

Ray Haas: The Founding of UHS



Ray Haas was chair of the founding board of trustees of University High School. He is an honorary alumnus of the class of 1976 and father of two UHS alumni, Mary Haas Barton '88 and Paul Haas '89. In this speech which was given to a group of current and former trustees and faculty, he discusses the vision behind the founding of UHS and the earliest years

UHS had its beginnings in an ad hoc committee formed in 1971 and made up of trustees from Hamlin's, Burke's, Cathedral and Town. The committee members believed that a substantial percentage of their schools' 8th graders would be eager to go to a rigorous, coeducational, and independent high school in San Francisco with a traditional curriculum, but there wasn't any school that met that description.

To give some context, the landscape at that time looked like this. Hamlin's, Burke's and Sacred Heart all had single-sex girls' high schools in San Francisco. Lick Wilmerding and St. Ignatius were single-sex boys' schools, but Lick was perceived as being focused on the mechanical arts, and of course St. Ignatius drew primarily on Catholic students. The only coeducational private high schools in San Francisco that I remember were Drew and Urban. Up in Marin, The Katherine Branson School was a single-sex girls' high school, and Marin Academy was a coed high school. For what existed at the time, MA was probably the closest approximation to what the ad hoc committee was discussing, but it was in San Rafael and not as rigorous as it has become today.

For years many 8th graders in Hamlin's and Burke's had simply moved up to the high school, but by the early 70's fewer and fewer were willing to stay put in the same girls' school for 13 years. The Hamlin's and Burke's high schools had shrunk to the point where they were no longer sustainable, but the trustees were loathe to shutter them without having anywhere to transfer the girls still enrolled. In addition, probably more so than today, large numbers of 8th graders from Cathedral and Town, as well as from Hamlin's and Burke's, had been going away to boarding high schools. Recently, however, there had been alarming stories about substance abuse, and many parents who previously might have favored boarding schools were thinking that they'd like their children to stay at home. Finally, historically many independent school 8th graders had gone to Lowell and Washington, but the San Francisco public schools were going through a very trying time, and there was concern that as classes grew larger and larger, the education would get worse and worse.

The ad hoc committee commissioned a marketing study that confirmed that, yes indeed, it ought to be possible to find enough students to establish in San Francisco a rigorous, coeducational and independent high school with a traditional curriculum, but it left open some pretty big questions. Like who would do the starting, and where the money would come from.

“Who would do the starting” was where I came into the picture. After talking to lots and lots of more promising prospects who turned them down — I remember it being more than 20 — in the fall of 1972 the ad hoc committee asked me if I would take on the job of getting a new school off the ground, and I accepted. In case anyone wonders, I was not quite 30 at the time.

Working with the ad hoc committee, by the end of 1972 I had recruited a small group of old and new friends who eventually became the nucleus of the first Board of Trustees. Our little group met weekly throughout 1973 and the first half of 1974, and in between those regular sessions we had many more meetings with potential donors, board members and the heads of all of the independent high schools in the inner Bay Area, and many heads of what we hoped would become feeder schools. Believe you me, this was one “active” board, and everyone who served on it dedicated body, soul and pocketbook to the enterprise. Bob Stafford, Margaret Moore, Norm Rosenblatt and Carolene Marks are here tonight from that original small group, and Susan Land joined us not much later.

Soon we had developed an “educational plan” that would look pretty familiar to you. Our school was going to emphasize traditional academic disciplines, offer a broad range of courses, encourage independent projects, balance academics with a strong athletic program, recruit a diverse board, faculty and student body, and have a strong commitment to the community.

It was quite a bit harder to figure out how we would actually get this new school started. Quickly it became apparent that we had a three-cornered chicken-and-egg problem. Ultimately we needed a great faculty and terrific students, but somehow in the very near term we needed money, a head and a facility. And it seemed that none of the three could be secured without the other two. No one would give us money unless we had a great head and a fine facility, and no head would commit until we could promise money and a facility. The Burke’s board was talking about letting us start our new school at the Burke’s 32nd Avenue campus, moving the Burke’s lower school from 32nd Avenue to Jackson Street, but that concept hadn’t been finally approved, and we didn’t have a clear idea what we’d have to pay if and when that approval was forthcoming.

