

The Teenage Liberation Handbook ~ online repository

Welcome to the online repository for *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* 30th anniversary edition! Here you will find a few chapters and appendices from the previous (1998) edition that have been cut, but which may still be of value to some readers. There is some seriously outdated information in this mix—please don't rely on it for logistical or legal guidance!—but also many timeless gems worth discovering.

The excerpts here, like each edition of the *Handbook*, feature many anecdotes from *Growing Without Schooling* magazine (often referred to as “GWS”). This material is reprinted with permission from Growing Without Schooling © 2021 HoltGWS LLC. (You can read all 143 issues of *GWS* for free via Holt Associates' [online archive](#)—a wondrous resource!) Where *GWS* or another source is not specified, anecdotes are taken from my personal correspondence with readers and other individuals.

Thanks to [Blake Boles](#), my stellar editor, for (among so many other things) coming up with the idea for this repository!

Anyone is welcome to access this document via [TeenageLiberation.space](#), so feel free to share a link to it. Please do not, however, copy, publish, or otherwise share it in whole or in part without express written permission from me. (Side note: the pdfs of previous editions of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, which have sometimes circulated on the internet, are 100% illegal and they are extremely frustrating for me. Please don't share or promote them. Thank you!)

You can get a copy (print or ebook) of the updated, revised *Teenage Liberation Handbook* 30th anniversary edition via Amazon and other booksellers.

Happy browsing!

Grace Llewellyn, September 2021

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If there is 21st century value in this chapter, it lies in the general discussion of broad issues that can affect homeschoolers, and in the vintage anecdotes from unschoolers and homeschoolers around the world. Do not, of course, use it as a source of current legal information.

That said, before I decided to cut this chapter, I did make a few small changes. The second part, "Free the Planet," has not been changed except for the short introductory paragraph.

The Guinea Pig Chapter

Skims briefly over the lives of approximately 65 unschooling teens, most of whom responded to my 1990 survey

Your Allies Among the Rich and Famous

A quick survey of a few notable people who succeeded via an unconventional educational path - or who in some cases succeeded *despite* (rather than because of) conventional schooling

The journal, etc., of Ms. Kim Kopel, Autodidact

Kim's thoughtful, personal account of her life as an unschooling teenager. (For a while I considered not bothering at all with this repository, but then I re-read Kim's journal and that sealed the deal.)

The Unschooler's Bookshelf

An appendix that recommends approximately 20 carefully chosen resources. (Many of them, amazingly, remain relevant and useful in 2021. In fact, as of September 2021 there's a thoroughly updated 40th anniversary edition available of John Holt's classic *Teach Your Own.*)

Afterword to the 2nd [1998] edition

A few notes and reflections, looking back over the *TLH's* first 7 years

Selected Bibliography

A list of most of the works cited (even briefly) in the 1998 edition

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the Not Necessarily Difficult Legal Issue

[Before I decided that this entire chapter was not essential for the 30th anniversary edition of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, I began updating it. Post-1998 changes are minimal, though. The international “Free the Planet” section is unchanged except for its brief introductory paragraph. -Grace]

As I write, homeschooling is legal¹ in all fifty states of the U.S. and many other parts of the world, and each year, the laws become less bothersome. Though the legalities could still stand a lot of improvement, growing numbers of people support homeschooling. When homeschoolers are so obviously living intelligently and happily—and when they tend to do just as well on tests as other young people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds²—legislators and courts look rather silly requiring them to go back to school “for their own good.” Truth is on your side, and for most families at least in the U.S., it is now easy and quick to get out of school. Let me repeat that: *there’s an excellent chance that it will be easy, quick, and overtly legal for you to get out of school*—in which case you personally won’t need most of the details in the rest of this chapter.

However

In a few states and many countries, homeschooling is quite regulated, and homeschoolers are still working for better laws. They could use your help. There’s no better way to learn “citizenship” or “government.”

Even where homeschooling is now easy, it wasn’t always. In the 1970s and 80s, schools and courts harassed a lot of families. Lucky for you, homeschoolers did not give up. Instead, they banded together, spoke the truth, suffered, and eventually won supportive laws. Thanks to their very hard work, Americans and most Canadians (and many others) are unlikely to face any serious hassle from schools, let alone a court trial. Don’t take their struggle for granted—and be ready to stand up for your freedom if you need to.

If laws can change for the better, they can also change for the worse. If hundreds of thousands of people quit school all at once, schoolpeople would panic about losing their jobs, and would therefore lobby for tighter restrictions on homeschooling. There are millions of schoolpeople, and they might win....then again, homeschooling is now widespread enough (in English-speaking countries, anyway) that major backsliding seems unlikely.

¹ The information in this chapter is as accurate as I could make it. However, it is not intended as *official* legal advice, which I am not qualified to give. Legally, only an attorney has the right to give legal counsel. Also, laws change frequently, so some details might be out of date by the time you read this.

² For extensive details on the achievements of homeschoolers in the United States, see “Homeschooling: A Comprehensive Survey of the Research” by Robert Kunzman and Milton Gaither, published in 2013 in *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* (available online).

This chapter will give you some basic pointers and information on the legal aspects of homeschooling in the U.S., but most of the general principles apply to everybody everywhere. Yes, I am shifting my terminology a little. In this chapter, I will mostly use the euphemism “homeschooling” rather than “unschooling.” *Unschooling* is not a legally recognized term, and probably never will be. Don’t use it when you talk to schools, courts, or legislators; it will anger or at least confuse them.

(“Homeschooling” implies that *somebody* is teaching you, even if it’s “only” your parents. That’s easier for arrogant professional educators to swallow. Of course, you *do* have guiding adults in your life, but no one should be bossing you about. Gradually, tactfully, start letting people know that you are responsible for your own education. But don’t strut around acting as if you don’t need no help from nobody. It’s not true, and it will earn you enemies.)

General stuff you need to know to understand homeschooling legalities

The more you know, the more powerful your position. That’s one major purpose of anyone’s education, of course—but as an unschooler living on the edge, you have a real chance to put this truth into action, *now*.

1. *The best way to find out how things really work, and what’s really allowed, is to contact a local homeschooling organization.* These groups can share the lessons learned by all of their members and contacts. They have had experience dealing with laws and school boards, and can offer you invaluable advice. Many groups even publish legal guides.

If a group helps you and doesn’t charge for their materials, pay their membership fee or find some other way to contribute. The homeschooling movement has come as far as it has because the people in it are generous, involved, and incredibly helpful.

2. *In the U.S., education laws are the business of each state, not of the federal government.* Californians and Iowans, for example, face completely different sets of regulations. Every state has statutes, or written laws, on compulsory education. Most of these laws now have specific provisions for homeschooling. (In some cases they define homeschooling as a type of private school.)

3. *No law is an issue until someone tries to enforce it.* The vast majority of homeschoolers are perfectly legal. However, in restrictive areas, some people do break laws in order to homeschool. Sometimes, schoolboards ignore them. Sometimes, schoolboards simply don’t know about homeschooling families. Until Mr. Mint registers Junior Mint for kindergarten, they don’t know he exists. If a schoolboard does get upset over your actions, it may first ask you to return to school, and then perhaps try to take you to court.

Often, by the way, school administrators and boards think they have much greater power than they do. If worse comes to worst and you are taken to court (perhaps most likely if your parents are separated and if they disagree about homeschooling), one thing you can do in preparation is attend a few other trials or court proceedings—not necessarily related to homeschooling—just to demystify the whole thing a bit.

4. *Most of us do, supposedly, live in democracies.* In the U.S., the people who pass the statutes are your local elected representatives—not the state senators and representatives who work in Washington D.C., but the state legislators who work in your state capitol. These people are supposed to represent the choices of the people who elect them. Technically, that’s not you, because you’re not old enough to vote.

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However, any politician with foresight pays attention to the opinions of thoughtful future voters. Obviously, your parents' voices count too. See the end of this chapter for suggestions on changing legislation.

What do the U.S. statutes say?³

Laws change somewhat frequently, and they are different in every state. Within state laws, separate districts have varying policies and attitudes. Therefore, I cannot tell you exactly what you are expected to do in your particular district this year, and whether you should cooperate with or defy the authorities. Instead, I'll mention a few common aspects of such statutes, and then you can and should google to find out about the current laws that apply in your area. (Note to readers outside the U.S.: Though this section discusses American laws, many of the suggestions may be relevant to your local situation, too.)

Most statutes specify that you must register with the state or a local board, be in "homeschool" for a certain number of days and a certain number of hours, and that you keep attendance records. Some statutes ask that you keep records such as logs, portfolios of written work, and even written evaluations of progress (like grade reports); in some states, you must show these records to certain officials. (Be creative with unsavory regulations. If your state requires a progress report, write it yourself and have the parents sign it.) None of these requirements should cause problems. Attendance in school can certainly include educational field trips, such as your kayaking expedition around Prince William Sound.

Other requirements may be more bothersome.

1. *One requirement in most states' homeschooling laws is that parents provide instruction in the same areas schools do—math, language arts, science, art, history, health, etc.* Don't panic when you read this stipulation. By pursuing your interests, you will automatically include some of these subjects. If any get left out, you can either ignore them and probably not get caught, or study them in ways that you find interesting. There are so many ways to explore any subject that you can almost certainly end up with a legal program that you like, even if it includes subjects you used to hate. See the rest of this book for ways to design a program you can love and everyone else can accept.

And remember: the laws don't ask you to imitate school *methods*. Textbooks, for instance, are not required; nor are grades, marks, or book reports. School activities take most of their shape from rigid schedules, bureaucratic logistics, and limited access to the outside world. There's no point in lowering your intellect to that level.

2. *Because people just don't get it about self-directed education and insist on believing that homeschoolers are taught by their parents, some statutes say a lot about parents' qualifications.* In some states, one parent must hold a high school diploma or GED certificate. In others, a bachelor's degree is required. In a few states, if neither of your parents has a teaching certificate, you must consult

³ Note to non-U.S. readers: Though this section discusses American laws, some of the suggestions are relevant elsewhere too.

occasionally with a certified teacher. Sometimes, these states pay for this by technically enrolling you in school and paying a teacher-consultant.

3. *Many states require you to take standardized tests*, either once a year or once every few years. In some other states, you are required to submit some type of annual “assessment”; standardized testing is one of your choices, but you can also elect an alternate method, such as having a certified teacher evaluate your progress, or assembling a portfolio of your work. Other states have no assessment requirements at all.

In some states that require testing, very low scores can send you back to school. In Colorado, for instance, if the composite score on your test is at or below the thirteenth percentile, you are first given the chance to take another test; if your scores are *still* below the thirteenth percentile, you may be required to go to school until the next testing period. (The average test score is in the fiftieth percentile.)

