

Looking Back at 25 Years of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers

by Susan Richman, editor

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I'm sitting at my computer with a collection of hefty 3-ring binders full of all 99 issues of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers all around me. Preparing for our 100th issue of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers has been one of those wistful memory-lane times -- full of hours of browsing and reading and remembering and even calling up old homeschooling friends who I hadn't talked to in years. I hope this special retrospective issue might help bring some of this rich heritage of homeschooling over the last 25 years to life for you.

That first issue (held aloft by the girl in the center of the cover drawing) was sent out in March, 1982 to only about 30 families -- many whose oldest child was maybe 2 or 3 years old. The impetus for starting the newsletter, originally called Western PA Homeschoolers, was a visit to Pittsburgh from John Holt, editor of *Growing Without Schooling*, the original national homeschooling publication. The short newsletter was typed on an electric typewriter, with some parts written by hand.

Down at the bottom I also wondered if families might be interested in a sort of children's writing section or publication so all of our kids could have a larger audience for their work.

What's maybe most surprising to me is how closely we still follow these basic hopes and goals -- helping homeschooling families in the state find meaningful ways to pool ideas and resources, stay in touch, encourage one another, and share our successes and tips and hopes. And, yes, we did develop a children's writing section in our newsletter -- eventually seeing it edited by each of our daughters, and now by other homeschool teens.

But so much was also so very different back in spring of 1982. At that point homeschooling was basically a true leap of faith -- there were no stories of how well homeschoolers could do in college (or even any stories on homeschoolers getting accepted to any college), no wins in national competitions, no firm ideas of how we'd teach algebra or deal with socialization issues. It was all a guess and a hope. There were no support groups or homeschool co-ops, and no museums or zoos had thought of offering special classes to homeschool students. There were no educational companies publishing materials designed by and for homeschoolers. And of course there wasn't the Internet -- and most families didn't have computers -- and if they did, they were used largely for playing Pacman rather than for learning anything, let alone for keeping in touch with homeschooling friends instantly. "Website" was a word still far in the future.

But see if this description of our First Annual Homeschoolers Weekend held at our farm outside of Kittanning PA, from issue #2, still fits homeschoolers you know: After a potluck lunch feast, the parents gathered for general introductions, sharing briefly why they were choosing homeschooling, or why they were looking into the idea. Our network has a wide variety of families, each coming to homeschooling for unique and special reasons. Some

felt a need for closely fostering their spiritual views with their children, others were concerned that their children not become 'cookie cutter' people made from someone else's mold. Others were appalled at the discipline situations in schools, or the contagion of compelled peer influence. Many parents were distressed that their school children were not allowed to learn at their own best rate, or that their children were mislabeled as having "learning disabilities", or even simply ignored too much. Many felt that a wish for homeschooling grew out of their early bonding experiences with their children -- from close birthing, breastfeeding, nurturing, growing, this seemed simply the next imperative step. Parents didn't want to give up the close day-to-day relationship they'd formed with their child. Others had noticed negative personality changes once their children had been in school -- some even experienced physical symptoms, such as constant stomach aches, before homeschooling began. Several parents had been teachers in schools, and felt that they knew what really went on there and didn't want that for their children. They knew first-hand the difference between being a teacher facing 25-30 relative strangers, and the closeness of parenting their own children. Other parents were wondering, curious, concerned, looking for more information so that they could make their own best decisions for their children. By that second issue we were also up to 100 families on our mailing list -- and the first on-going group activities were starting to be planned.

Looking over these very early issues brings up so many memories of old friends -- some who are sadly missed today. My good friend, Sandy Speck, who passed away just over a year ago after a valiant struggle with cancer, wrote the following about her daughter Autumn, who is now married and working in the field of sports training:

"Puzzling out numbers at age three" When Autumn settled for bed the evening of her third birthday, she was fascinated by being three. She used her fingers and told me that first she was 1, then she was 2, now she is 3, next birthday she'll be 4, and next birthday she'll be 5. At that point she ran out of fingers, as her other hand was holding her blanket. So she maneuvered her fingers on her one hand every imaginable way, and finally put up one finger and said, "Then I'll be one again!"

Sandra Speck is no longer with us here, but her legacy certainly lives on -- her oldest daughter Noelle is homeschooling her five children, and Sandy's youngest child, Annaliese (9th grade), is still being homeschooled by her dedicated father, Jonathan Speck. We've seen new generations of homeschooling families grow up over these last 100 issues of *Pennsylvania Homeschoolers*, and seen homeschooling friends face both great joy and great sadness -- and we've felt like one large extended family.

Over the years the newsletter grew in readership, wealth of contributions from wonderful homeschooling parents sharing their experiences, and technical sophistication. We gradually moved on from having various homeschool friends do typing of articles, as I gradually figured out how (with Howard's push!) to use our early rudimentary computer. We eventually stopped having "parties" where homeschool friends and their kids would help us collate 350 issues by marching around a table picking up the next page and then stapling issues together in the corner. We eased into doing on-screen layout instead of the literal "cut and paste" job of earlier issues (though I still have sweet memories of my youngest ones sitting at low tables beside me, happily using glue sticks to "layout" their own "newsletters" from the computer-printed scraps I was throwing away). The masthead developed from a

charming young child's scrawl, with no attempt at creative design, to our current masthead competition with ingenious unique calligraphy, making each issue memorable.

Over time real headlines developed -- because there were real issues. By our 3rd year of publication, the homeschooling movement in PA was starting down the legislative route, working to develop a new homeschooling law. None of us knew it would be a four year effort, and none of us could know what the outcome of the law would be, or what it might mean for the future cohesion of the several thousand families then homeschooling in the state. We saw fracturing and bickering and real divisions within the ranks of homeschoolers at times, as people grappled with how they were going to comply with the new law. Honest disagreements, along with simple growth and diversity, spawned further communication tools and a wider range of homeschool groups. But when parents got together, or when people talked about what they valued in the *Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Newsletter*, it was the sharing about real experiences in homeschooling that meant so much -- that glimpse into how others had faced challenges or found creative solutions to the problems that we all experienced.

