

Mentoring Other Homeschoolers -> Paying it Forward!

from Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 76 (Fall 2001) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

Have any of you seen the recent movie where a little boy devises a plan to make the world a better place by asking people to pay back a kindness done for them by 'paying it forward' and helping someone else? When I saw the movie, I immediately thought of all the many homeschooling families I know, who help one another out in so many ways. And it doesn't take long to be considered 'experienced' by a newer homeschooling parent -- you might be surprised at how soon others may start calling you and asking for advice or suggestions. Be ready to reach out!

Here are just a few of the ways I see others helping and mentoring one another....

A wonderful old homeschooling friend of mine, Sharron Lerew of Dillsburg PA, had her last homeschooler graduate several years ago, and she's still giving back to the homeschooling community, and still touching many homeschoolers' lives in important ways. Her special gift? She loves to do one-on-one math tutoring with high school kids, especially helping them prepare for the SAT I math exam. Looking through spring portfolios of kids in her area, I can always tell when they are showing me work done with Sharron -- suddenly the paper is no longer lined notebook paper -- it's pink, square, unlined, and everything is written boldly and hastily and at a slant all over the page.... it's as if I'm hearing Sharron's lively conversations with these kids just by looking over these scribbled and scrawled examples of their combined math thinking. Sharron tells people that she does this because it's her way of giving back to the community that gave so much to her family and to her kids while they were homeschooling. Sharron has also continued an interest in community theater spawned by her kids -- she's still hard at work helping in many ways with the DreamWrights Theatre in York PA, even after her own kids have moved on to college and no longer have time. Many homeschoolers take part in this unique theatre -- and Sharron's dedicated work has really been a boon.

I'm reminded of the conversation I had just today with a wonderful warm-hearted homeschooling mom, Trisha Cronce, a single mom with an only child. She shared how meaningful it was for her to receive one email response to her frantic query several years ago on an AOL homeschooling e-list, where she desperately wondered whether or not homeschooling was really legal, and if she could possibly do this or not. To hear back from another single mom, who even lived nearby, was such a boost, and that one person's helpful and encouraging response has led her to answer every similar query posted -- and even now to offering to be a new statewide contact person for other single moms who are homeschooling. Gratefulness can make us act, can make us 'pay forward' as the movie says. See her welcoming and encouraging article in this issue.

Then there's Casey Deely in Pittsburgh, whose youngest daughter, her only homeschooler, just graduated this year. Casey will continue doing leadership work with her support group, helping new moms learn the ropes of homeschooling and dealing with the local Pittsburgh Public Schools (not always an easy district to deal with!). She also was ready to lead a session at our summer PHAA High School at Home Conference about making the transition

to post-homeschooling life... learning to both let go and to move ahead with your own life in new meaningful ways. She's being a help to other homeschool moms not as far along the road as she is. A good friend of hers, Lori Koch, continued to come to Casey's book discussion group for homeschool students even after her son graduated -- she still loved helping the other kids see more in the books they were reading, and felt she herself still gained immensely from taking part. Lori also still keeps up with leadership work in her local area, helping homeschoolers gain perspective. She's 'paying forward' too. And I know the families she mentors are very grateful for her longterm perspective, for her ability to point out more possible paths for their kids' futures than they might have been able to see just on their own.

My friend Karen Boyd has worked as an evaluator ever since the very early days of the homeschooling law, helping families create a positive program at home, and helping them see more clearly the good things the students are really doing. She's been an audience, a prod, a helper, an inspirer, just like all the hundreds of evaluators all across PA have been as they work with very diverse types of homeschooling families. She has also been teaching math classes at a local homeschool weekly co-op, and has led writing courses in her home, and helped with judging for science fairs and for Homeschool Excellence Day, and serves on the Board of Directors of the PHAA diploma program. She's really given back to the homeschooling community over so many years, and will continue to do so even though her youngest graduated a year ago.

There's Karen Carr, in a rural area north of Harrisburg, who started offering to organize all sorts of group activities in her area right after moving there, that would encourage lots of kids beyond just her own very large family. She coached a MathCounts team of junior high students, hosted a National Geographic Bee with her local group, and more. Though she is certainly a very busy woman just caring for her own 8 kids, she's always had time for thinking beyond just her own family. She's letting her kids see that it's the right thing to do to reach out. And there are many others just like Karen all across the state. And her son Ben is now giving back to the homeschool community through taking on the task of being the new editor of the Excelsior, the PHAA high school student newsletter. It must just seem natural for him to give back to the larger homeschool community he's been a part of all his life.

Or I think of Gene Larson, the homeschooling dad who's the volleyball coach for my kids' homeschool volleyball team. Gene played varsity volleyball at the University of Pittsburgh, and has really helped all these homeschool kids -- and many, including my three, had never before played any team sport -- see how to work together effectively. He's given hours and hours of his time, and always seems to have a wonderful time doing it -- he's just been a true inspiration, and helped the kids see that the value lies in really working hard as a team to do their very best. And at every statewide volleyball tournament I see lots of other homeschooling parents serving as coaches or assistants, helping the kids see how to both gain skills, learn a lifetime sport, and also (maybe most importantly) learn good sportsmanship. It's because of people like Gene and all the other coaches, that we always get rave reports from the referees at the tournaments -- they love being at our games, as everyone acts so positively and no harsh words are said. It's also been neat to see that now some homeschool students are joining in as coaches after graduation -- Otto Monroy is now the chief coach for the Harrisburg area teams. He's learned from everyone else in the homeschooling community that this is just what you do here -- you pay forward, you keep on giving to help out the next kids coming along.

We all need to do our part, just as we've been helped in the past by those ready to give us their time and hearts and help. None of us are alone in this diverse homeschooling community -- be ready to 'pay it forward' today. It's the best way you can thank those who've been there for you in the past.