

Thinking About a Correspondence Course

from Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 60 (Fall 1997) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

I'll tell you truthfully-- it was in a moment of panic that I suggested to Molly that maybe she'd want to try a correspondence course in biology for her freshman year in high school. She lit up and said she'd love to. Instant relief for me. For two years we had had a pretty lame science program for Molly-- oh, enough to get by, but it wasn't anything consistent or thorough, and to tell it straight, she was really starting to feel that she hated science. The books I found for her were either too hard, or too easy, and as she explained to me, she was never sure what she was supposed to do with her new knowledge once she'd read anyway. Our family was very big into French, literature, math, art, piano, history-- everything but science, especially for Molly. Now don't get me wrong-- Molly loved reading about science from a really engaging book (at times, when she could be pulled away from *Jane Eyre*). She liked dissecting owl pellets (but was not so crazy about the mole I dissected-- it was a little donation brought to us by our cats and I just couldn't resist), and she liked messing around with experiments and observing things. But frankly we were very busy with other things most of the time, and a consistent program had just fallen through the cracks. With high school ahead, I felt it was really time for a change. Something really different for her.

Enter Keystone National High School, based in Bloomsburg PA. The people at Keystone have been involved for over 24 years in distance education, working originally with students who had failed courses in public or private school-- they offered make-up correspondence courses that students could do at home instead of attending summer school. In the past several years they've now branched out into a full line of courses for homeschoolers (using secular texts), including even driver education. Many of their courses are also used by students in public schools who have scheduling problems and can't fit in a needed course. I signed Molly up for their Biology course and it worked beautifully.

She now had a plan for the year, a goal (yes, she really would read and finish the whole book). She had work to send in to a teacher who would grade it and respond to it. She even felt encouraged to try some of the lab activities right in the text. I hear that for the upcoming year PA homeschool parent (and science teacher!) Mark Taber-Miller has helped develop a lab package to go along with the course, which should really add a lot.

There were a few things that helped make her experience with the course especially positive. I encouraged her to add a little personal note to each of the six tests she had to send in-- let her teacher at Keystone know a bit about who she was, tell about any related lectures or outings or observations or experiments she'd done, ask a question if something wasn't clear, tell about a related article she read in a magazine. I found that because Molly's always been encouraged to be an active learner, she did the course very actively, and not like a rote activity that she was just getting "through" to be done. She was constantly relating what she was reading about in her text to things she was reading in other sources. She found she was now trying to read articles in *Time* or *Science News* or *The World and I* that she would never have been able to understand before. She was always saying all year, "Oh! I can really understand this, because it was just in my biology book!"

She was making connections, and sharing with me excitedly about what she was learning. This just wasn't the same kid who had balked all year the year before.

Also the staff at Keystone were so very prompt in grading her work and sending it back to her. Her teacher wrote long comments back, encouraging Molly's interest and thanking her for her extra questions and initiative. They would point out any errors Molly had made, and show her exactly where she could find the needed info. Any questions were answered in a very thoughtful and helpful way. Molly never felt like just a number in a computer file. The staff at Keystone is even available to students for phone consultation if a kid is really having trouble with the material. Molly didn't need this option, but it was nice to know it was there. The cost was also very reasonable-- it's now \$170 per full-year high school course, and that fee includes all books, study guides, and even those envelopes to mail lessons in (email hasn't hit Keystone yet!). The red-tape of exactly how to send in completed work was also very low-key and easy. Molly, as a freshman, could easily be fully in charge of sending in her work all on her own. I could monitor exams myself, without needing to involve anyone else.

All of this was not so with an art correspondence course we started to take last year from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, which has been operating a very large high school correspondence program for years and years. I almost never like to give negative reviews, but this course made sending in lessons so difficult and hard to figure out that I had to call Nebraska to talk with a secretary of the program to see exactly which numbers I should put on the lesson, how it should be shipped, and more. Very confusing and unclear, with layers of computer numbers on everything. And to top it off, when we finally did send in the first lesson, and waited for a response from the teacher, a response never came. We never heard a word back on the assignment. We actually decided to finally drop the course, feeling it just wasn't worth the hassle-- and the materials were very outdated and "homemade" looking anyway, adding to the many things about the course that displeased us. All midterm and final exams would have to be monitored by an outside person (in fact, UN-L wanted another person to be the supervisor of the whole course-- parents seem quite suspect to them!). So instead Molly just continued studying art on her own. By that time we were long beyond the official drop period, and so lost all course tuition and fees-- a word to the wise to keep track of such things! We learned something though, and the contrast with the course from Keystone let us realize even more what a positive service Keystone offers.

Molly is now beginning work on Keystone's Chemistry course (supplemented with the World of Chemistry videos we rent out and the Teaching Company video series on chemistry), and we've even dusted off some of the chemistry supplies we put together when Jesse did chemistry four years ago. It's fun to plan to do that nifty experiment again with the electrolysis of water where we'll really get to see water split into hydrogen and oxygen, and much more. And the Keystone course will keep Molly on track and keep us all learning. We'll all do chemistry this year together-- Hannah working with elementary materials, and Jacob doing a distance course from Penn State.

I highly recommend Keystone to anyone looking for good solid high school level courses using secular texts. They have a full range of courses in all basic high school subjects, and are adding on new course offerings each year to broaden their scope even more. I'm one satisfied customer!

For more info and a full brochure with all their course offerings, contact Keystone National High School, School House Station, 420 W 5th ST, Bloomsburg PA 17815-9912, or call 800-255-4937 or check out their website at <http://www.keystonehighschool.com> or send email to info@keystonehighschool.com.