Some homeschoolers refuse to take standardized tests, since they believe on principle that tests are unfair (maybe not to them personally, but in general) or misleading. It does seem rather absurd to require testing as an evaluation of homeschooling—after all, if you’re in school and you do badly on the standardized tests, the guidance counselor is unlikely to say, “School doesn’t seem to be working for you; why don’t you quit and learn on your own?” In *GWS* #100, Oregonian Ann Lahrson writes:

I had been a schoolteacher before I began homeschooling. In school, I and other teachers knew that there were kids who could do the work but couldn’t perform well on the test, and kids who got a high score on the test but didn’t remember any of the material afterwards. I had been one of those kids myself, and I think doing well on tests gave me a false sense of self-worth, because although I did well on tests, I didn’t magically have an understanding of what I could do or wanted to do, and when I graduated I remember feeling like a phony. Also, when I was a student, I remember that there were some kids in the class who clearly had a real grasp of the material, they really connected with it, but they didn’t do as well on the tests . . . In some way, I learned that truly understanding the material *wasn’t* necessarily the best thing . . . When I began homeschooling . . . I didn’t like the idea of [my children] judging themselves, or limiting themselves, according to what the test said.

Ann explains that when her youngest daughter was eleven, she chose to take the required standardized test one year. But the following year, she chose not to. Ann asked her why, and she said, “It doesn’t tell you anything useful. If it was a test about butterflies, I could study about butterflies and then find out how much I remembered. But that test isn’t *about* anything.”

Of course there is some legal risk to test-resisting, but many homeschoolers have had no problem either quietly ignoring or openly resisting the “required” tests. If you think test resistance is right for you, research the “opt-out” movement in your local area. You may also want to suggest alternate forms of assessment rather than refusing assessment altogether.

4. *In some states, there are clear-cut statewide guidelines*; follow them and you have automatic legal approval. In others—such as West Virginia—you are supposed to request permission, often from

local or county boards. However, these boards usually have specific guidelines to follow in granting approval, and their decisions can be challenged.

5. *In California, you can easily register your home as a private school.* Also, in many districts you can homeschool through an independent study program (ISP), which is a branch of the public school system. (In some districts, these programs allow great freedom; in others, they are rigid and inflexible.) Many Californians also enroll in umbrella schools or other private schools with programs for homeschoolers. Also, you can take the CHESPE (California High School Proficiency Examination) and thus exempt yourself from school and homeschooling regulations too. The CHESPE certificate is legally equivalent to a diploma; employers are not allowed to discriminate against people who have one.

6. *In some states, you can start homeschooling and then notify your local authorities.* In others, you must first notify them and wait for their response before leaving school.

7. *And in Kansas you must conduct a tornado drill three times yearly.* There's no place like home.

An Ounce of Prevention

If you live with a bit of diplomacy, you shouldn't have to actually deal with courts or hostile school boards. Legal technicalities, after all, are not the only factor which affects your right to homeschool; unspoken social rules are even more important and fundamental. The following suggestions are especially important if homeschooling is difficult where you live. However, they can help maintain peace and goodwill anywhere.

1. Trust, as much as you can.

Don't turn a peaceful situation into a war. Until they prove otherwise, assume that the people in your school are your allies. Assume that they want you to have the best possible education, and that therefore they will cheer you on. Teachers and even administrators will likely support you unless you make them feel defensive.

Most of the teenagers I heard from said they'd never been hassled, and that the schools basically ignored them as long as they fulfilled local requirements. In most cases this involved little more than sending in a short statement every September outlining their plans. Some reported that their local schools were not just neutral, but helpful and supportive. Thirteen-year-old Anne Brosnan, for instance, wrote me: "The school is perfectly happy with us, and we've never been to court. About twice a year a lady comes from Babylon Schools to visit us, and she's really nice and we like her. We don't take tests and she just makes sure we are 'pretty smart'!!"

A California mother wrote in *GWS* #35 about what happened after she explained to the local principal why she planned to take her daughters out of school:

The principal agreed with me completely about my observations and said he would support my endeavors in any way he could. His support was not just official, but warm and genuine . . . The district agreed to send me any non-consumable materials I needed. The principal said my children could

partake of school activities if they wanted as long as full-time students weren't bumped from the class and the teacher was agreeable.

Of course, there is no guarantee they'll be nice. A few teenagers wrote me about minor trouble they'd had: "They still feel they own us," wrote Todd Brown, fifteen, about his school district in Virginia, "The local principal has forbidden us and some other nonschooling friends from taking driver's ed. Also in the past he has been unreasonable and even downright rude." A parent wrote me that local school officials "enjoy control and power, and their lack of awareness and support causes problems."

Sometimes schoolpeople simply talk arrogant nonsense—"We . . . were informed that no parent could teach a child to read," Californian Bonnie Sellstrom told me about the early stages of homeschooling her sons, "We did put Gary in the independent [homeschool] program with the principal's approval and he was able to complete second and third grade while his schoolmates completed first grade."

2. *If you live in a state or country with difficult laws, keep your ship together.* At the same time that you radiate friendliness and expect your schoolpeople to be nice, *give them every reason you can to hate the idea of messing with you.* Some of these reasons could be:

- Get your community on your side. If the schools think you're all alone, they might move in for the kill. But if they see that your community supports you, they'll realize the odds are against them and stay off your case. And your community *will* support you if you give them the slightest reason to do so. In most situations, people love to root for any underdog with the guts to beat a system.

How to win that community support? Be visible. With some of your free time, start a project that is terrific for everyone—a tree planting campaign, a theater production for kids, a teen-to-senior-citizen adoption program, a neighborhood newsletter. Smile. Take lessons from neighbors, in exchange for work. If you keep to yourself, your community may think you are arrogant and standoffish, that you consider yourself (but not other people) "too good" for the schools. That will get their hackles up for sure. Of course, if you *do* consider yourself better than other people, no amount of fakey goo will make your neighbors like you.

- When you start homeschooling, write a very detailed paper explaining your actions, your plans, your reasons, a brief history of homeschooling, and a summary of local laws and recent national court decisions. Mail it to the schoolboard. (In some places, you are required to submit a written plan anyway; by making it long and detailed, you help establish yourself as a force to be reckoned with.)

Forget everything you ever learned about good writing being direct and simple; make it as long and flowery as you can. Unfortunately, bad confusing writing impresses some bureaucrats more than clear writing does. Toss in plenty of jargon like "learning style," "individualized education program," "experiential education," "writing across the curriculum," and "neuro-linguistic programming." Don't say you've been growing mushrooms; say you've been "learning mycology through experiential education." Borrow a textbook on educational

psychology from a college library to get some juicy terms, or have a teacher-friend help.

In *GWS #44*, Lisa Boken wrote about working with and learning from boatbuilders, day care centers, an herb shop, and a health food store. “We call this,” she explains, “for the benefit of the public school authorities, Reality Centered Learning. We give everything we do with the kids a buzzword like that.”

Follow up by keeping a detailed portfolio of everything you do—your writing, your art, extensive lists and journals of books you read and places you go.

- Join a local program that combines some of the elements of a private school with homeschooling. The one I most respect is North Star (in Massachusetts) along with the newer “Liberated Learners” centers that have modeled themselves after North Star. Maybe you can convince your own favorite teachers to quit school and start up a center.
- No matter where you live, one simple way to deal with rude legal requirements is to enroll in a long-distance umbrella school. Umbrella schools usually encourage you to learn as creatively and independently as you wish. They do not require you to study anything in particular and don’t provide set curriculums or online teachers; their function is mainly to help you keep records and to handle negotiations with your local schoolpeople when necessary. The better programs do also give good advice when you ask for it. Usually, they charge a flat fee which can seem expensive—but if it solves your legal worries and thus sets you free, it’s money very well spent.

The Off-Campus Program of Clonlara school, in Michigan, is probably the best and most widely used umbrella school. It offers as much or as little structure as you want, although it does not actually provide textbooks. It can give you copies of the same curriculum guidebooks public schools use, formats for record keeping, and—if you complete the reasonable, flexible graduation requirements—an accredited high school diploma. Clonlara has had a campus-based school since 1967, and the international home-based program since 1979.

- If you are legally old enough, you can simply drop out of school. For all real purposes, you can still be an unschooler. Good colleges and employers won’t notice the difference, especially if you call yourself a homeschooler.
- Stay informed on homeschooling issues. If you have to attend meetings with school officials, take the initiative for politely educating them on homeschooling—don’t let *them* preach to *you*.

Understand what the schoolpeople have to lose: money and pride. Don’t carelessly say or do things that increase their losses.

Money: if you quit by the dozens or hundreds, teachers and other schoolpeople will panic about their jobs, reasonably enough. Schools are given money based on the number of students who attend each day. Therefore, each person who quits causes their school to lose that much money each year. Some states and districts work out programs where they continue to enroll homeschoolers, giving them access to certain classes and services in return. These programs could be developed much further, helping both the schools and homeschoolers financially, though many homeschoolers prefer to avoid such programs since “government money comes with government strings.” Regardless, if the homeschooling movement continues to grow rapidly, teachers *will* eventually lose jobs.

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Pride: quite aside from the homeschooling movement, the teaching profession has long suffered from a general feeling of not being respected or taken seriously enough. Teachers do face injustice—they are not trusted with enough independence or creativity in the classroom, they are swamped with inane clerical details, students and parents viciously blame them for things that are beyond their control, and their pay is low compared to other careers that require similar qualifications. All of this discourages teachers from living with healthy humility and honesty; instead, it encourages them to be generally defensive and overly concerned with their reputations.

To teachers of this unfortunate mentality, homeschooling feels like an additional slap in the face, even a challenge to do battle. After they wear themselves out convincing the public that they are knowledgeable, indispensable professionals, homeschooling families come along and say, “We don’t need you. Our kids will have better educations without you.”

(Of course, there are many earnest teachers whose self-esteem is intact enough that they can see clearly. They are not puffed up with superficial pride, and will be glad to see you escape to learn freely, even though they may nevertheless worry about money.)

American teachers have formed several very powerful unions, which not only work for higher salaries but also lobby for laws which help them. Obviously, favorable homeschooling laws do *not* help them. So far, the NEA (National Education Association) and other unions have not felt threatened enough by homeschooling to really fight hard. But as homeschooling continues to rise and shine, they *will* fight hard. For many years they have included a head-in-the-sand statement in their annual resolutions, such as: “The National Education Association believes that home schooling programs cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience.”⁴

If I belonged to the NEA I would be embarrassed by such a careless declaration. Nationwide, homeschoolers’ standardized test scores are comparable to school kids’, even though these tests don’t reflect the variety of learning methods and subjects available to homeschoolers. Then there’s that term “comprehensive.” Of *course* homeschooling can’t offer a comprehensive education. Neither can school. “Comprehensive” is a huge word. It approaches infinity. No one should toss it around so glibly.

