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 Schu-chat, 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 Souls 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 pre-teen years, when girls are particularly vulnerable to the pressures Pipher and others describe. At the time, there were no non-sectarian 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,