

## Celebrating Homeschooling Friendships

from Susan Richman

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Imagine this: it's been a long day of testing during our fall swing around PA giving the Terra Nova achievement test to groups of homeschool students. We've had almost an hour of driving that morning, and more the next day, early. I really wish I could take a nap or just relax that evening and talk with the good friends we're staying with that night, or I wish I catch up on my online AP US History course students via my laptop. But instead Howard and I get into our van again, driving over to a large old barn in Lancaster County, to call an old-time square dance for a group of homeschoolers-- all members of Lorie LaSala's amazing homeschool choir. And suddenly it happens once more-- all my tiredness disappears while we're with this lively and diverse group.

The kids all have delightful energy. When I ask (as I almost always do...), if the group might sing us a song before we get started dancing, they always enthusiastically discuss among themselves which song they'll do. And then they astonish me with their complex harmonies and rhythms, with their ability to work together-- especially when Lorie then mentions as an aside that they haven't practiced that particular song for several months.

When these kids start dancing, it's always gratifying to see how they help one another out as they learn again how to doe-si-doe and grand-right-and-left together. Many remember parts from previous years, and the new students pick things up quickly. There are few worries about being "sophisticated" or "cool"-- these kids know how to just have fun together in a really wholesome way. There are ready smiles, lots of laughing, and lots of kind "thank you's" all evening.

Whenever I'm with this group, I realize again how important it is for our homeschool kids to have positive groups to belong to, groups that meet often enough and for long enough for the kids to really form longterm and meaningful friendships. Groups that meet for a real *purpose*, such as for this choir or for a volleyball team or for something like the old *Sleepover Shakespeare Society* that my girls used to organize, seem to be best for this. Maybe this is because the kids all begin to feel a real commitment to the group-- they are all creating something together and need one another. Groups that just try for very informal activities together can sometimes peter out pretty quickly, especially when teens are involved-- most will just be too busy to come just for a purely "social" activity... but for the choir or the drama practice, they are there. And that gives them the time to forge real connections.

You know how much we all hate the big "S" question we always get as homeschoolers-- the old "But, you know what I really worry about is homeschoolers "social lives?" I wish every newspaper reporter who's ever asked about this (always very sincerely, and always with the tone of voice that lets me know they think they are asking quite an original question!), could be at this October square dance in the barn-- or at one of the three statewide co-ed volleyball tournaments that bring hundreds of kids together. Or one of the many homeschool drama productions around the state-- and maybe even attend the cast party

afterwards. I think then they'd realize that homeschool kids can indeed have full and very happy social lives with good friends.

One thing that I often mention to those reporters, when I share about the many ways homeschoolers get together, is that homeschoolers do have to be pro-active in developing positive social opportunities for their kids. It could indeed be possible-- if no one did anything-- to just have the kids stay home every day and every evening, feeling lonely (unless they are in one of the very large homeschooling families, that provides almost a full baseball team just in itself!).

But I don't know any good homeschooling families who just resign themselves to such a limited view. Instead, I see these kids dancing and swirling before us in the barn as Howard and I play oldtime fiddle tunes. I see the kids cheering on their teammates at volleyball tournaments-- and even striking up good-natured friendships with the opposing teams during breaks. I hear students talk about forming longterm friendships with the kids in their Civil Air Patrol squadron, kids who've learned to do search and rescue operations together and to meet tough goals together. Or I think of the laughter late into the night as the group of girls up in our attic are working at filming their own spoof of *Romeo and Juliet*-- after first eating a potluck meal together, having a vigorous discussion about the play led entirely by them (I was doing the dishes...), watching a video version or two.... and talking and laughing and getting to know one another in their own terms.

Or I think of the homeschool kids I know who have formed small musical groups that perform at churches and weddings and nursing homes. They have formed fast and meaningful friendships in the process of developing their skills and working to share their gifts with others. They've worked together on something they really value—they've set goals together, and put in the hours needed for both friendship and for accomplishment.

I think of the kids who've shared about how special it was to be part of a drama production with their homeschool group-- about the new level of comradery they felt after working so hard together to create *Peter Pan* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on stage with fellow homeschoolers. These kids gained a community as well as a wonderful chance to learn more about set design and acting and stage lights.

And so I celebrate all these many ways that we help our homeschool kids find viable links and friendships with one another, all ways that help them feel happier with the choice of homeschooling. We all have heard of homeschooling teens who beg to head back to "real" school, because they feel lonely at home. When we help and encourage our kids to develop or take part in new options within the homeschooling world or beyond, we help them gain the realization that they can indeed be part of something bigger than just themselves—they'll stretch, grow, and find friends.

"Partners all, places all! Ready for the next Square Dance Call!"