Furthermore, in order to try to get comprehensively educated even in their confused understanding of the term, you can’t have time to be comprehensively *alive*. The underlying message is that schoolpeople prefer quantity over quality. Their statement implies, “Homeschoolers cannot be trusted to force enough worksheets, textbooks, and multiple choice quizzes on their children, in the fields of English, biology, chemistry, algebra, geometry, art appreciation, history, health, geography, French, and Physical Education.” Anyway, if those NEApeople themselves were “comprehensively educated,” they would have done their homework and learned that homeschoolers are far beyond their petty ideas of education.

But of course the NEA has to make their statement, silly as it is. If we had somehow gotten ourselves into a nutrition predicament similar to our education predicament, by this time all kids would be eating three meals a day at state run cafeterias, where millions of cooks, servers, and other cafeteriapeople earned salaries. If sad parents suddenly got wise and brought their kids home for blueberry pancakes,

⁴ NEA resolutions passed at the NEA annual convention, Washington, DC, 1996 (and still current as of 2019).

those cafeteria people would lose no time issuing proclamations that parents without degrees in nutrition are unfit to feed their own children.

Teachers' money and pride panics are not your fault; they are the natural and fitting consequences of an arrogant profession which has preyed for more than a century on the planet's young. However, you may want to generously do something to alleviate the problem. With tact, you can make things easier for both you and the school people, at least in the short run. If you want to ease the money panic, you can look for a way to stay partially enrolled in school so they get their dollars (Chapter 19). If you want to ease the pride panic, you can avoid making public statements that accuse teachers of incompetence. In your conversations, focus instead on the structural problems of schools, and point out that the system prevents teachers from teaching to their best ability. No honest teacher will disagree with you there.

How to work for better U.S. homeschooling laws

Contact your representatives: write, phone, email, visit. Make specific suggestions on legislation, or simply help teach them about homeschooling by describing your own life and education. This is one of the main ways homeschoolers have so far had legal success: by getting to know their representatives and showing them how wonderful homeschooling is.

If you're up for more, write a bill that would make homeschooling more possible, and then ask your local representative to sponsor it. If your state has difficult laws, homeschoolers are probably already working on a bill. Connect with them and see how you can help. If you plan on working on homeschooling legislation, see *The Story of a Bill*, by Howard Richman, which tells how Pennsylvanian homeschoolers won a good homeschooling law.

An important, radical change that most statutes need is an acknowledgment that homeschooled teenagers have the right to teach *themselves*—so the Authorities won't poke their noses into your parents' qualifications and schedules. Related statutes would also be helpful. For instance, consider writing (or supporting) a bill that allows people of any age to take the GED. Or, consider working on "educational choice" legislation that gives tax credits to people who want to educate their children outside of the public schools. Make sure that these credits are available to homeschoolers as well as private school students. The way this works is that if you choose to homeschool (or go to private school), the state tax people return to *you* most of the money they would have otherwise passed along to the public school. You use this money to help pay tuition at a private school, or to buy supplies for homeschooling. Through legislation like this, you and everyone else who leaves school could get several thousand dollars a year—which could obviously make a substantial improvement in your attic laboratory.

A potential drawback: schools may become more reluctant to share their resources with you. Consider aiming for a compromise, where homeschool students might give up part of their rebate, and then be legally entitled to use certain school resources. Also, many homeschoolers think that this sort of legislation is dangerous because if the government "gave" (returned, actually) money to homeschoolers, it might attach rules and regulations and expectations to the cash... and maybe even to the whole practice of homeschooling.

Free the planet!

This section on international homeschooling was last updated in 1998, so much of the legal information is obsolete. Still, there is unique and helpful advice and perspective throughout - “*Teenagers are made to be spear heads!*” - and most of it applies to more than just one country. Also: Clonlara is still helping independent learners all over the planet.

If you’re not a U.S. citizen, lucky you. Unschooling may be more difficult, but yours is the chance to make history. Depending on where you live, you may have to fortify yourself with a big bottle of courage vitamins, but your actions are truly important. Your example will open the door so a big blast of fresh air can blow into the brains of your friends and classmates.

If you are a U.S. citizen, please read this section. The world needs you! In South Africa, the previous government actually imprisoned two parents for homeschooling their kids, but American homeschoolers wrote hordes of letters to the South African embassy and the parents were set free. In Russia, many educators have been trying to develop a new education system that suits their new democracy. They looked to U.S. schools and were surprised to find that our schools didn’t have much to do with democracy. Fortunately, a delegation of teenage homeschoolers (led by alternative education activist Jerry Mintz) visited Russia and demonstrated, by talking about their lives and giving workshops related to their interests, what was possible for self-directed young people. Homeschoolers in Japan, wanna-be homeschoolers in Germany, and people in other restrictive countries crave contact with U.S. unschoolers. Sometimes this contact feels like their lifeline. If you’re interested in traveling, consider visiting homeschoolers in difficult places and offering to speak to their organizations about your own activities and those of your friends.

Conversely, if you live in a country where it’s hard to homeschool, and can’t find other homeschoolers, contact any Americans living in your area—such as missionaries or military families—and ask if *they* know of local homeschoolers.

The unschooling movement in many countries—especially in the Western world—resembles that of the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. That is, there are few homeschoolers, so they feel isolated. Laws are ambiguous, and there are proportionally fewer unschooling *teenagers*. It’s my guess that in ten or twenty years, the numbers, laws, and attitudes in these countries will catch up to where the U.S. is at the turn of the millennium. That makes for an awesome and hopeful vision, and you can help make it come true.

When a law is unclear, homeschoolers attempt to interpret the law as it applies to them. In some ways this ambiguity can be a blessing—that is, a law may not state that homeschooling is *allowed*, but neither does it explicitly *prohibit* homeschooling. Usually, though, homeschoolers prefer to push for specific legislation, hoping that this will clearly establish their rights. The U.S. has gone through this process during the past twenty years—there are still a few states where homeschooling rights are a bit fuzzy, but that doesn’t stop people from doing what they believe in.

In most regions of most English-speaking countries, it’s legal to homeschool, and there is a thriving, rapidly growing unschooling movement, with numerous support groups, a few nationwide organizations, and newsletters. (The terms “deschooling” or “natural learning” are used more than

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“unschooling.” Also, like in the U.S., many people use the terms “homeschooling” and “home-education” to mean self-directed education.) Barbara J. Smith, who directs the Calgary Montessori Home Education Program in Alberta, Canada, gives advice which is realistic for teenagers in most English-speaking countries:

Take advantage of the flexibility. Find a mentor or an apprenticeship. Do job shadowing. Let your program be interest based—you can’t do it all. Aim for good research skills, good critical thinking skills. Be entrepreneurial. Value informal learning. Look in your own community. Travel when you can. Have fun learning. Learn a foreign language—go there!

Within our program, I facilitate special projects for teenage students—such as work experience in an eye clinic, construction and decoration of a family room, travel in Greece with interviews of relatives and documenting the sites, an equestrian project training a miniature horse, food studies and menu design.

In most other European countries, it is legal or semi-legal to homeschool but quite rare, and somewhat difficult, and often frowned upon. Katherine Hebert, fourteen, holds both Swiss and American citizenship. Her unschooling experience reflects that of many Europeans:

Once you’ve settled in and have sunk into routine, you realize [that homeschooling in Switzerland] has quite a few advantages. The main one is that you are in the Centro of Europe, culture capital of the world. To make my point I’ll give you a few statistics: if you aren’t scared to fly and have an extra two hundred bucks saved up from the last bake sale, why not go to Stockholm? How about Russia? Turkey? Greece? England? The places are limitless. The Italian border is four hours away by train (considering I can’t drive yet I take the train everywhere), Rome five and Venice six. Germany is an hour and a half, the French border twenty minutes and Paris two hours. Get the picture? Only two weeks ago I was doing volunteer work in Sarajevo, Bosnia, a half an hour plane trip away . . .

The resources are more difficult to get than in the States. The local library is only accessible to adults, my mother’s World Health Organization library is only for W.H.O. workers and the U.S. embassy library only for embassy workers. I get around this problem by posing as an eighteen-year-old at the local library, as my mom at the W.H.O. library, and as a secretary at the embassy under a fake name; I hope they never actually check to see if I work there. I also get a lot of my information off the Net.

If someone is interested in homeschooling here, I think it’s a great idea. If you have a strong drive for learning and like to get out and do stuff this is the perfect place for you.

There’s little information available on unschooling in most parts of Africa, Asia, and Central and South America. That doesn’t mean it’s not happening—undoubtedly, there are young autodidacts in every nation, though they may feel alone and not realize they’re part of a worldwide movement. If you live in an area where no one has heard of unschooling, it’s truly up to you to be the bright ray of brave hope. Aleta Shepler’s advice for unschooling teenagers in Venezuela would be well adapted to most of South America and, in fact, to much of the world:

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If you are interested in a traditional book-centered type of education, you will need a lot of money for such an endeavor in Venezuela. There are public libraries, but you may not check out the books. One can use the Internet now but sometimes the phone system doesn't work and in the interior the electricity only works certain hours of the day. However, if you are interested in experiential education, there is a great deal of freedom and opportunity to explore your passion.

Our children have observed Cappachin monkeys in their native environment, interviewed Bolivian women regarding their traditional strategies of family planning, worked with street kids, directed a neighborhood theater group, built a recycling center, studied the impact of subsistence farming on the rainforest, learned to write a proposal, a petition, and make power phone calls, run an import comic book business, learned to ride and train a horse, raised rabbits and dogs, trained a parrot, etc. . . . They have learned a great deal about cross-cultural conflict resolution.

If you learn best with a mentor, there are many possibilities. In the capital city, there are many artisans who can serve as mentors in ceramics, clothing design and construction, carving, painting, etc. With the help of an agent there are opportunities in theater, movies, and commercials . . . In the interior, there are still people who can show you how to build a grass roof, carve a canoe, observe and identify the flora and fauna of the rainforest.

Most of the kinds of activities which are extra-curricular but school-related in the U.S. (such as sports, music, drama, and art) are done in social clubs in Venezuela. For example, our daughter Halee belongs to a horse club and spends every afternoon riding with her Venezuelan friends. Our son Os attends a comic art institute every morning, where he meets with his mentor and shares his work and imported comic books with his fellow learners (ranging in age from 18 to 48).