So we started off on all three fronts, money, head and facilities, hoping against hope that by some miracle one factor would fall into place and then the others would too. On the money front, we hired a fund-raising consultant, extracted from each other the most meaningful pledges possible, and focused on local foundations as the likely source of our major money. To find our head, we hired a specialized recruiting firm, solicited our personal networks for recommendations of possible candidates, and started to schedule interviews. On the facilities front, we reviewed a few alternative sites, hired first one and then a second architect to see how best to use the 32nd Avenue campus to run a high school, and participated in seemingly endless negotiations with representatives of the Burke’s board.

Well, our miracle happened, and we got the commitment that made the others come true. Our miracle took the form of Dennis Collins accepting the job as head when we offered it

to him. Dennis was just starting his third year as the head of The Emma Willard School, a prestigious girls boarding high school in Troy, New York. Emma Willard was Dennis's first job as a head, and the independent school world, including our head-hunter, assumed that Dennis was going to stay with that plum job at least for several more years. But I had a friend in Pasadena, Jim Galbreath, whose wife had gone to Berkeley with Molly Collins, and Jim told me that the Collinses hoped to return to the West Coast sooner rather than later. I told our consultant, he reluctantly agreed to contact Dennis, Bob Stafford convinced Dennis to come out here for an interview late in 1973, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Dennis saw the three-cornered chicken-and-egg problem just as clearly as we did, but he and we both were optimistic, and we had arranged for him to talk to representatives of foundations and Burke's who I suppose must have painted a pretty rosy picture. Anyway, Dennis came away persuaded that we could make our new school happen, and in no time at all a letter went out to The Emma Willard community saying that Dennis was going to leave in June 1974 to start a new school.

Suddenly, however, things took a turn for the worse. Early in 1974 problems surfaced in the 32nd Avenue neighborhood that led the Burke's board to decide that they did not want us to use the 32nd Avenue campus after all. Things looked so bleak that a small group of us met to discuss whether it was worth keeping up the fight. We decided to soldier on, in large part because we had such admiration for and confidence in the Burke's representatives, John Piel, Walter Newman, Leslie Luttgens, Ann Gillette and David Fleishhacker. But if we had been aware several months earlier just how precarious our facility situation really was, we probably could not have mustered the enthusiasm to ask Dennis to interview, much less leave his excellent job at Emma Willard.

But as it all turned out, Dennis's acceptance, and his presence here during the year before UHS opened its doors in the fall of 1975, was the lever that made everything work. Those foundation trustees who had been so positive to Dennis, and others too, came through with generous capital contributions so that we raised in excess of \$900,000 before the school opened its doors. And Burke's eventually let us buy the wonderful Julia Morgan Jackson Street campus at a favorable price of \$700,000, with only \$50,000 down, which meant that the \$900,000 we raised was enough to pay that \$50,000, fund extensive renovations and startup costs, cover a small operating loss in the first year of operations, and still leave a substantial cash reserve.

None of this could have happened without our generous donors, and I want to express my never-ending gratitude to the Cowell Foundation, the Mary Crocker Trust, the Hills Foundation, the William G. Irwin Charity Foundation, the Land Family Fund, and the Louis R. Lurie Foundation, each of which provided \$100,000 or more of our initial capital.

Skipping around just a bit, several years earlier the Rainbow Garage across Washington Street from the current Auditorium had come up for sale, and David Fleischhacker, the long-time head of Burke's, had bought it because it seemed the perfect place for Burke's

to expand to accommodate the lower school he thought might be moving to the Jackson Street campus. A year and a half after UHS opened there instead, David allowed us to purchase the garage to convert it into what is now the Lower Campus. Of course this took more money, which we succeeded in raising with the help of our enthusiastic new parent body, all of the same foundations who had given us our start, and especially the Herbst Foundation, which provided the largest grant that UHS received until quite a few years later.

So that is how University High got the basic building blocks of startup capital, an adequate if not elaborate facility, and the head of school who first put us on the map. Dennis followed through by recruiting a wonderful founding faculty and an outstanding founding student body. Remarkably, half of that founding faculty and a good representation of our founding students are here tonight.

But it is succeeding generations of heads, trustees, faculty, students and staff who have made UHS what it is today. From the bottoms of our hearts, we founders thank each of you who followed in our footsteps for all that you have done to meet and exceed the goals that we set for University High more than 30 years ago.