Berkeley. She spent the next 15 years as a reporter at the *Sacramento Bee* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, covering a variety of beats: politics, government, business, technology. But she continued exploring women's economic and educational issues as well. At the *Bee*, she wrote a prize-winning series that pointed out how, despite the then-booming economy, few women ever achieved top jobs in the high-tech industry—largely because so few women graduated from college with the requisite technical skills.

Along the way, she married Sam Schuchat, a nonprofit-agency administrator; in 1994, she gave birth to their only child, Rebecca. Before their daughter was two, DeBare was already thinking about her future schooling. As she read books on girls' development and education, she became increasingly dismayed by what she learned.

In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher describes an appearance-obsessed, "girl-poisoning culture" in which many young women submerge their identities to conform with narrow, rigid expectations about appropriate female behavior. That struggle, Pipher says, puts girls at risk for depression, eating disorders, drug use, early sexual activity, and self-inflicted injuries.

"That book really scared me," says DeBare, who also read works by Carol Gilligan, the feminist psychologist and former Harvard professor. "Adolescence is so much more filled with pressure than when we were growing up." For example, she says, young girls may feel compelled to mimic provocative pop stars well before they're sexually aware. Or they may get the message that only boys are supposed to play sports and do well at math and science.

Though her own daughter was still just a toddler, Debare's research prompted her to wonder about creating an environment where, as her book title suggests, "girls come first," a place where they could learn without competing with boys or worrying about their approval. Even though parents can, of course, reassure their daughters that it's perfectly fine for them to play soccer or excel at geometry and chemistry, DeBare thought such messages might be more powerful—and more permanent—if the girls gave them to each other. "I had the idea of setting up a peer culture that would reinforce the idea that they don't have to be Britney Spears," says DeBare, who has a ready smile and an air of thoughtful determination.

It seemed especially important to reinforce that idea during the precarious preteen years, when girls are particularly vulnerable to the pressures Pipher and others describe. At the time, there were no nonsectarian all-girls middle schools anywhere near DeBare's home. So she set out to start one.

It wasn't something she could do alone. She began talking to other parents, passing out leaflets, holding meetings at people's homes and in libraries. By late 1996,

## Sister Schools

COURTESY OF CASTILLEJA

**Joan Z. Lonergan**

**Castilleja and Julia Morgan** are only about 35 miles apart, but in many ways, the distance between the two California girls' schools seems much greater.

Julia Morgan, in Oakland, opened in 1999. Castilleja, in Palo Alto, will mark its centennial in 2007. Julia Morgan, bursting out of rented space at one college, will soon move into newly leased space on another college's campus. Castilleja, located in a pleasant residential neighborhood near Stanford University, has its own six-and-a-half-acre campus, including a large grassy courtyard, a pool, a sun-drenched art studio, 300 computers with high-speed Internet access, a director's residence, and a newly renovated administration center and theater. Castilleja's 415 middle- and high-school students wear uniforms; Julia Morgan's 146 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders wear what they want, as long as their midriffs stay covered. For the 2003-2004 academic year, tuition, books, and fees were $14,650 at Julia Morgan; at Castilleja, the bill was nearly $8,000 more. (Both schools offer generous financial aid.)

And yet the schools are indistinguishable from each other in one key way: both are based on passionate belief in the value of single-sex education. "Our mission is to educate strong, independent young women who have a sense of themselves, who are confident and curious and resilient, girls who have a conscience, girls who value their community," says Joan Z. Lonergan, Ed.M. '84, Castilleja's head of school since 1993. She believes that's most likely to happen in a setting that is, as one Castilleja student wrote in a poem published in a school brochure, "completely de-guy-ified." "In a girls' school, there aren't any cheerleaders; everybody's an athlete. All the class officers are women," says Lonergan, herself a graduate of pre-coed Vassar College. "If you're a girl in a physics class where everybody else is a girl, you don't think, 'Well, this is something I shouldn't be doing.'"

Like many contemporary schools, Castilleja emphasizes math and science; nearly all students take classes in both subjects every year. (Course offerings include computer programming and robotics.) One hundred percent of its alumnae go on to college, with Stanford accepting about 20 percent of each year's graduating class. The school routinely hosts visits from well-known women: most recently, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stopped by. She opened her talk by telling students, "Don't put your hand up. Interrupt if you have something to say." They did.

Lonergan, who met with Julia Morgan's founders during their fact-finding days, cites experiences like that to rebut criticism that girls' schools don't prepare graduates for "the real world." "They're going to fare just fine," she says of her students. "They'll be able to negotiate their way in any environment."