

Team Effort Wins Sports Access in Easton

by Howard Richman

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Few homeschoolers do what Kelly Wakeman did for her 9th grade Civics course: she gave a speech which actually helped change the rules in her community. Her speech did not change things right away. However, it did lead to an ongoing debate in the Easton and Allentown newspapers which did eventually change the rules.

Just after her speech on August 9, 1996, the Easton Area School Board voted for the second time against homeschool participation in school sports and extra-curricular activities. Eight months later, on April 14, 1997, they reversed themselves and voted to permit homeschool participation.

Reporter Fred Walter wrote this about Kelly's speech (August 10) in the Allentown Morning Call:

The board heard an emotional appeal from Kelly Wakeman, a 14-year-old home-schooled student.

"I was shocked and disappointed," Wakeman said when she heard of the policy.

"This decision brought me to tears," she said, noting that she had dreams of playing on a soccer team.

Under Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association rules, she said she could only play at Easton where she is a resident...

The main argument against homeschool participation was that school students had to keep up good grades to participate on school sports. The implication was that homeschoolers shouldn't be allowed to participate because they might not be doing the work.

That argument was countered in a September 8 article by Melanie Novak in the Allentown Morning Call which focused upon Kelly's poise and academic success. Here is a selection from that article:

Articulate and poised, Kelly is comfortable discussing the stock market one minute and historic movies the next. Her sense of self-awareness is something that often eludes the average adolescent.

Kelly, her brother, Chad, and sister Becky have blossomed during the Wakeman's 10 years of tutelage, their parents say....

Easton school officials confirm the district's 43 home-school children perform at and often well above national averages for standardized tests....

The Wakeman's portfolio contains pictures of Kelly's annual archaeology dig -- she's really interested in hurricanes and tornadoes, too. There's copies of the Wakeman's Newsletter, written by all three children, and copies of short stories, poems, book reviews and math homework. There's lots of information about the Roman Empire -- the whole family spent a long time on the Roman Empire last year -- and pictures from a play with other home-schooled student actors.

Kelly who plays soccer for a community league, had hopes to play in the public school program; Easton's board voted against that last month.

She thinks if board members got to know her, they'd change their minds. And anyone who doubted the quality of a home-school education would change his mind, too. She said:

"They'd see the proof."

Many other people participated in the lobbying effort. For example, Ingrid Wakeman, Effie Bitner, Jeffrey & Karen Smith, Bernard Bauman, Richard DeCrocker, Deb Bell, 15-year-old Christopher Orlemann, and formerly-homeschooled college-student Jeff Heimbach all wrote letters which were published in Lehigh Valley newspapers.

You can find out more about the effort in Ingrid Wakeman's article which appeared in Issue 57 of this newsletter. She informed school board members about friendly policies in other districts using materials obtained from Deb Bell at the Home School Resource Center (717-533-1669). She also let the members know that the issue would not end with a "no" vote.

The Wakeman family, who led the effort, put into effect many of the lessons that we learned the hard way during the lobbying effort for the homeschool law (see my book *Story of a Bill*). I am convinced that the battle for homeschool participation can be won in almost any district where homeschoolers mount a persistent lobbying effort, educate school board members about friendly policies in other districts, and where homeschooled students speak to the hearts of the board members.