I would highly recommend that you design your home based educational endeavor around a big problem or question that needs to be solved. Venezuela is a country which is in crisis and it is our family's experience that you can learn most academic subjects and many skills by making the resolution of a social problem the focus of your study. Our children have devoted 85% of their educational budget to social problem-solving expeditions. We believe that this is the true meaning of "public education."

While there are many opportunities and legal freedoms in Venezuela for homeschoolers, it is not always easy. You will have to develop the skills of a detective to sniff out mentors, apprenticeships, and other learning resources. And you will have many well-meaning Venezuelans and expatriates who will try to direct you to traditional schooling. Non-conventional education in Venezuela is for risk-takers, social change agents and the passionate. It is not for followers or the faint of heart.

General Resources

- *Growing Without Schooling* magazine publishes frequent articles on international homeschooling, and lists homeschooling organizations around the world.
- The annual directory issue of *Growing Without Schooling* includes the latest addresses for dozens of international homeschooling organizations.

- Clonlara’s Off-Campus Program. If you are not sure about the laws in your country, or if homeschooling seems to be illegal or semi-legal, or if you’d simply like some long-distance support, enroll with Clonlara. These people are amazing! They provide a legal structure for homeschoolers in twenty countries so far, as well as in all fifty states of the U.S. They are expert at dealing with school officials all over the world, and have even been able to help people homeschool in Germany and Japan. Very few of their client families outside the U.S. are American citizens.
- The Internet. Search for “homeschooling” and you’ll find heaps of information pertaining to many countries.

The Countries

In Appendix D you will find a list of many countries’ largest or broadest organizations, which can put you in touch with smaller groups near you. Almost all of these organizations are run completely by volunteers—sometimes it’s just one dedicated family. So when you write, be sure to include a large self-addressed stamped envelope, and it’s also nice to send a little money to cover costs of photocopying, etc. If no organization is listed for your country, you may be able to find one via the general resources listed above—and no matter where you live, Clonlara can likely help you homeschool legally.

What if your country isn’t listed? I don’t have information about homeschooling everywhere, and I don’t have room here, anyway, to go into detail on all the countries that I do know about. In addition to the countries discussed below, I heard from and about homeschoolers in Bermuda, Brazil, Haiti, Hong Kong, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, and Taiwan. Do your best to find other homeschoolers, or just sniff out the local laws and give it your best shot. Then, write and tell me about your adventures so I can talk about them in another book!

Americans (and others) living abroad

form a large, though dispersed, homeschooling community. *Military* families have practically no problem homeschooling anywhere—even in Germany—and most other expatriates have no problem in most countries. Valerie Bonham Moon, an American military mom in Germany, says that “any military personnel can consult DoD Manual 1342.6-M, and also read UR 10-12.” She is beginning to form a network of military families homeschooling abroad, and you can contact her for information.

Australia

Despite—or because of? —difficult laws in some states and territories, Australia has a thriving, though small, community of homeschoolers who are politically active and alert. Officials and number-people put the total at somewhere between five and twenty thousand among the country’s population of eighteen million. “As in the U.S.,” says Janine Banks of New South Wales, “there are restrictive laws in a couple of states, but many people continue to home educate as they wish. To the best of my knowledge, no-one has ever been jailed for home educating in Australia . . . Most of the general population do not know it is

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a legal alternative to school, and there is a lack of awareness of home education and its advantages. This means there are very few resources specifically for home educators and most of the support literature I have read comes from the U.S. or Britain. We are a growing movement but still in our infancy.”

The worst state is Queensland, where if your parents aren't registered teachers, they're supposed to hire one to teach you or else enroll you in a correspondence school. Yet, at least two hundred homeschooling families—in Brisbane alone—do not comply with these regulations; it seems that most Queensland homeschoolers simply don't bother to notify the authorities, and they get away with it. Eleanor Sparks remarks in her (funny and comprehensive) Web site, “The Education Department seems to be putting a lot of the home schooling issues into the ‘too hard’ basket.” (And anyway, as Eleanor says, “The list of criteria spelled out in the Information Booklet [of Queensland] can be used against the Department. It would be fairly easy to prove that the State schools did not meet the standards set down by the Education Department that home schoolers’ curriculums must meet in order to be approved.”) If you want to unschool yourself in Queensland, you should definitely get in touch with a local homeschooling group, and *not* with the Education Department. At the other end of the Australian legal spectrum is Victoria and the Australian Capital Territories, where the law clearly allows people to homeschool without permission from the Education Department.

In between the heavy-handed laws of Queensland and the cheery freedom of Victoria, the other states and territories at least seem to have more homeschoolers than rules and regulations *about* homeschooling. Jo-Anne Beirne of Homeschoolers Australia Pty Ltd writes in *Growing Without Schooling* #101:

The lack of a national approach to education has been good for homeschooling . . . Because some states do not have a process for certifying that a student has completed high school, access to jobs has not traditionally been predicated on the school examination process, but rather on workplace examinations and interviews.

Belgium

Karen Maxwell runs a small homeschooling discussion group in Brussels. She reports:

Homeschooling is a legal option in Belgium, but it is a fairly well-kept secret. A family who wants to homeschool runs the risk of hearing that it is not legal from a variety of sources that should be reliable. I write a letter to the school inspector of my district once a year from each of my two boys [ages ten and fourteen], stating that I take the responsibility for their education for the coming school year. For the last five years, that has been the extent of my contact with the educational establishment.

As there is no legal restriction on homeschooling, the individual school inspector seems to sometimes feel obligated to “interpret” the law and the reasonable restrictions. I have also known families that had their family allowance stopped, as someone who handled their benefits felt that family allowance was only provided if the children attended school, but in both cases the money was paid after legal proceedings.

All of my community contacts know that I homeschool, and I have not been secretive about it and have had no trouble. It is an option that is used by a very small minority here, and I have no idea what the statistics are. By contrast, in France the option is much better known, although the percentage of homeschoolers may not be much higher than here.

Compared to the U.S.: As I have *no* restrictions to follow, and as we “unschool” rather than following lesson plans, I would say that is the biggest difference from any states that require planned lessons or testing at the end of the school year.

Canada

Each province and territory has its own laws governing homeschooling, and as I write the official count of homeschoolers is about ten thousand. British Columbia has the best legal climate for unschooling, with a vital, warm “deschooling” community; I met dozens of independent, bright unschooling teenagers during speaking trips to Vancouver and Victoria. British Columbians, in fact, are better off than most U.S. citizens. Homeschoolers must register with a public school, through correspondence courses, or with an independent school of their choice. (Some of these independent schools are operated *by* unschoolers.) These institutions receive a small amount of money from the government, based on the number of homeschoolers registered with them, and in turn they provide resources back to their “enrolled” homeschoolers.

Nova Scotia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are pretty good too. Alberta is similar to British Columbia in that homeschoolers are supposed to register with a school board; they can register with any board in the province. Registered Albertans also receive a small amount of cash for learning supplies.

Laws have improved considerably in the past few years in Ontario, so that school boards no longer have much authority over homeschoolers. Each year, Manitobans must register, submit an educational plan, and then submit two progress reports. Quebec is “way down near the bottom of the list” when it comes to a good legal climate, with an ambiguous, indefinite law that allows hostile school boards to cause a bit of pain and suffering. Some families stay underground and choose to have nothing to do with the Commission Scolaire; many others enroll with Clonlara or other long-distance umbrella “schools.” Nevertheless, homeschooling is clearly legal and parents do not need to be certified teachers. Elizabeth Edwards, who publishes a bilingual homeschooling newsletter, writes:

The question of language creates its own problems, as many resources for homeschoolers here in North America are available only to English speaking families. We have the highest rate of drop-outs for Canada and enormous pressure because of our demanding language laws. Our advice to teenagers is to get close to a computer and to not worry. Our unemployment is so high presently that a piece of paper (a degree) is practically worthless. Job finding is an archival term, what we need is business creation. Our system allows for anyone to enter CEGEP [the equivalent of college in the U.S.] by writing a grade 11 equivalency exam. My suggestion is that students prep for that if they are sure they wish to enter the system of college and to by-pass secondary entirely. Of course even CEGEP could be avoided depending on the area of life your interests lie in. I strongly advocate the apprentice system and encourage my kids to look upon their natural talents as the doors of opportunity in life.

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England

Homeschooling is unquestionably legal and well established throughout the U.K. Roland Meighan, director of Education Now, estimates about twenty to twenty-five thousand teenagers, but other homeschooling leaders guess under one thousand. Some people feel it's easier to homeschool in the U.K. than in the U.S.—the regulations are the same throughout the whole country, and therefore easier to communicate and understand. Few people homeschool for religious reasons, so British homeschoolers don't quarrel much among themselves. Formal testing is not required. Homeschoolers do not have to follow the National Curriculum. And homeschoolers *can* take GCSE's and "A" level exams at home.

On the down side, school officials have the right to visit homeschoolers to ensure that their educations are "suitable" to the "age, ability, aptitude, and any special educational need" of the learner, and in a few areas these visits are intrusive and aggressive. It's difficult to attend school part-time in Britain, though on that front the visionary Roland Meighan is working to raise awareness and bring about many improvements. He advocates "Flexischooling," sort of a combination of homeschooling and using schools part time. And, at this point, it may be harder for homeschoolers to gain admittance to universities in England than in the U.S., but homeschoolers *have* been admitted to Cambridge, Oxford, and York Universities.

France

Homeschooling in France is a little-known option, but explicitly legal since 1882. Your family needs only to announce your decision to homeschool two weeks before the new school year starts. You give one declaration to the mayor of your town, and another to the inspector of the regional academy which represents the board of education. The "authorities" may look into a homeschooler's education at ages eight, ten, and twelve, and the academies can require a detailed description of how you plan to reach academic goals. In reality, homeschooling is easier for some families than others. Sophie Haesen, of Alsace, reports:

Very much depends on the regional academy and their former experience with homeschoolers. If they have been dealing with others before, it should be easier for you as they already know that this possibility exists. If you are the first family in your region, they might be inclined to make administrative problems as they themselves do not know too well how to deal with homeschooling. (In France, usually the first reaction to the fact that homeschooling is legal is surprise and disbelief, even with teachers.)

I know of about two hundred families who are homeschooling in France, because they are members of the homeschooling network. How many "independent" homeschoolers there are, I do not know, and it is almost impossible to estimate.

