

Excellence Day Success - PA Dept. of Ed. Congratulates Homeschoolers

from Susan Richman

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We want to say a very special thank you to all the many families who helped to make this year's Homeschool Excellence Day a great success, and especially to the many, many students who worked so hard to have high quality projects to share with everyone in the Capitol. In addition, special thanks to Project Fair Coordinator, Marie Robbins and her husband Gary and all of their kids, and to the Lester family, their on-site helpers. Marie put in many, many hours of work to make sure all would go without a glitch, and her organizing skills have really put this Project Fair on a sound footing. Further thanks go to all of the adults and senior year high school students who served as judges -- your willingness to give your time to encourage homeschool students towards excellence is really appreciated. Also much thanks to Natalie Bishop, our public relations coordinator, for helping to spread the word about the event to all the legislators and to the media, and for helping coordinate photo-ops after the Project Fair.

It was also so heartening that our call for volunteers to take on the job of coordinating the Excellence Day Project Fair for 2001 was answered right at Excellence Day. We welcome Diana Merkel and Mary Ellen Moore as the new coordinators, with Diana being in charge of collecting project registrations and planning exhibit space, and Mary Ellen in charge of organizing the judging. I know they will be a great team, and really carry on the tradition of Excellence Day in new and exciting ways, so that the event continues to grow. You'll be hearing more from each of them in future issues of *PA Homeschoolers* as plans for Excellence Day 2001, set for Wednesday, October 2001.

Opportunity for Meeting Legislators

The day was also a great time for families to visit with their legislators and share about the positive work homeschoolers are doing. We were delighted to receive the following email from a homeschooling mother who'd come to the Capitol to take part in all the events of the day:

Thanks for a GREAT day yesterday. My kids had an unbelievable civics lesson as well as a great time. Our state representative, Carole Rubley, spent at least 10 minutes with them in her office and gave us enough information on PA to keep us reading for a week. I was, however, quite surprised when she told me that we were the first homeschoolers EVER to visit her office. I was wondering if you might want to put an article of encouragement in one of your upcoming newsletters letting people know how easy (and fun) it is to visit your state representative's office. We also visited our senator, Robert Thompson's office. We were not able to meet him then because the senate was in session, but would you believe that he actually came searching for us (looking at the kids name tags to find us) after the press conference was over!!! He posed for a photo with the kids and really made them feel special.

Although, since I only began homeschooling 12 months ago, I feel hesitant to give anyone any advice, I think that perhaps we homeschooling parents need to be reminded to 'stop in and say hello' to our representatives -- especially now that we are heading into a year of potential great strides in the HS law. A few friendly encounters with us could serve us all very well.

Thanks again for a great day,

Arlene Dittbrenner, Berwyn PA

Excellence Day Press Conference

At 1:00pm all the hundreds of homeschoolers taking part in the day's events met in the Capitol Rotunda, filling the huge stairway and all the floor area. We were honored to have Donald E. Lunday, Deputy Secretary for Administration of the PA Department of Education speak to the audience (see his speech below). He showed real appreciation of the innovations homeschoolers are creating in education, and his talk was punctuated by many bursts of applause from all the homeschooling families.

Champion of Homeschool Excellence Awards. Howard Richman presented the 2000 Champion of Homeschool Excellence Awards to Rep. Thomas Armstrong and Rep. Samuel Rohrer, who have both worked steadfastly to protect homeschoolers' interests in the state legislature. Both are homeschooling fathers themselves, and have seen the benefits of homeschooling within their own families, as well as throughout PA and the nation. The applause rang on and on as homeschoolers showed their appreciation for the work of these two men of strong principle, and their words of encouragement were taken to heart by all.

Homeschooled National Merit Semi-Finalists in PA Recognized. The following senior homeschool students were recognized at the September 27, 2000 Annual Homeschool Excellence Day press conference for earning National Merit Semi-Finalists standing:

- Kelly Addleman, Mill Run PA
- Stephanie Bartlow, Narvon PA
- Mary Blazewicz, Holidaysburg PA
- Raina Cashore, Conshohocken PA
- Elisabeth Eipper, Lititz PA
- Christopher Gaiteri, York PA
- Jonathan Huber, Manheim PA
- Phillip Koshute, Beaver PA
- Aaron Luprek, Johnstown PA
- Shana Owens, Montrose PA
- Alexa Weber, Freeport PA
- William Weber, Walnutport PA

Students were chosen for this prestigious honor based upon their combined verbal, math, and writing skills scores on the PSAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test exam taken during October of their junior years in high school, and all are eligible to proceed in the

competition for finalist standing and possible college scholarships, which will be announced in the spring.