Looking over these issues I'm struck by the articles from families writing in when their children were very young, and all guesses on their future were just cheerful hopes. Say, regular contributor Barbara McMillan wrote in issue #8, way back in Spring 1984, sharing about their family finally making the decision to take their very bright 6-year-old daughter Jaime out of the 2nd grade classroom where she'd been very stressed and unhappy. At the end of the article, Barbara wrote:

What we homeschooling families need to strive conscientiously toward is a genuine spirit of acceptance for individual and family differences, without condemnation or raised eyebrows when we encounter others whose methods or results differ from ours. Already a sharp division is evident between the "serendipity" families and the "organized curriculum" families within our network. Why not toss out the arguments and attempts to persuade one another and admit that what works well for one child/family may be a fiasco for another! Why fight about whether reading should be taught incidentally or systematically, when it is obvious that where love is the guide, both approaches work.

Barbara then went on to describe Jaime's great relief at coming home, and then mentioned in closing:

Our youngest child, Abby (age 4) continues to thrive at home, reading short vowel linguistic material with ease and working diligently on her Suzuki violin practice (well, sometimes!). She and I take private lessons together. What a joy for both of us to make real music. Jaime (age 6) is learning the piano accompaniment for the Suzuki pieces; **someday we'll be making family music together!**

It was that last hopeful thought that touched my heart -- as I remember so clearly just a few years ago when Barbara's very youngest, Amanda, graduated through PHAA. The whole McMillan family indeed made music together all throughout the ceremony, giving great joy to everyone present. There was Jaime on piano, Abby on violin, and Amanda on marimba and vibraphone. Over these years of publication we've seen so many families truly realize dreams. And I know, too, many families have been very grateful for Barbara's ongoing

dedication to helping so many homeschooling families, especially those with special needs children, through her many articles, her Whatz Up manual on special needs homeschooling in PA, and through her evaluation and assessment services. I know her new regular column on special needs homeschooling will continue this tradition of service and outreach.

This happened with many other articles; I realized that I'd seen firsthand the family's early hopes bear fruit. There was a good article on teaching music at home, written by Nancy Krape of York PA, published when her oldest son Matthew was just 8 years old. Many years later I had Matthew as a student in one of the first classes for my AP US History online course. Matthew's now a college grad, and I now evaluate his youngest sister and brother -- who are now in 8th and 10th grades at home respectively. And the family has indeed continued on in music from the wealth of early activities Nancy described -- and Nancy has gone on to lead homeschool choirs for many years now, and her children are all accomplished musicians (what a treat to hear them play at evaluation meetings!).

Back issues were brimming with good articles about how to pull together homeschooling portfolios -- and in the very first years of the law literally none of us even knew what the possibilities were, let alone how this could or should be done. Portfolios left most families simply saying, "A what?" There was a gradual process of realizing how families could present their learning in meaningful ways, both to their evaluator, their school district... and also to that very important audience, the grandparents. I so well remember my own mother (may her memory always be for a blessing) becoming so much more supportive of our homeschooling endeavor once we had portfolios -- we would bring all of our portfolio notebooks with us on our annual visits to see her in Georgia, and each child would have some special time with grandma to do a sort of "show and tell" with their portfolio, sharing with her about all they had been doing in our homeschooling. She was delighted -- and relieved! We're sharing parts from some of these portfolio articles here, and will do so throughout this coming year, as these ideas are timeless and worth repeating.

I also came across many articles from parents about how their local school district reacted to their homeschooling -- some were humorous, as Judy Parker's piece from the first year of the law shows. Others showed surprise blessings in this interactive relationship. Over time we found that in general the PA Department of Education was a real friend in settling conflicts with districts -- much more so than before the law was enacted. There were many happy surprises along the way, as well as some challenges to work through -- and this process certainly continues today.

Finally, looking over these many issues of *Pennsylvania Homeschoolers* let me see my own four children growing up again in a new way. I realized again that most of our first book, *The Three R's at Home*, was drawn from my articles for the newsletter sharing about how our sons Jesse and Jacob were learning in their early years at home. We posted birth announcements for our daughters Molly and Hannah -- and then later for our first grandchild, Sarah. And each of our kids began contributing in their own unique ways to the newsletter endeavor -- through creating whimsical mastheads, doing little illustrations to liven up the look of the newsletter, helping with computer layout and design, and even writing articles of their own. They always helped with mailing out the newsletter -- a standard family joke was that in the "olden days" people would "raise the kids to raise the farm", but that we "raised the kids to mail the mailings." Jacob helped develop our first websites for our AP Online classes, and all our younger three got to be "guinea pigs" as we tried out

new courses -- and Jesse helped in teaching both AP US History and AP US Government and Politics while in college and grad school. And this year Molly joins us in leading two AP English online classes -- and even gave a wonderful Keynote Address at our summer *PHAA High School at Home Conference*. And families do just get larger, not smaller, as your kids grow up -- it's with real gratitude that we've welcomed our daughter-in-law Patricia as a regular columnist now (and we also remember her years of dedicated work in our home office when she and Jesse lived at our farm before moving on to Nashville and now Norfolk VA!).

So this 25 years of publication is in many ways the record of our own kids growing up and learning and contributing and becoming who they now are. It's been the story of everyone who's been homeschooling and who's read or contributed to this newsletter over the year. It's touched my heart. I want to say a warm thank you to each one of you.