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2 School Entrepreneurs Lead the Way on Change

By SAM DILLON

As the founder of Teach for America, a nonprofit program that recruits elite college graduates to teach in low-income schools, Wendy Kopp has presided over many triumphs, and the group's annual dinner last month was another. It raised $5.5 million in one night and brought so many corporate executives to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York that stretch limousines jammed Park Avenue for blocks.

Watching discreetly from the ballroom floor was Ms. Kopp's husband, Richard Barth. In the early years of Teach for America, he was one of her closest aides. Today he runs the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, a charter school network that has won praise for turning low-achieving poor children into solid students.

Ms. Kopp and Mr. Barth are a power couple in the world of education, emblematic of a new class of young social entrepreneurs seeking to reshape the United States' educational landscape by creating new schools, training better principals and getting more smart young teachers into needy classrooms. The couple may not be as well known as Bill and Melinda Gates, but their fast-growing organizations have become incubators of new ways of thinking about education.

Teach for America, founded in 1989, has 14,000 alumni, some of whom have founded charter schools and other educational start-ups, or are rising leaders in school systems nationwide. Among them are Michelle Rhee, the hard-charging schools chancellor in Washington, D.C., and Dave Levin and Michael Feinberg, who founded KIPP in Houston and the Bronx with schools on an extended-day schedule and the slogan "no shortcuts."

The effort to reconstruct the schools in New Orleans and manage 41 charters there is thick with educators who have worked with Ms. Kopp and Mr. Barth.

Ms. Kopp describes Teach for America as a social movement to improve education for the poor. "We have the potential to end educational inequity," she said in an interview at her headquarters in the garment district of Manhattan. "I truly believe that."

And she has big ambitions; she is urging alumni to run for public office, aiming to see 100 elected by 2010. In Houston, Natasha Kamrani, a former Teach for America member, sits on that city's nine-member school board, and a dozen other alumni are on boards in Washington, Chicago and elsewhere.

"School boards can be a steppingstone to higher forms of political leadership," Ms. Kopp said.

Some prominent academics are skeptical.

"Teach for America and these other new entrepreneurs are on to something, but they're not near to changing

classroom teaching nationwide," said Larry Cuban, an emeritus professor at Stanford University. "They're still a relatively minor force, and the best they can hope for is incremental change."

But others think they just might etch important changes on the nation's schools.

"My generation thought the same thing, and we did change the schools a lot," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, which represents the nation's largest urban systems. "We pursued change through civil rights laws and by seeking adequate funding and through legislation. They're pursuing it through entrepreneurship, trying to bring in fresh blood and new energy."

Ms. Kopp has built her group into a powerhouse, with an annual budget of $120 million, a national staff of 835, and partnerships with Goldman Sachs, Google and other blue-chip names. This spring, she presided over its most successful campus recruiting campaign, and made Time magazine's list of the world's 100 most influential people.

Mr. Barth is a low-key executive, but like his wife, he can sound like a community organizer when he talks about shaking up schools.

"In a country as great as ours, why should where you're born dictate your life outcome?" Mr. Barth said in a separate interview in his Manhattan office (the couple declined to be interviewed together). "Anyone, born anywhere, should have access to high-quality schools."

At KIPP, Mr. Barth is leading a closely watched effort to build a network of 65 charter schools into a much larger organization that can enroll a significant share of public school students in Houston, New Orleans, Washington and elsewhere. The couple have a baby daughter and three sons who attend public school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the family lives. Ms. Kopp takes charge of the children's schedule and makes sure they do their homework. Mr. Barth umpires Little League games.

"They're both super disciplined," said Iris Chen, a Harvard Law graduate who worked with the couple at Teach for America. "Wendy maximizes every minute. She knows she'll have to wait in line to get her Starbucks, so she figures out how to use that time."

Ms. Kopp got the idea for Teach for America when she was an undergraduate at Princeton. She had been valedictorian at an affluent Texas high school and found college easy. But a roommate who had attended Bronx public schools struggled, persuading Ms. Kopp that public schools shortchanged poor students.

"I thought our country should be recruiting the most talented students to teach in our poorest schools as aggressively as we were being recruited to work on Wall Street," she recalled.

Ms. Kopp's senior thesis became a proposal for a national teaching corps, and after graduation in 1989, she set the plan in motion.

She met Mr. Barth that fall, when she was hiring her fledgling staff. Mr. Barth, a Harvard graduate and the son of a pharmaceuticals executive, applied for a job. He had undergone his own epiphany, counseling working-class high school students in Boston who guidance counselors said were drifting even though they had college potential.

“Those kids were so capable but nobody was painting a picture for them of what was possible,” he said.

Ms. Kopp hired him, and by 1994, they were dating.

In those early years, Ms. Kopp spent much time fund-raising. Mr. Barth supervised corps members and, during a budget crisis, imposed a spending freeze. In 1995, he left the group, soon joining Edison Schools, a for-profit school management company. The two married in 1998.

Since the mid-1990s, prominent academics have argued that Teach for America’s two-year assignment ensures that recruits leave just as they are learning to teach. “You lose them just when they are becoming effective,” said Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford.

David C. Berliner, an education professor at Arizona State University, said Teach for America recruits brought a missionary zeal to classrooms but were unprepared for teaching. “They think, ‘We can solve the problems of urban education because we’re smarter than everybody else,’ “ Professor Berliner said. “There’s some arrogance there.”

Such critiques once damaged fund-raising. But over the years, Teach for America has attracted significant numbers of highly qualified recruits to long-term careers in education. A third of its alumni have stayed in the classroom after their two years, and many others have become principals or educational entrepreneurs.

Since 2000, Doris and Donald Fisher, founders of the Gap clothing chain, have given $75 million to KIPP and Teach for America, encouraging cooperation. Today 60 percent of KIPP’s principals are Teach for America alumni. The relationship tightened in 2005, when Mr. Barth became chief executive of KIPP’s national nonprofit organization.

Although Ms. Kopp said that she “definitely” did not like the spotlight, she is often in it. In 2000, she met with President Bill Clinton at the White House, and President and Laura Bush have visited several Teach for America schools. In 2005, Mr. Bush invited the couple, along with senators, Supreme Court justices and four-star generals, to a black-tie dinner at the White House honoring Prince Charles.

Ms. Kopp, who turns 41 this month, mused about approaching middle age, noting that recruits have taken to calling her Miss Kopp instead of Wendy.

“I never considered back when this all started that it would be my life’s work,” she said, “but here I am, it’s nearly 20 years later.”