire best effort, [and] revel in intellectual risk taking. The result? Girls who are competent, capable, courageous, and compassionate. Meehan, in *Learning Like a Girl*, walks the reader through her adventure of transforming a vision into a reality—founding a girls’ school. Throughout that journey, she is driven by her belief that girls deserve classrooms of their own with teachers mindful of their possibilities, who prize education, and encourage their multi-dimensional success. We agree! A girl-centered education is indeed a transformative experience!”

—MEG MILNE MOULTON and WHITNEY RANSOME,  
Executive Directors, National Coalition of Girls’ Schools

“This is a book by a leader about leadership. It tells a story born of conviction and practical need. *Learning Like a Girl* is descriptive, concrete, personal, and undergirded with knowledge derived from useful research. Diana Meehan’s narrative of how she and other women defied great odds and fought annoying demons in their quest to build a new community of learning and leadership for girls offers everyone a lesson in the dynamic power of a dream combined with a plan.”

—RUTH B. MANDEL, Board of Governors Professor of Politics and  
Director, Eagleton Institute of Politics Rutgers—The State University of New  
Jersey

“This book presents one of the most compelling cases I have ever seen made for single-sex schools, but it is much more than that. Deeply thoughtful, full of wry humor, this is a wondrously well written account of how three women succeeded against all odds in creating a school to match their dreams. Describing her predecessors, Meehan writes that ‘they were essentially adventurers with a noble agenda; they were steadfast, stubborn, dogged, indefatigable, obdurate, and indomitable. . . .’ And so, indeed, was she. There will, I predict, be few readers of this book who will not wish their own daughters had been lucky enough to go to The Archer School.”

—MARC TUCKER, President,  
National Center on Education and the Economy

*For Gary, for our daughters and  
for all daughters  
and in memory of  
Brenda Elizabeth McGourty Meehan  
6/9/1919–9/6/1999*

# Note from a Dad

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The creation of a school must be the same as the birth of a city-state, where human beings share common necessities—like shelter and water—at the same time each has individual needs—like prescription eyeglasses and relief from allergies. A school, particularly one made from scratch and meant to educate only girls, will need the familiar stuff like desks and restrooms. Much more than that, the school has to accept each girl as a quirky, one-of-a-kind human, then strive to transform her into the best of herself. Without that mission statement, all the school would be is desks and restrooms.

The city-state may start from random chaos and never recover. The school will have the same origins, but can somehow, perhaps miraculously, leapfrog the requirements of the brick-and-mortar needs, and, getting straight on into the nitty-gritty, turn a girl's high school years into a hair-raising adventure.

Diana Meehan, along with a team of allies that would give The Justice League of America a run for its money, did just that. She took that dream of an all-girls school and wrestled it through chaos that seemed, at times, insurmountable—juggling, fighting, begging, and negotiating all the way. And she succeeded.

The result is The Archer School for Girls, a place that lives up to the last line of its school song, sending their graduates out into a world where they will become “everything they can be.”

From the perspective of a father of an Archer Grad, a single sex all girls’ school may not be for every young woman. Just those who want to one day rule our city-state and the world.

Tom Hanks



# Preface

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Let me go back in time fifteen years ago to a turning point in our own lives, an incident that now seems almost trivial. It was at a screening of *The Rocketeer*; our daughters were eighteen and seven. It was a charity event, and we were in line to meet the lead, the young actor playing the Rocketeer, with what was apparently delightful allure for one of our party, our younger daughter.

Her sister and I stood with her as people waited to shake the Rocketeer's hand or congratulate him on his performance. Just before we got to him, we were startled to see her step slightly aside and flip her hair with her fingers, practicing a pouty smile.

Our eighteen-year-old, who a few years later would become a comedy writer, raised one eyebrow toward her sister and smiled ruefully as she turned to me. "Have a nice adolescence," she said.



I admit I panicked. This hair-flipping, pout-making, flirty-girl behavior did *not* come from home. Home was heroes and gods of mythic Brooklyn (my husband's bedside stories) or heroes and goddesses of mythic Celts, Greeks, or some other ancient tribe

(my contribution). This child and I enchanted ourselves with Inanna, Athena, Caileach, and Spider Woman; whispered wary tales of Pandora, Echo, and Deirdre of the Sorrows; and avoided the Furies and the cannibal kachinas.

And now this encounter with the Rocketeer. It seemed a portent she was opting for the wrong myth. Or singing the wrong siren song. And all of it too soon.

Does every parent look at his or her offspring and see painful possibilities emerging from everyday actions? Can the same child show a propensity to be Persephone, dancing around until she attracts the attention of some underlord who'll snatch her up and make her mother grieve, and also have in her Athena, the warrior-poet, the grey-eyed one who took guff from no one and had her own cities?