Germany

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The Bad News: Germany is the only nation I know of where homeschooling is definitely illegal. Foreign military families are exempt, but all school-aged Germans and non-military foreigners are required to attend school. A few families have homeschooled and fought hard for their right to do so, but have been so harassed and prosecuted that they eventually fled the country. Valerie Bonham Moon, an American military homeschooling mom, has also heard of families who have had their children obviously leave the country and then quietly return so they could homeschool in secret, but she has not personally known anyone who has done that. Margy Walter reports that another family “managed to keep their kids at home a good part of the year by writing them ‘sick’ for weeks on end, but they were also harassed and had to hide the kids inside from the neighbors, etc. — pretty ghastly.”

The Good News: Clonlara can help even Germans homeschool, through its connections with German alternative schools. And some would-be homeschoolers enjoy the comparative freedom of Waldorf schools, which are numerous and large in Germany.

Ireland

The Irish Constitution says that the family is the main educator, so homeschooling has long been legal and relatively problem-free, and the trend is growing. In *GWS* #84 (1991) Mary Delmage Sheehan writes, “Now that we are starting to organize a homeschooling group, the full extent of homeschooling is becoming apparent and it is clear that it has been going on quietly and successfully for many years . . . The reaction of school-going children to homeschooled children usually seems to be, ‘Lucky thing!’ and the reaction from adults is similar—‘Good idea.’”

Jamaica

In Jamaica, apparently no one restricts homeschooling because officials don’t recognize it as an option, and because there are already many kids who don’t go to school. “There are many children who just don’t go to school mostly for economic reasons,” writes Sally Sherman, an American citizen living with her teenaged son Theo near Ocho Rios. “Many times, they don’t go if they do not have lunch money. And very few go when it rains . . . There are no truant officers.” Schools are also overcrowded and lack supplies. After Theo finished grade school he didn’t go back, and nobody official said anything.

Nevertheless, says Sally, “The social pressure on parents to send their kids to school is tremendous.” Perhaps that pressure, along with lack of awareness about unschooling, explains why, despite the freedom, “Only a few of us take advantage of this incredible opportunity.” Many Jamaican homeschoolers are Rastafarians. As Sally says, “Their religion teaches them what Babylon (the system) does to their children. Also, most schools are insensitive to culture differences (or purposely want everyone to be the same) and require that children keep short hair, though Rastas wear dread locks.” Sally points out several good opportunities for Jamaican unschoolers:

There are lots of accomplished tradespeople here and apprenticeship is a natural occurrence. Most carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and masons need helpers and pay them very little, but it’s easy to

work with someone for a while and then move on.... Also the music industry is big here and there is probably opportunity within that.

Japan

Press stories from Japan offer wake-up stories:

A ninth-grader depressed by school discipline hangs himself. A teacher slams a school gate on a student, crushing her skull. Another teacher beats a student to death on a school outing, just for carrying a hair dryer . . . Typically, children are hit on the head, punched in the face, kicked or beaten with sticks for missing homework deadlines or breaking the rules.⁵

A [fourteen-year-old] teenager who confessed to the brutal murder and beheading of an eleven-year-old acquaintance may have been responsible for earlier attacks on two schoolgirls, police said on Sunday....

While police have not disclosed a motive, a letter sent to a local newspaper ten days after the killing blamed Japan's authoritarian education system. "I am not forgetting revenge for the compulsory education that has produced me as an invisible existence and on the society that has produced this compulsory education," the rambling note read in part....

Residents said on Sunday they were glad there had been an arrest but many voiced concerns about a system that puts so much pressure on students to succeed. "Although the suspect was arrested, the problem remains to be resolved," said Yoshihiro Kubota, 41, a Kobe resident.

"This case exposed the ugly aspect of school life," said Kubota, the father of three schoolchildren in Kobe.

Since the killing, children have been escorted in groups on their way to school and armed with noise emitting devices.

6

Thanks to an incredibly stressful and abusive system, around 180,000 "school refusers" from ages six through fifteen have stopped going to school. Because Japan places such a high value on schooling, these kids suffer greatly, and they have little or no support for their attempts at saving themselves. Dr. Pat Montgomery, director of Clonlara, says:

Last year the suicide rate of young boys hit an all time high . . . When school refusers quit going to school, there are not many places they can go. Their self-esteem sinks to a low because they are disgracing their families . . . I must emphasize that they do not make this decision gleefully; they are usually physically ill leading up to it and afterwards . . . I was shown a hospital in Tokyo where all ten

⁵ "Japan's brutal schools: Discipline fosters culture of violence," by Mari Yamaguchi, Tokyo, Associated Press, March 1994.

⁶ "Japanese Teen Confesses to Beheading," by Noriko Yamaguchi, June 29, 1997, Kobe, Japan, Reuters.

floors held children with school phobia . . . The idea was to rehabilitate them so that they could go back to school.

Fortunately, a few people have responded with compassion, setting up “free schools” to help school refusers meet and learn outside of the system, and the government has basically averted its eyes. This brave beginning has led to interest in homeschooling also.

In 1994, 889 people attended a full day Tokyo symposium on homeschooling featuring Pat Montgomery. And in 1997, Clonlara enrolled 150 families and has even opened a Japanese office in Kyoto, with a Japanese contact teacher, Konomi Shinohara Corbin. This program is adapted for the needs of Japanese homeschoolers, which differ in some ways from those in other countries. “Now is the time for homeschooling to wax,” says Pat, “while its existence is officially ignored by the powers that be. Another case of ‘When the people lead, the leaders follow.’”

Of course, being *allowed* to homeschool is only half the battle in Japan. Whether a homeschooler will grow up and be accepted as an adult member of Japanese society remains to be seen. “There may be a serious risk of not being able to access higher education, or problems getting a job without the Junior High school graduation certificate,” writes Kyoko Aizawa of Otherwise Japan. She reports that the Japanese advisory panel for education recently proposed that school refusers and homeschoolers should be allowed to take an exam in order to receive that certificate, but they would still not be able to say on their résumés that they had actually graduated from junior high school. Kyoko, attorney Sayoko Ishii, and other homeschooling advocates are hoping instead for better legislation that clearly allows and recognizes homeschooling as a worthy path into responsible adulthood, and they feel that equivalency exams are not the answer. In the meantime, Clonlara has some hopeful news:

Several of our Japanese students have graduated with our Clonlara diploma and have entered colleges and universities there—even the renowned Waseda University. So, we have no problems on that score. Others have used their Clonlara credentials to go into the work force or to TV and theatre work.

At this point, some Clonlara students may still have to take Japanese exams to earn their graduation certificates, but at least they can prepare for those exams outside of the school system.

“The legal position of homeschooling is unclear,” says Leslie Barson in *GWS* #106, “and until this is clarified, the present homeschoolers are frightened and cannot join together. Nor can they advertise homeschooling as a choice for Japanese families.” Of course, since compulsory schooling stops at age fifteen, theoretically it’s possible for older teenagers to find some way to take charge of their educations outside the system, but independent learners cannot necessarily expect to be accepted by employers or universities.

The Netherlands

Homeschooling is legal, but not well known; it took one mother almost six years to track down information. In 1988, a homeschooling family won an important court case, partly through proving their

seriousness—they said they'd leave the country if forced to attend school. In *GWS* #102, Liz Meyer Groenveld writes about her seven-year-old daughter:

My worries have always been about the higher grades. Academic standards are very high here; for example, to enter university, one must know not only Dutch but English, German, and French. And in Holland one must have a trade diploma even for work such as flower arranging . . . But reading *GWS* never fails to reassure me that where there's a will, there's a way. I think that as long as we can meet the academic requirements, Lizzy should have no more trouble passing a state exam to enter university here than any transfer student from another country would have. Now that she is . . . quite fluent in English and Dutch, I am working on finding someone to teach her German . . . I plan to ensure that Lizzy can homeschool as long as she wants to . . . I do think people assume that we are doing things very officially, with tutors and textbooks, when in fact we are unschooling. I also ask the school children regularly what they're working on, and in most areas we're way ahead of Lizzy's class despite the minuscule amount of time we set aside for actual lessons.

New Zealand

There are about five to seven thousand homeschoolers in New Zealand. This accounts for more than one percent of the school-age population, so homeschooling is definitely well known and increasingly popular. Your parents do have to fill out some detailed forms, outline how they intend to address various subjects, and then provide annual reports. Homeschooling mom Debbie Bennett says, "I don't think the laws are particularly restrictive. As long as you tell the authorities what they want to hear you can be fairly relaxed in your approach. It's up to the individual really—just as long as you play their game." Homeschooling families receive several hundred dollars each year for educational supplies. Jan Brownlie says, "It is very easy for teenagers to homeschool, especially if you apply for an exemption (from enrollment at school) and emphasize the work experience angle. In fact, if a teenager over fourteen or fifteen can say they have a job, they can leave without applying for an exemption." Jill Whitmore of Auckland notes that:

It is accepted that children may learn informally as well as formally . . . Our own teenagers were able to attend a local school part time during the later part of their home schooling careers; this was by agreement with the principal and teachers. Some other teenage home schoolers that we know of have enjoyed similar arrangements.

The Philippines

Candace Thayer-Coe, the mother of a Canadian/American homeschooling family living in the Philippines, reports that "A Filipino family who has homeschooled one of their sons through high school has told me about the Filipino law on schooling. They said the law is: School is mandatory at seven years old but if your child is not in school there is no punishment enforced. People do tend to ignore the law here."

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But as in many parts of the world, Candace says, “There are not many homeschoolers here because it is socially unacceptable. Who you are here in the Filipino community . . . has a lot to do with where you went or go to school . . . We are considered brave by our peers and fellow employees at Asian Development Bank to courageously keep our children out of any group’s system.”

Norway

Norway had its first national homeschooling conference in 1996. Homeschooling is controversial but legal.

7

Portugal

“Parents here are very dissatisfied with the state of public schools,” writes Gloria Harrison in *GWS* #80 (1991). She knew of no homeschoolers besides her own Portuguese/American family and a few Americans, English, and Canadians.

As far as homeschooling my own children, I have never met with any hassle . . . Portuguese schools . . . function in two shifts. Children go to school mornings only or afternoons only. That means that one always sees children around in the streets, and my children and I don’t stick out like a sore thumb when we go out. No one has ever asked them why they’re not in school . . . My brother-in-law told me that homeschooling in Portugal is not against the law, but he didn’t think many people would do it, because of the stigma attached to it.

Russia

Interest in alternative education is definitely increasing. In *GWS* #97, Natasha Borodachenkova wrote about the experience of homeschooling her young daughter, Natasha. Though the legal system was very rigid at the time (about 1988) and required that all children attend state (public) schools, the headmaster of her school made an exception for Natasha at her mother’s request, with the agreement that she would take exams in some subjects.

