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WOMEN WHO MEAN BUSINESS 2014

SISTER MARY BOURDON, RJM

Executive director, Washington School for Girls

► **Age:** 64

► **Education:** Bachelor's in sociology and psychology, American University; master's in counseling, Loyola University Maryland

► **Residence:** D.C.

► **Family:** A nephew in the area

Sister Mary Bourdon, RJM has always been concerned about the opportunities available to young girls. In 1997, she founded the Washington School for Girls, a tuition-free private school in Anacostia. Under her guidance and leadership, the school went from a small, after-school program to a full school that has helped hundreds of preteen and teenage children thrive.

Who's been a mentor to you? I have so many mentors, beginning with my family, of course. I grew up in a family of eight, and I was the fifth person in that family. I had a lot of role models that went before, both as a child and as an adult and certainly both of my parents.

What characteristics do you seek in a mentor? People who've worked with me would know that you have to be strong. I think, creativity. Breadth of vision would be very important because I wouldn't want a mentor that's a how-to manual, as much as somebody who can point at things that I may not see myself.

Who have you mentored? There is one student in our school who is just an absolutely outstanding dancer. And I'm trying to promote and encourage her to be a dancer. It even influenced me to go to the National Gallery of Art and see "Little Dancer" and tell her about it and brought her back a postcard from there. Anybody I work with, they teach me more than I can teach them. But I suppose in the mix, we're mentoring one another.

What is the best career advice you ever received from a mentor? Failures are not failures. You go through life and you kind of label things a success and other things a failure, but the truth is in each of those circumstances, there is an opportunity.

If you could pick anyone — dead or alive — to be your mentor, who would that be? Claudine Thévenet and everyone who followed her. She was a really gutsy woman. We can talk about an economic downturn and starting a startup, but try taking the French Revolution, where there was just an amazing deterioration in society, and in a sense — take out the religious language — she started up a nonprofit. And it kept going and still exists today in 23 countries and is focused on girls.

Why did you start Washington School for Girls? I have always,



always, had a concern about young girls and the lack of resources that were being turned over. I wanted to do something. I didn't know what was ahead of me. I look back now and realize really, we're the only private school for girls — all girls — tuition free, in Anacostia. That's amazing.

What keeps you up at night? When something strikes here in the school and you see how really unfair something is in the life of an individual student. Maybe access to something is blocked for her, just because of when and where she was born. Maybe because of who her parents are. And something happens, and this girl does not get to go on a field trip because her mother didn't sign the paper on time. That bothers me a lot.

– Interview by Moriah Costa