This daughter does. She wavers between extremes of Athena, commander in chief of the children of Santa Monica, and Persephone, too-cute coquette.

If you maddeningly have both characters in the selfsame child, how do you protect Persephone while she's dancing in the fields and encourage Athena to go ahead, take some risks, try to win some battles? What do girls need to thrive and prosper? What keeps them safe and helps them realize their potential to be great?

Every social scientist I've ever encountered argues it starts with family—the traditions, routines, guidelines, and rituals that provide context and meaning. In our family we had all of the above with a mixture of Irish-Jewish genes, Berkeley hippie sentiments, and Mexican and Italian recipes.

We urged playing team sports, honoring elders, and sharing Halloween candy, not necessarily in that order; TV watching was communal and clothing purchases, limited. We tried, we did, to

do what parents can do; with three comics in this family of four, the dynamic was complicated but never boring.

Growing up, our older daughter had the strict parents firstborn often have: we sanctioned no TV other than shows with positive female role models (which at one point included only three protagonists, Nancy Drew, Wonder Woman, and the Bionic Woman, with urgent arguments made by that daughter on a weekly basis for the addition—this week only—of the Angels from *Charlie*). She also had a few piano lessons, American Youth Soccer Organization soccer games, and a single sex school.

Her sister, born eleven years later, has no girls' school; more distracted, permissive parents; and a more dangerously distracting, permissive society. She lives in what is virtually a different world than her sister did at her age. Everything we read says it's not a safer, sweeter place either.



Mary Pipher, a Nebraska therapist, wrote an important book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), arguing that even if we raised them to be dauntless and assertive, our daughters seem to be anxious and insecure “saplings in a hurricane.” Two journalists, Peggy Orenstein in *School Girls* and Judy Mann in *The Difference* (1994), concluded, as Pipher had, that girls' adolescent “selves” were at risk in a culture that devalued them and undermined girls' abilities, achievements, and independence.

Nor was there any help from their schools. The social scientists, from Carol Gilligan challenging psychological theory about gender, to Myra and David Sadker observing our public schools and concluding that girls there were ignored and patronized, to researchers publishing findings in 1991, 1992, 1993, and 1996

that female students were being “shortchanged,” all reported bad news for girls in the coeducational classroom.

A wide variety of social science studies seemed to make a strong argument for single sex schooling for girls, an option available in the late twentieth century to less than 9 percent of the population. Researchers for the U.S. Department of Education, as well as sociologists, psychologists, historians, and education policymakers, consistently concluded in one context or another:

Girls’ schools are good for girls.


What’s good about them is they are totally and exclusively dedicated to girls. The research about how girls learn urges us to find a place they can “own,” which *only* occurs in single sex space; where their values, community, and connection are honored; and where their ways of knowing are respected and their hearts engaged.

In the best of these schools, girls make many of the rules. In all of them, girls play all the roles: girls are the clowns, the chemists, the classical scholars; girls play varsity sports (and they’re not the Lady Eagles or the girls’ team; they’re *The Varsity*); play the leads in the drama productions; and hold all the leadership positions in every endeavor.

Free from the judgment of boys, girls are active, not reactive. They’re not distracted, wondering, *What do the boys think of this?* They don’t compete with each other for boys’ favor. They remain little girls longer in those in-between years.


This kind of school provides an antidote to a female adolescent culture found to value cars, clothes, and boys, and it gives our daughters a little longer to be unadorned, plain ol’ kids. Being spared a few years of the culture of consumption is a respite in which to develop talents, traits, relationships, understandings, and skills independent of *what’s hot and what’s not*, in other

words, a chance to evolve into the confident, caring, independent-thinking members of society we'd like them to be.



Fortified with convictions about girls thriving in certain educational settings, prime among which are academic, innovative, girl-valuing girls' schools, we set out to find a single sex school that met our expectations. We were, at this point, two stay-at-home writers, so the prospect of finding what we wanted in this wide world was increased by what I thought of as geographic flexibility. As it happened, however, there was resistance to relocation (from the one I hold closest to my heart), which meant we went to Plan Two, which was to make the school we wanted.

This book is about the consequences of that decision: why we made it, how we made it, what it means today. I wrote it not only to share the journey but to encourage you to make your own journey, in some way, to give our daughters, our biological and spiritual descendents, the benefit of an educational environment that is their own.



For us, starting a school would seem to be about who we wanted to teach, what we wanted to teach, and where. Turns out, it isn't that simple.

Our purpose was clear, sweet as a Girl Scout cookie: to educate girls: rich and poor and in-between, black and white and in-between, ages eleven and eighteen and in-between. We imagined a place where the best teachers could do their best teaching and the girls would have the tools, the risks, the chances

to fail and to succeed—all they would need to become the leaders of their generation.