South Africa’s

homeschooling movement is alive and kicking. The old government vehemently opposed homeschooling, and the present Parliament is not exactly eager to dispense freedom, either. But with the new, more democratic government, activists have won major improvements—and continue to fight for more. Our star is Kate Durham, who says, “I was your average housewife except that I knew what had to be done and how to do it.” Kate organized an association, helped motivate homeschoolers in other provinces to also organize, and then traveled repeatedly to Cape Town to educate politicians.

⁷ Information from Karl M. Bunday’s Web site, “School is Dead, Learn in Freedom.”

As a result of her work and that of other dedicated people, South Africa now has national legislation which allows homeschooling, though you still have to register and then hope that the government will grant approval. Many families homeschool openly without registering, though, somewhat fortified by a growing public resistance to state interference in private matters. How many homeschoolers? “A guesstimate puts the figure at about 1,300 . . . with the majority underground,” says Kate, “Our association’s membership grew close to one hundred percent in 1996.” The public schools are terrible, and the private schools are expensive, so Kate expects the trend to continue. (Ironically and obnoxiously, the old South African compulsory school laws did not apply to black kids. In a letter to *GWS*, Kate says, “White children especially were herded into schools. It is my personal belief that this was an effective way of perpetuating the myths and fears on which apartheid survived.”)

Spain

The laws are ambiguous, but homeschoolers are pretty much allowed to do as they please; as Bippan Norberg points out, the law “has basically been used to force poor families to bring their kids to school instead of using them as labor.” In one court case a judge condemned 150 such families, but said that the problem was not the lack of schooling, per se—it was a larger issue of neglect and abuse. He said that legal consequences would probably *not* apply to homeschoolers, because “in a case like that, the parents do not let go of their obligations towards their children, but the opposite—they take responsibility for choosing the best educational method.”

As far as Bippan knows, no family has had serious legal problems for homeschooling, and there is a nationwide homeschooling movement of at least a few hundred families. “But we know that a lot more people would do it if it was completely legal,” she says, “Lots don’t even know it is semi-legal. Some families are completely open about it, like we are, and have not had any problems at all . . . Others do it completely in secret and are afraid. From our point of view they are afraid of things that they absolutely have no reason to be afraid of.” Bippan’s family holds national meetings and week-long camps for homeschoolers, and usually about fifty people attend. They also send out an information packet on request.

Bippan’s son, Lomi Szil, fifteen, is one of few teenage homeschoolers in Spain. Most of his friends hate school, but don’t see homeschooling as an alternative since they’ve never had much chance to decide *anything* for themselves. But Lomi says if any Spanish teenagers *do* choose to homeschool, there are plenty of opportunities to take courses and try out all kinds of things. “Even when the rules say that you have to be a certain age or show that you are in school, here in Spain you can always go around the rule. Many courses have an age limit of sixteen or eighteen, but only because there is nobody under that age who *can* take part, since they are all in school.” Despite the lack of unschooling peers, Lomi manages to educate himself with amazing vitality. Among other things, he juggles, contemplates going to circus school, studies Aikido, is a boy scout, plays basketball, and much more:

My father is Hungarian and my mother is Swedish and we live in Spain, so I speak Hungarian, Swedish and Spanish fluently. I also speak some English, as I hear English a lot as my parents speak it with lots

of their friends. We live in a very international town (51 nationalities!), but my friends of my age are all Spanish and go to school.

Do you lay in bed or watch TV all day? is a question I often hear from other teenagers. But I only lay in bed the few hours I sleep and we don't have TV, and even so I don't have enough time to do all the things I want to do!

About a year ago I was interested in radio and wanted to try it out so I took a radio and TV speaker training, and right after that I took a short course in how to make radio programs for young people. Then I took part in a training in rural tourism in this area, where we mostly studied tourism and its impact on nature. These courses were supposedly for adults, but I had no problem participating.

I have always liked vegetarian cooking and I also like to eat! I cook quite a lot at home. A couple of years ago I volunteered at a vegetarian restaurant and I learned a lot . . . A year ago I cooked lunch once a week for the staff at an alternative center.

Once in a while I go with one of my parents to give talks about homeschooling, as I'm one of the very few homeschooled teenagers in Spain at this moment . . . I will be part of the team producing the homeschool newsletter, as I know lots about layout, how to make a newsletter, printing etc. (I started a newsletter in my scout group and also worked with others doing one for an ecology group. Right now I have offered to do the layout for a pamphlet for a new group working against the traditional Spanish torture of animals, bull fighting.)

With the world as it is, there is no other option than to be involved in projects for peace, human rights and ecology. I have mostly concentrated on ecology. I'm a member of big groups like Greenpeace, as well as small local groups, and I participate however I can. For instance, I promote recycling in my scout group, through a battery-collecting campaign. When there are volunteer jobs that need to be done, like a study of coastal contamination or signature collecting, the local ecology groups contact me—unless I'm already involved!

In this part of Spain there are many alternative festivals related to ecology, peace, alternative medicine, crafts, organic food, etc. My mother and I organized the first one in our town last year. It was a big success so we put on another one this year. It's a lot of work to organize such a big event: more than fifty stands, twenty talks, twenty workshops, live music, etc. My mother and I shared all the work, but as I'm not an adult she had to do all the contacts with the town hall and TV stations. But the radio stations phoned to interview me, as they had no idea what age I am!

My mother has been selling her homemade cosmetics at these festivals. I started helping her, and then I got my own organic popcorn stand next to hers. Now I go without her to sell at the festivals, and I'm thinking of starting to make and sell more complicated food. The only problem is that as I'm too young to drive, it's difficult for me to get to the festivals with all the materials.

Recently I got into a project with some others: to start a food co-op, where I hope to work halftime in the future. The dream is to open a vegetarian lunch place next to the food co-op. I already have some experience selling food from wholesale distributors to friends.

Most of these activities are about fifty kilometers from my home, which means that I spend a lot of my time on my bike, on the train, and on the bus.

Sweden

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Homeschooling parents Ywonne and Gunnar Jarl write:

In all of Sweden (an elongated country of nine million heads) only one hundred children are doing homeschooling . . . We were told, and believed, that Sweden was among the worst nations in the world in its intolerance of homeschoolers . . . One year ago we got ourselves a computer and connected to the Internet. Within a few weeks our isolation broke and we discovered we were members of a global community . . . As our knowledge grew we became aware that things are not so bad after all. Swedish laws are in fact much more liberal than many local state regulations in the U.S.A. . . . Since it after some time has become clear to me that grown-ups with kids very often show assent to our ideas, but very rarely take any action, I came to the conclusion that if homeschooling will ever become a well-known opportunity in Sweden some other group of people will have to be the spear heads. Teenagers are made to be spear heads!

According to the Jarls, the School Law states that children aged seven to sixteen must be educated, but can receive permission, one year at a time, to learn via an “adequate alternative.” This “adequate alternative” can include homeschooling, at the discretion of the local municipal committee of education or the board of a private school. The Jarls advise: “Get in touch with Ywonne and Gunnar Jarl. Get yourself a copy of *Hemskola for Nyborjare* by Ywonne and Gunnar Jarl . . . Stand tall—do less!”

Switzerland

Local authorities have some veto power over your choices, and only a tiny handful of people have chosen to homeschool, let alone *unschool*. Essentially, some parts of the country allow homeschooling, and others don't. Homeschooler Marie Heitzmann reports that Ticino is the worst place: “When people from there want to homeschool, I tell them to move.” In the Vaud Canton, where Marie lives, and in Geneva, homeschoolers have to take a fairly simple exam each year. Katherine Hebert, fourteen, an American with dual citizenship, reports that

Homeschooling is not really encouraged in Switzerland and to tell the truth homeschooling is more or less considered by the Swiss and French as something of a hippie movement, associated with high school dropouts and drugs. The only children who are informed of their right to homeschool are those with two or three hours commuting to and from school, where homeschooling is considered to be ‘beneficial’ to their education (implying that in other circumstances it isn't beneficial). Swiss students inquiring into homeschooling have doors slammed in their faces; the people are kept ignorant of the educational possibilities . . .

Yet, homeschooling is legal under Swiss law if you follow the rules . . . These rules restrict homeschoolers and keep them within neat boundaries. I enrolled in Clonlara, which is mainly a school on paper. I have practically nil correspondence with them and am left free to my studies. I have an exceptionally open-minded school district officer, who after a few Sundays over at our home to have tea and cookies, warmed to the homeschooling idea and then gave me full support, offering tutoring, classes at the Swiss school, and great project ideas.

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Ironically, the very rigidity of the school system in Switzerland makes it easy for *teenagers* to homeschool, even without their parents' approval. As in many European countries, the schools are based on a tracking system. Uninterested students finish when they are fourteen or fifteen, and then usually go into apprenticeships. Though this rigid system certainly has its drawbacks—the Swiss suicide rate is the world's second highest, and the apprenticeship track is stigmatized—at least it also provides a loophole through which fed-up teenagers can escape. As Marie points out, “Most Swiss parents would not accept homeschooling, but would have no choice if the kid didn't have the grades to stay in school.”

Venezuela

The good news: school is not compulsory, and the lower classes have a thriving apprenticeship system. The bad news: societal expectations are very, very powerful, and for people who can afford to go to school, it is definitely not considered cool to take charge of your own education. (School is free through eighth grade, but nevertheless, many families cannot afford the necessary books, uniforms, and supplies.) “For an upper class family to decide to educate their children at home, using the apprenticeship model, is unthinkable!” reports Aleta Shepler, a U.S. citizen and mother of three unschoolers. Even so, people's minds can change. Aleta says that Venezuelan acquaintances “were critical of our choice until they saw that Kirsten was able to attend college, Halee was published in a magazine, and Os was accepted to a Venezuelan university art program at age fifteen. Now there are very few open criticisms.”

the guinea pig chapter

This chapter grew stubbornly out of my mailbox.

The book in your hands is spiked all through with stories of unschooled teenagers—where they work, what they think about learning, how they play soccer, which musical instruments they love. But I wanted to describe more of the people who wrote me about their lives, just to assure you they’re real, just to give you a bigger idea of what’s possible. In the next pages, therefore, I throw a party to introduce you to a few dozen of these teenagers, and toss in morsels of *GWS* articles along the way. Each teenager here deserves a whole celebratory chapter to herself, but that’s another book for another year.⁸

Most of the people you’re about to meet study a fairly traditional curriculum, including math, science, literature, history. I do not explain their academics in detail, but most use textbooks for math, and textbooks or library books for other subjects. Many learn from adult friends. Some take courses through junior or community colleges, correspondence schools, or even public high school. Some have parents who are intimately involved with decision making and checking work; others work and make choices independently. Also, they don’t necessarily study a lot of subjects at once—they might read biographies for a few weeks and then spend a month having a Relationship with a microscope.

