

## What About a □ Gap Year □ Before College?

by Susan Richman

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I'll admit right off that my husband Howard was very skeptical about this idea of our youngest daughter Hannah. What was she talking about-- heading off to Israel for a year with friends and not going to college right away? She might not ever go to college, she'd lose out on all scholarships-- and what would she be doing, anyway? What would colleges think about this odd plan? This just wasn't the normal route-- all of our three older homeschool grads had all gone right on to college, and had done fine. Hannah should too.

But Hannah had her heart set on this idea. She wanted to spend this year abroad, living with a small group of friends from her summer 2004 Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel program. They'd study, they'd do community service, they'd learn Hebrew, they'd tour around, they'd learn to live like real Israelis instead of just being tourists. The group needed her, too, as they needed a certain number of kids to make this a real go, and to receive backing and guidance and oversight from the Bronfman Foundation.

Finally came the tearful day when we needed to make the final decision. We'd just found out from the University of Pittsburgh Honors College that while admissions could certainly be deferred for a year, scholarships would have to be applied for again next year. Howard thought she was completely tossing away her full-tuition scholarship. He made out cost/benefit analysis sheets showing what she'd be losing by following this crazy dream of hers. We had tears on Hannah's part, and tears on mine. I thought Howard was not seeing the full picture, and that he was misjudging the way the university would look at this opportunity. Hannah had even found a very positive article about "Gap Year" programs by an admissions person at Harvard. What would the college folks here say?

And so I made the phone call to the Pitt Honors College, and just asked them outright what they thought of the plan. And that call made all the difference. The college advisors were delighted at this amazing option for Hannah. They really urged us to take advantage of it, as they felt she'd come into her freshman year so refreshed and ready for academic learning after a year away doing very different types of things. They thought she'd be broadened, would have new perspectives, would be much more mature than your typical entering freshman straight from high school. They felt she might even have a better shot at top scholarships too-- and added that it would be no problem to do the required scholarship interview via phone to Israel.

And so, Hannah's tears happily turned to beaming smiles, as we gave the go-ahead for the adventure, and her planning began in earnest. She arrived in Israel in late August, flying over with two of her friends also taking part, and she'll return home in mid-May. It's truly been the time of her life, and I'm so grateful she's has this chance to follow her dream. And I want to encourage any other homeschoolers getting close to graduation to consider this type of □ gap year' option also.

And what has Hannah actually done this year? For starters, she and her housemates took two months of intensive Modern Hebrew classes, meeting six days a week for 5 hours a day in classes with adults of all ages wanting to learn this challenging language. Hannah was even able to use this experience to develop one of her new college scholarship essays, too. She wrote about the challenge of standing before her classmates from over the world, who had no language in common except their fledgling Hebrew, and trying to explain to them what homeschooling and growing up on a farm in western PA was like. Hannah's group followed this up with small classes led by a wide range of people -- including especially the unemployed older sons of the rabbi overseeing them for the year. They are all reading through the Torah (the Five Books of Moses in the Bible) in Hebrew-- and discussing it in Hebrew also as much as possible. They are studying about the history of the Middle East conflicts, studying Talmud (those of you who've read Potok's *The Chosen* know a little about this!), studying Jewish philosophers, and traveling all about the country to visit friends and see different places.

They've also been volunteering with a matched Israeli group of teens that they'd met in summer 2004, working in an afterschool program for very poor kids in Jerusalem. Hannah helps the kids with their English speaking skills (something they need to graduate from high school), does art and craft projects with the group, helps with math homework, and is a friend and role model for these children. She especially loves working with the Ethiopian immigrant kids in the group, gaining a whole new level of insight into the problems of integrating into a completely different culture. This experience led to another college application essay, too. And it's been touching when Hannah has asked me about games we used to play in math or language studies during our early homeschooling years-- she thinks those may really work well with "her kids" in Israel. She found her fellow volunteers were also very excited to hear Hannah's unique homeschooling perspective on how kids learn best-- she shared that she had never learned through worksheets or drill, but through active exploration, play, reading, and games. Her homeschooling approach is taking root in this afterschool program.

Hannah's also been creating a travel blog, so she can keep in touch with friends and family without having to write each person a separate email. It's been a wonderful way to learn about all she's experiencing, and it's fun to read her friend's many comments and responses. People are so fond of denigrating computers as something that keeps people apart and isolated-- Hannah has shown us that this new tool can really help people stay in touch in a unique way.

Hannah has also been majoring in "Life Skills 101"-- she and her friends are shopping, cooking, cleaning, and learning to be responsible for getting themselves up on time for their classes. (I won't say anything about learning to go to bed at reasonable hours. Sometimes I've been chatting on Instant Messenger with Hannah in the evening, only to suddenly realize that it must be 3:00am in Jerusalem!) She's learning how to travel safely, how to be a good guest in many different homes, and how to cook a whole Shabbat dinner with her friends and develop their own traditions and meaningful rituals. She's learned to find the right place to worship. She's learned to work out schedules and chore duties and to get along with her friends.

Recently she asked if I could find some books to bring with us when we visit her this month (we leave two days after dropping this newsletter off at our printer!). Could I find her AP

Psychology textbook, and a book on advanced math or beginning calculus, and something on art history, too. They were all wanting to branch out into some other topics in their learning together-- I think they are all starting to remember that next year they'll indeed be in college, and they want to be ready. It feels rather like they've all been doing homeschooling at its best this year--learning collaboratively with each other, working with a flexible mix of teachers, following leads and exploring ideas fully.

I hope that more homeschoolers might start considering a self-designed "Gap Year" option. I know of a growing number of homeschool grads who've also had wonderful and meaningful experiences doing just this. Each "Gap Year" is going to be unique-- one grad stayed home and worked on a novel, another took on a range of volunteer opportunities in his city, discovering that he actually wanted to major in urban studies in college. Another worked and earned money so that college was more affordable-- and gained valuable insights into the real world in the process. Each student felt just as our university advisor said-- they were refreshed, and had a renewed vision of what they wanted to study and pursue.

And yes, they all did go on to college after their special year of exploration.

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[ Note from Howard: Hannah's hopes of getting an even better scholarship offer after the gap year did not materialize. In fact, she lost out on the full tuition academic scholarship that had been offered by Pitt before the gap year. As a result of this loss and her analysis that Brandeis had a stronger Jewish-studies Department, she decided to go to Brandeis University, instead of Pitt, with just a needs-based scholarship (not an academic scholarship) beginning in the fall of 2006. ]