Excerpts from the student talks:

Alexa Weber, Jonathan Huber, Elisabeth Eipper, and Christopher Gaiteri, who have each been homeschooled K-12, were invited to speak at the press conference, offering a view into their homeschooling experiences and what has inspired them to excel. Their talks were very well received by the crowd of hundreds lining the stairway and spilling out all around the rotunda area. The students all showed poise, good humor, and a real gusto for learning and achieving their best, coupled with a touching gratefulness to their families and the other teachers and adults they'd worked with over the years. Their high personal integrity and character was also so clear -- and this especially made all the homeschoolers present very proud!

Alexa Weber, from Freeport PA, has been very involved during her high school years in leadership her church youth group, teaching beginning gymnastics, running her own website development business, volunteering at the Carnegie Science Center, taking challenging AP online courses, and much more. She has entered many writing contests, and always placed well. A real highlight of her high school program was taking part in the full scholarship Summer Honors program for high school students at Taylor University last summer.

When I opened up my mailbox to find a package from National Merit, I tore it open eagerly -- despite the notice that said, "For the Principal Only." I ran to announce to my parents, "Guess what, I'm a National Merit Semi-Finalist! In fact, it says right here that I'm the only one in my entire school!" OK, so I'm the only student in my entire school, at least in the class of 2001 All this aside, though, to be totally honest I've never felt like a lonely-only in my high school years. I'm proud to be part of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers. To me PA Homeschoolers is like a giant high school. This year I've had the privilege of being on my high school's newspaper staff as Design Editor for the Excelsior; I'm the editor along with my friend Gwen Umbreit who I met through AP United States History online through PA Homeschoolers last year. I've taken several AP online classes through PA Homeschoolers, and they've all been such valuable experiences in preparing me for college.

Jonathan Huber, of Manheim PA, has been an active participant in the CHESS (Creative Home Educators Support Services) weekly program throughout his high school years, coupled with attending area college classes and preparing for AP Biology. He is also an accomplished pianist and sings with the Men's Ensemble, a homeschool group from Lancaster County that has performed on the floor of the PA House of Representatives. He hopes to attend Grove City College next fall, majoring in molecular biology.

For me, one of the obvious benefits of homeschooling has been the flexibility. The greatest benefit for me has been the opportunity to choose my curriculum and tailor it to the goals and plans that I have for my life. From the beginning of school, learning was driven by learning in and of itself. Every subject incorporated numerous projects, experiments, and field trips... Our goals were not simply to get an 'A' in each subject, but to really master and learn the material.... More currently, I'm planning a career in science. This past summer, we thought what could we do to get some experience in the field, and we contacted various

people and talked to others. I was able to get a job at the Penn State College of Medicine at the Milton Hershey Medical Center working in a microbiology lab studying HIV-HTLV... This provided me a lot of valuable experience that I hope to use in my career. My longterm goal is to get a PhD in medical engineering and start a career in applied research. I'd like to follow in the footsteps of important Christian scientists in using science to benefit mankind.

Elisabeth Eipper, of Lititz PA, is the second of seven children and her older brother Joshua spoke at last year's Excellence Day press conference as a National Merit Semi-Finalist also. She is a regular volunteer at her local library, and has also taken part in several AP online courses (including AP Calculus, led by her father), as well as preparing for other AP exams independently. She is possibly considering future work in health sciences or human services, and will always be an eager reader and writer.

I've been homeschooled all my life and I've never regretted it. When I tell people that I and my siblings all are or have been or will be homeschooled, the typical response has been, "My, your mother must be busy!" Though sometimes what they really seem to mean is, "Your poor mother!" However, things are not quite like that at our house. True, my mother does make all our objectives, portfolios, and weekly assignments, and she and my father are always there when we children have questions, but she doesn't teach us -- she gives us books and we learn. For instance, my history for many years consisted of a fairly heavy reading of various history-related books -- including many classics, Landmark book, biographies, and historical fiction.... I would say that extensive reading is one of the main factors behind my ability to write comfortably and fluently, as well as my performance on various tests. And perhaps most importantly, I also write, write, and write some more. From 6th grade on up through 10th grade I had to write one essay a week, every week of the school year, not to mention writing long stories, letters, many newspapers, etc. ... If I had to go back and learn again, I wouldn't give up those hours spent on struggling with words -- they've all been worth it.