However, some of the people here do not study *anything* formally. Even these completely “unstructured” teenagers usually find out about “academic” subjects in more depth than schooled teens do; they just don’t do it on predetermined schedules. Most are avid readers, probably because nobody forces them to read.

Tom Adams, twelve, of Pennsylvania, pursues a variety of hobbies—collecting and cataloging stamps and football and baseball cards, collecting rocks, drawing, carving wood, reading mysteries, and playing baseball and football with friends. Eventually, he’d like to go to college and perhaps become a professional baseball player or a lawyer. He points out that living in a university town offers great advantages, since he has access to the university library, cultural events, and “knowledge bank” of professors.

Joseph Anderton, fifteen, of North Carolina, uses textbooks; he tests at two years above grade level. He spends much of his time working with his father, who is a heating and air-conditioning serviceman; he plans to earn a license in this field and maybe also go to college. Also, he plays football with friends and collects baseball cards.

Britt Barker, of Ohio, now a 22-year-old pianist and bush pilot, grew up passionately interested in wildlife and classical music. You can read more about her field biology and travel experience in

⁸ The book is *Real Lives: eleven teenagers who don’t go to school*, and the year was 1993. Among the eleven teenagers are some of the guinea pigs in this chapter: Anne Brosnan, Rebecca Merrion, Erin Roberts, Patrick Meehan, Tabitha Mountjoy, and Kevin Sellstrom, as well as Jeremiah Gingold, who is quoted elsewhere in this book.

Chapter 21 (or in her own booklet, *Letters Home*), but I wanted to mention other aspects of her life here. Unschooled and surrounded by a close farming family of seven, Britt began writing for publication at age twelve with an article for *Mother Earth News* on ponies. Two years later she began selling weekly word-search puzzles to a local newspaper, and wrote a second article for *Mother Earth News* (on dairy goats) at fifteen. An accomplished classical pianist and integral member of the family's farmsteading operation, she decided at age sixteen to spend time away from home in search of new adventures, described in *Letters Home*. In 1986, she was chosen as one of *Teenage* magazine's "one hundred most interesting teenagers in the country."⁹

Britt's mother Penny sent me an update on her other kids. **Maggie**, seventeen, is a dedicated dog musher who keeps thirty dogs—Alaskan huskies and border collies. In Michigan, she conducts pack dog trekking and dogsledding workshops for people ages eleven and up. In a newspaper clipping about a fifty-mile race that she and her dogs won, a sheriff comments, "You could see the joy in her face....She was smiling when she came over the hill and crossed the road."

Other unschooled Barkers are sixteen-year-old **Dan**, "the cellist," fourteen-year-old **Ben**, "the kayaker and boat builder," and twelve-year-old **Jonah**, "the mechanic." "All so different," comments Penny, "It's great fun." All of the Barkers work together to run The Country School, a summer program at their farmstead, where children and teenagers visit for five days at a time, participating in farm activities.¹⁰

Benjamin Israel Billings, sixteen, of Massachusetts, wrote,

I like to fish. I read a lot (Vietnam). I really like my music (progressive rock, classical, mens' choral, new age, folk and some Irish also). One of my favorite things is bike riding (I did 96 miles in an afternoon last summer). I play Dungeons and Dragons. Boy Scout activities are always favorites as well as church activities . . . I am receiving my Eagle Scout in April. I am currently serving as a Junior Assistant Scoutmaster.

Django Bohren, thirteen, of Louisiana, lives "on the road" with his family since his father, Spencer Bohren, is a musician. One fall, for instance, he traveled through Louisiana, Yellowstone Park,

⁹ See Britt Barker, *Letters Home*, and *GWS* #49.

¹⁰ A later Barker update—among many other things:

At 27, Britt continues to play music, write, and fly as a private pilot. She also works as a brakeman on the Wyoming Railroad and runs Suzuki piano studios in both Wyoming and Colorado.

At 22, Maggie has become well known in Europe as well as all over America for her dog sled racing. She also trains dogs for Search and Rescue, teaches other people to train their own border collies for livestock work, and runs dogsledding programs in Michigan and Montana.

At 21, Dan is a cellist with the Missoula (Montana) Symphony and leads outdoor programs. He also attended Oberlin college, where he performed with the Oberlin Chamber Orchestra.

At eighteen, Ben works as a herd-riding cowboy in Montana, and runs canoeing and mountaineering expeditions in Michigan and Montana.

Jonah, at seventeen, has also lived in Montana for a year, where he has his own mechanic's bench in a shop and is saving money for helicopter training.

Washington, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, Michigan, Illinois, and Kentucky. He *did* attend school once for two and a half weeks and enjoyed it, but his unschooled life is full. Constant travel, obviously, exposes him to worlds most teenagers don't get the chance to see.

Anne Brosnan, thirteen, of New York, wrote a lot worth repeating. In her words, I catch glimpses of the unschooler I might have been:

I learn by living and doing. At home we can do anything we want, anytime. Mom doesn't make us do any reading or schoolwork. Kids go to school to learn how to do things, but it wastes a lot of time and you can get by doing whatever it is and learning as you go along. I learned to play piano by playing it. I found out how to read music just from finding the note for middle C on the music and on the piano, and all notes followed. I learned how to read by reading, how to type by typing, etc. It goes on and on, and it's a very simple concept, really . . .

[Anne lists her interests:] classical music, folk, ragtime, early American (classic) jazz, piano, banjo, harmonica and other instruments . . . I pursue the study of music by listening to it and playing it.

Mythology and folklore, legends and beliefs of all cultures, deep ecology, philosophy, the Gaia Hypothesis. (These following people I study and/or admire) Albert Einstein, John Muir, Robert Frost, Charles Dickens, Amos Bronson Alcott, Leonardo Da Vinci, Ludwig Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann C. Bach, Abraham Lincoln, the Tree as a Being.

Nature, ecology, wolves, etc. The Lives and Personalities of Wolves and Whales in Relation to Humans as a Study of Environmental Peace, archaeology, anthropology, genealogy, geography, lexicology, bibliophilism, auto-didacticism. Books such as Charles Dickens', Shakespeare, Scott O'Dell, *Watership Down* (Richard Adams), *My Family and Other Animals* (Gerald Durrell). Fishnetting, knitting, cuckoo clocks, running, basketball, badminton, Famous Homeschoolers, poetry, calligraphy, philately, postcards, animal skeletons, geodes, owls, Carl Larsson, typing, Galapagos Islands, Sierra Club, newsletters, history, simple living, farming, treehouses (for permanent living), vegetarianism, African wildlife, composting, recycling, bicycles, Native Americans, canoeing, camping, and hats. I use no textbooks except one or two workbooks for occasional math, and no correspondence courses.

[Anne explains what she does with her time:] I go to track and basketball practice for a total of about three days a week and games and meets on weekends. That's in the evenings. In the daytimes I practice piano for about 45% of the time (a lot, anyway), write letters, read, knit, practice basketball, track, tennis, etc., do some gardening or composting, make hammocks, clean house, sort books, knead bread, etc. I have a lot of projects going too such as writing articles and cleaning and stamp collecting.

Todd Brown, fifteen, of Virginia, says the greatest advantages of never having gone to school are "choices" and "freedom." From what his friends tell him, school sounds "hostile, barbaric, and monotonous." Todd approaches his many interests from a thoughtful, profound perspective. For instance, he says that *Star Trek* is "an extension of our dreams and a realization of our limitless capabilities." In addition to watching the show, he reads books and attends *Star Trek* conventions. His other major interests are entomology—"I love insects and arthropods of all kinds"—and making electronics devices—"I can't even begin to describe the joy of designing and testing a circuit." Also, he sails, uses a computer, draws, uses a microscope, makes jewelry and models, and reads. Included in his academic

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work is Latin and philosophy. His father teaches him electronics. College? His sights are set on Virginia Tech. He enjoys his Boy Scout troupe and marine biology camp. He is curiously hard on himself for one gap in his “education”: “I hate history although I firmly believe that history will repeat itself if not studied. This is a flaw I am *not* proud of.”

Sharma Buell, sixteen, of Maine, uses no textbooks or tests. “We just sit on the rim of the big melting pot, stirring, throwing stuff in... tasting what looks good.” A free spirit with a thoughtful outlook, she does “a lot of art,” hitchhikes, and thinks constantly. “I’ve learned most things the hard way,” she says, “from actual experience which, I suppose, does the trick—but nothing like a clean, safe textbook with a time limit to ‘learn’ controlled information.”

Becky Cauthen, fourteen, of Georgia, spends her non-academic time playing piano twice a month for a homeschool group and three times weekly for church. A candy striper, girl scout, and member of her church youth group, she helps run a cattle and goat farm, sews some of her own clothes, bakes, and plays guitar. She says she would not consider returning to school: “I would be gone from home for seven hours or more and that’s a lot of time wasted. Now I can take a break from a tough English assignment, go help doctor cows or walk in the woods, or play the piano and come back to my work refreshed.”¹¹

Chelsea Chapman of Alaska is taught by her parents, though not school style. She explains in *GWS* #74:

Let me try to describe our homeschooling. My mother teaches us culture, history, literature and things like that, while Dad teaches us math, chemistry, some history, and physics. We do schoolwork from about 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 or so. Often we don’t do any at all, and we never do it in the afternoon. My Dad works one week and then has the next week off. When he is home, we talk about math and chemistry, and he gives us some problems to work out. Often he just draws us pictures of protons, neurons, etc. to look at and study. Today I wrote short essays on Pythagoras, Archimedes, and Avogadro. Knowing about their lives really helps me remember their respective theorems, principles, and laws.

I love physics and things like that! I have always thought that I was just not a smart enough person to understand these things and that they were deadly dull anyway (something I got from school). But now I have discovered that they aren’t hard or dull or stupid, and I am finally getting over the thought that “hard stuff” isn’t for everyone.