Mainly there were three of us who started this school: Vicky, Megan, and me. With the succor and life support from three husbands, especially mine. With help from our friends and interested bystanders. With luck. With money.

Innocently we thought the mission alone would carry the day. We expected the pure goodness of the dream (who could be against girls learning?) and our determination to see it realized would ensure success. We were ill-prepared for the breadth of the job, for the resentment and rage it would produce in the neighbors.

Founding a school turned out to be like the stages of becoming alcoholic. Initially it was fun. Then it became a series of late nights, long speeches, and arm-wrestling lawyers with false smiles who resembled the sad regulars in a neighborhood bar. It degenerated into crying in bathrobes in the middle of the night and eating vats of ice cream. Finally—if it turns out well—it will be about meetings and a mission and a relationship with a Higher Power, in this instance, First Republic Bank.

Like alcoholics, we weren't really prepared for the life we would lead. Vicky is a short story writer whose method of relaxation is reading Henry James. Megan is a documentary film producer who entertains herself by cooking the kinds of complicated dishes that require arcane tools and cream of tartar. I myself am a teacher.

We are parents—mothers of girls, five among us. We'd had personal experience in single sex institutions, high school or college, and like most alumnae of these schools, we cherished our time there. When challenged as threats to our community, we held fast to those memories.

None of us had been on a board of an independent school or started a business or been sued in court. We were not experts on children, although we all have them. We knew nothing of land use permits, employment law, or the city council.

We weren't totally dense. Vicky knew all that is currently known about Joan of Arc and spoke fluent Portuguese. Megan had interviewed the Unabomber. I myself in a modest way am good at research.

I'm addicted to social science research, especially studies which describe forty-four randomly chosen individuals agreeing to lose ten pounds by lunchtime or memorize the Social Security numbers of members of Congress. I like gender research—women and men and how we got that way. I know a theory which explains why a man would go to a baseball game, watch it, listen to the radio commentary on the way home, and then read about it in the newspaper the next day, as if he hadn't been in that very ballpark in person himself (Stephenson's Play Theory, for those who have wondered about this same phenomenon).

We knew things, the three of us, interesting things, but we knew little about schools.

We did not know, for example, that new schools are like magnets to the brave and the bold who seek new adventures but also attract the untried, the unfortunate, and the unstable, escaping unsavory pasts or unpleasant futures. New schools are models of chaos theory.



In the pages that follow is the story of founding a school, the protagonists, the parents, and the bit players, as well as the ogres under the bridge directing some of the fruitless, enervating battles

that sapped our reserves and energies. Like a new country, we had financial insecurity, political opposition, betrayal, corruptions.

So, too, did the other young schools I visited—started after Archer but resembling us, inspired by similar aims, opposed by similar foes.

The Young Women's Leadership School, for example, a public institution in East Harlem, attracted the ire of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the New York Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), both objecting to the use of public funds for the benefit of girls only, even though they were exclusively poor and educationally disadvantaged. Public girls' schools in Chicago and Dallas, modeled after the East Harlem one, braced for similar battles, but first faced more immediate problems of providing places to teach. They were offered buildings without gyms or studios or even classrooms, where construction crews were unwilling to work overtime and unions wouldn't allow teachers to move chairs or hang banners from the ceiling.

Independent schools in Oakland, Atlanta, and Seattle encountered climates in their communities that ranged from cool to chilly: "You shouldn't be so activist," complained a prospective parent in Seattle. "We should be focused on boys," said a prospective donor in Oakland, alluding to a recent rush of boy-advocate books.

All of us had one additional obstacle: lack of resources, particularly caused by little money, big bills.

Against all odds, however, we continued to believe we were doing the right thing. Our mission was focused on girls: the social science research about female behavior, female values, female learning; what motivates girls to succeed; the importance of role models; ways of approaching technology. When we learned about the brain research that indicates males and females think



differently, we were encouraged to incorporate it into the teaching methods. And as our understanding of the research and its applications to girls' education evolved, so too did our schools.

In "School in a (down-filled) Box" (Appendix A), you will discover ways and means to start a school of your own, and in "Mothers of Invention" (Appendix B), what sort of person has done that recently. In "Every Which Way but Here" (Appendix C) are resources for parents and activists who want to provide something of the all-girls' learning experience without giving up full-time jobs: programs in public schools, summer science camps, and Girls' Incorporated centers are among the options.

This is a journey I urge you to take, if you have daughters or nieces or granddaughters or students or girls in your neighborhood. We started thinking about this issue because we had daughters and we'd all read two books, *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan and *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher, and we'd heard rumors of new research about girls' education. What makes us persevere is the girls themselves. So, too, will yours.