Christopher Gaiteri, of York PA, has many wide-ranging interests and accomplishments -- for Chris, the only problem in thinking about his future is selecting which of the many, many fields that he loves he'll pursue in depth. He's been very active in ceramics design for many years; he's led a week of Physics Club 2000 to younger homeschoolers in his area, he's the coach of a Math Olympiad team for middle school kids; he's been a top student at the annual Citizen Bee several years in high school and was at the state level of the Geography Bee in 8th grade (some of you may remember his terrific article on preparing for the Bee, published in PA Homeschoolers). Chris has participated in AP online courses and developed his own comprehensive AP courses at home, and even written a delightful fictional account of Washington's Crossing of the Delaware... and much more.

My entire family is addicted to learning. This shows up in chronic visits to historic sites, or intense craving for the hundreds of books, videos, and lectures we go through in a year.... The layers of learning that accumulate with years of homeschooling are like living cells that reproduce themselves and create something with a life of their own. A perfect example of this is the seminar I designed for 10 to 12 year olds, called Physics Club 2000. If I did not have the time to construct that huge catapult in the backyard, if I had not been inspired to compete in bridge building contests, if there had been someone else to fix the computer, or if I hadn't studied the Greeks and the Scientific Revolution five times, I never would have had this opportunity to help others maximize their own potential.... Learning is still a natural

process of discovery, and my mother is still my favorite teacher. Before awards and scholarships come perseverance. Before that is inspiration, and before that freedom. And all of these rest on the bedrock of homeschooling. And before that was a mother, like many of you.

Remarks from Donald E. Lunday - Deputy Secretary for Administration

Pennsylvania Department of Education
Homeschooling Excellence Day
September 27, 2000
Capitol Rotunda

On behalf of Governor Ridge and Secretary Hickok, I extend a hearty thank you to the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers association for including us in this special celebration, the Sixth Annual Homeschooling Excellence Day. I also would like to extend our congratulations to the students who are National Merit Scholarship semi-finalists. We are extremely proud of you.

This event is about winners and excellence. I would like to make a few points about winning and excellence for homeschoolers.

In the first year after Act 169 of 1998 was signed into law, there were approximately 3500 students being homeschooled in Pennsylvania. Since then, the number of students has increased by 500% to over 21,000 students and that number continues to grow. Nationally, there is a similar trend. The number of homeschooled students continues to increase at a phenomenal rate. And these homeschoolers have been winners and have demonstrated academic excellence in a number of ways. For example, the winner and runner-up in this year's National Spelling Bee were homeschoolers. I recently observed the state Geography Bee and there were several homeschooled students in the finals. Homeschoolers have also continued to demonstrate excellence through their SAT scores and in National Merit Scholarships.

After the recent National Spelling Bee, a national commentator, in his analysis of the event, commented that homeschooling was a new phenomenon, that it is a non-traditional approach to education. He seemed to indicate that homeschooling is a fad that may or may not continue. If I could have responded to him, I would have pointed out that from a historical perspective, public schooling is the non-traditional method. The center of learning has always been in the home and continues to be in the home. Before public education came along, most schooling in the essential academics, occurred in the home. In his commentary, he also suggested that the reasons for the successes that homeschooled students experience derives from some secret behind this homeschooling "fad." I wanted to point out to him that it is not a secret, that homeschooling epitomizes the methods we see in trying to improve public education.

First and foremost, homeschoolers have completely dedicated and committed teachers who place the utmost focus on their student. Their teachers set high

standards and are uncompromising in the pursuit of these standards. And if my own parents were any measure, parents and guardians certainly are rigorous in their demands for excellence. The curriculum and learning pace for the student is tailored to individual needs. Homeschooling is student centered. There is accountability and an ideal learning environment with minimum distractions. Recently, we have seen a growing concern and emphasis in public education on site-based management of schools. I would contend that homeschooling is an excellent model of site-based management.

Again, if my parents were any measure, there certainly is rigor at home in any task. I am sure this holds true for homeschooled students.

Homeschooling is not done in isolation, as many believe. Through voluntary participation in organizations like the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers association, parent/guardian teachers can share experiences, techniques and resources through a non-obtrusive structure.

Finally, and very importantly, the Home Education Act represents something that is very important to Governor Ridge and Secretary Hickok --choice! We have some excellent public schools in Pennsylvania and also some that are struggling. Parents now have the option to chose charter schools, private schools, and the ultimate in choice, homeschooling.

In closing, I would like to extend a personal thank you to the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers association, the parents and guardians of these fine homeschooled students, and in particular, to the students here today for allowing me to be part of this celebration. Over my many years, I have learned that one of the greatest privileges and honors of life is to be able to be associated with winners and you have provided me that honor and privilege today. You certainly are winners and are setting a standard of excellence in education for others to follow.

Congratulations!