Now, I said my mother teaches us history and literature. We mainly read for history. In fact, we read all the time. My eleven-year-old sister and I will read anything and everything. We are really allowed to study what we choose here. In fact, it reminds me of Summerhill school sometimes. I love poetry and read masses of Blake, my favorite. Shakespeare is all right; I like *The Tempest* best. In contrast, I have been reading DOS (Disk Operating Systems) and doing a lot on our computer. We really just work on

¹¹ Several years later, Becky’s mother wrote to *GWS*: “I am happy . . . for the opportunity to affirm homeschooling, especially organic, unstructured, interest-directed styles of learning. We had no grades, diploma, etc. but merely wrote descriptions of Becky’s character, how she learned, areas of interests, etc. This, along with proof of the GED, SAT scores, and applications, was sent to three colleges (two state and one private) and [Rebecca] was accepted and awarded scholarships in piano at all three. She is now attending Shorter College in Rome, Georgia, and is doing well.”

what we are interested in. Often schoolwork is nonexistent, like when there are more important things to do like going to watch the start of the great “Yukon Quest” dog sled race!

I’m going to be a naturalist/writer/artist/poet when I grow up. These all, I think, can be combined.

Alex Clemens was thirteen when his mother wrote to *GWS* #16,

Alex now programs the Apple II, works at the hardware store, helps our Supervisor at city hall, takes math from his former public school math teacher, writes journal and book reports for me, passed his karate green belt in June, and cooks his own meals.

Christopher DeRoos wrote to *GWS* #32 when he was sixteen,

Two years ago . . . my mother started taking me to sit in on college courses. I am at Holy Names College in Oakland [California], where a friend also attends. He started there when he was fifteen . . . I am in computer sciences and economics. I’m going to be taking an auto engineering class . . . I am serving on a Planning Commission—Sign Committee, reviewing the Alameda County sign ordinances . . .

My motto is from *Auntie Mame*, “Life’s a banquet and most of you poor suckers are starving to death.” Being home taught has been the best!

Jonas Diener, thirteen, of Virginia, studies nothing formally. Instead, he spends his time biking, reading what he wants to read, working on a computer, and playing around with electronic things—“lights and wires and stuff.”

Katrina Fallick, fourteen, of Washington, is interested in ecology action, fashion design and merchandising, and sociology. “Ecology action” means she plants trees and reads a lot to find out what else needs to be done. To pursue her interest in fashion, she investigates clothing stores and then designs and sews clothing which she predicts will fit the next trend. Also, she works on a steering committee which organizes a local homeschool fair (she helped to film a commercial for the fair), reads, hikes, writes to pen pals and—oh yes—studies academic things like math and history. She plans to take the GED at sixteen, so that she can take college classes. However, she emphasizes that she will go to college for “knowledge, not a diploma,” and that she will “take whatever classes [she needs] at whatever college has the best program for what [she wants] to learn.”

Katrina’s mom Jj later sent me the following update:

She is in Spokane attending a high school level vocational program in fashion merchandising—living with friends and “home schooling” for her regular subjects. At fourteen, she is enrolled as a high school junior . . . it will give her entry-level job skills at fifteen and she hopes to get a job at sixteen, take a few classes at the junior college and begin a career in fashion design . . . making her own designs.

Zachary Field, fifteen, Maine, plans to become a professional juggler soon, and practices for well over an hour each day. He says his academic studies are “very informal.” Like many unschoolers, when he first quit school five years ago, he and his family attempted to set up a fairly rigid home

program, which later grew very unstructured. His interests include extensive reading, riding his unicycle, and spending time with his friends, most of whom are fellow jugglers.

Benjamin Flagel, twelve, Maryland, belongs to two 4-H clubs, reads a lot, plays baseball, basketball, and soccer, keeps a garden, and collects butterflies and baseball cards.

Nicole Flores, of California, wrote in *GWS* #52,

I dropped out of high school when I was fifteen and in the ninth grade. My mom and her boyfriend made it legally possible by turning our home into a private school.

It's great. They've been providing me with resource materials and three years later I've become interested in subjects I would have shrieked about if I was still in high school. I'm writing science fiction stories, reading physics, and most importantly I've learned how to think for myself and make my own decisions. Basically, the freedom I lacked in school has enabled me to grow up.

Elise Foxton, fifteen, of Washington, is enrolled in both a general homeschooling correspondence program and also in an algebra course through the University of Nebraska. She echoes most of the homeschoolers I heard from: "You have more time to do things not related to school. I ride the horses I take care of while other kids are still in school." Last year she started successfully showing her two horses, and she takes weekly riding lessons.

Theo Giesy, of Virginia, was one of the first homeschooling *moms* in the seventies. Her grade-school-aged kids kept asking if they could stay home from school, pointing out that they got more of an education at home. Theo took them seriously and took them out, though at the time she had no assurance that it would work out legally. All four of her kids started taking ballet, and Theo recalls their experiences in *GWS* #58, ten years after they'd started. By that time, her kids were fourteen, eighteen, twenty, and twenty-two. Theo writes:

Shortly after she started taking ballet, **Danile** [the eldest] began to be interested in a career in dance. When she was thirteen, she started performing with a small modern dance group that performed in schools. She has been performing with similar groups ever since. She got her own apartment before she was eighteen, since she was dancing with a group based in Williamsburg, forty miles from our house. When she was eighteen she told us that she didn't need our financial support any more and that she would tell us if she needed help. Besides dancing she teaches ballet and jazz classes. She has never felt the need for a diploma. When filling out the "school attended" slot in job applications she writes Brook school, grade completed: twelfth.

Darrin also took ballet, and since he was not in school he could watch rehearsals and help by running the tape recorder. That led him into theater technical work. He kept taking ballet but was more interested in tech work as a career. He went to Antioch College for two years [beginning at seventeen], and during that time he began to think that he did want to dance. He left college and spent the past year studying at Boston Ballet. He recently signed a contract with Nevada Dance Theater for next year.

Susie enjoyed ballet but never planned to be a ballerina. She has considered musical theater and modeling. She has worked in the groups that Danile worked in, both as a dancer and as a tech person.

Now she is dancing in a lounge. Next year she and Danile will both dance with a group that performs in schools and for other community groups. She doesn't know what she wants to do beyond that.

Anita is writing poems, a teenage romance, and moving notes to friends and family. She babysits for ten families, though she is cutting back to have time for other things. She makes beautiful earrings which she gives to special friends and occasionally sells. Had she been in school, I'm sure she would have been labeled "learning disabled" because she was a late reader . . .

It has been wonderful to watch all four children grow, learn and develop with no curriculum, no artificial schedules and no comparison with "the norm."

At eighteen, Anita took a year-long road trip around the U.S. When she came through Eugene and stayed with me, she told me more about the Giesys' lives. As a teenager, Anita developed a very strong interest in children, and held several long term daytime babysitting jobs with different families. Also, she was involved in 4-H, worked as a counselor for 4-H camps, taught workshops in earring making, did technical work for dance productions, and lobbied against a law requiring parental consent for minors' abortions.

Danile, 25, continued to dance with the company Ballet Tidewater and to teach ballet as well as jazz and character dance. Also, she performed as a "heartbreak dancer," doing fifties style rock 'n roll dancing. Darrin, 23, danced as an apprentice with the Ballet Met of Columbus, Ohio, and considered auditioning for other dance companies or going back to college. He had also been a volunteer fireman and an EMT. Susie, 21, had just returned from six months of traveling on her own in Europe. Before that, she danced with Ballet Tidewater and taught ballet to inner-city kids.

Darlene Graham of Texas wrote in *GWS #37* about her sons **Grant** and **Graham**,

Grant is seventeen now and works as a carpenter while preparing to take his G.E.D. test. Graham, fourteen, has taken a breather from his violin lessons . . . He does quite a lot of auto repair with my husband, and is becoming very skilled and responsible. At his age, he loves anything to do with cars, and never complains about unloading livestock feed since it involves driving to the barn, backing up, etc., and maybe going once or twice up and down the driveway for good measure.

Ashia Gustafson, thirteen, of Washington, is extremely involved in dance, and is in fact considering a dance career. Currently, she studies ballet, jazz, tap, and modern dance. Also, she pursues a fairly "traditional" academic program through the Calvert School, a correspondence school. She plans to attend college, and considers her academic knowledge and skills more well rounded, and generally higher, than that of her schooled peers.

Andrea Harrison, of England, became a member of Ludlow Orchestra at age sixteen. *GWS #15* reports:

She plans to go on to Dartington to study music when she is eighteen. Until recently she has run a small business from one of the buildings [at home]. She obtained organic whole wheat from a neighbor friend, made bread and sold it from her little shop, but has now found that the demands were too great

on her energy and time for her to do justice to her musical study. Some days this can be in the region of eight to ten hours of intensive study.

Gordon Hubbell, fifteen, of California, is a new unschooler studying Russian, English, and math. He spends as much time as possible skiing and mountain biking. He participates in ski races, reads books on ski technique, and skis “the Extreme” frequently. “With mountain biking,” he explains, “I ride eighteen miles everyday at a high cadence through varying terrain.”

Jud Jerome, rather famous poet, essayist, playwright, etc., wrote way back in *GWS* #1 about his daughter, from age twelve onward:

To avoid the law [in the early seventies] we enrolled her in a ‘free’ school in Spokane, Washington, run by a friend who carried her on the rolls, though she has not yet, to date, seen that city or that school. She spent most of the first year here at the farm, pitching in as an adult, learning from experience as we were all learning. While she was still thirteen we went to help another commune, in northern Vermont, with sugaring, and she loved that place—which was very primitive and used horse-drawn equipment—so asked to stay. This was an agreeable arrangement on all sides—and she has lived there now for over five years, except for one, when she was sixteen. That year she and her mate (ten years her senior) went to Iceland (Vermont was not rugged enough for them) to winter, working in a fish cannery. The next Spring they traveled, camping, to Scandinavia, hiked the Alps, then flew home—coming back with \$3,000 more than they left with after a year abroad. Last year, she wanted to apply for a government vocational program, for which she needed a high school diploma, so went to an adult education class for a few months, and took the test, passing in the top percentile (and being offered scholarships to various colleges). She “graduated” earlier than her classmates who stayed in school. I think her case illustrates especially dramatically the waste of time in schools. She is by no means a studious type, would never think of herself as an intellectual, has always been more interested in milking cows and hoeing vegetables and driving teams of horses than in books, and in her years between thirteen and eighteen moved comfortably into womanhood and acquired a vast number of skills, had a vast range of experiences in the adult world, yet managed to qualify exceptionally by academic standards. By comparison, her classmates who stayed in school are in many ways stunted in mind, emotionally disturbed, without significant goals or sound values in their lives—in large part (in my judgment) specifically because of their schooling.

Clarissa Johnston, fourteen, of Georgia, who has been out of school for five and a half years, takes gymnastics four days a week. She studies most academic subjects using textbooks, but also attends a Spanish class at a high school and studies nature on her own. In addition to her fairly rigorous academic coursework and intense involvement with gymnastics, she appreciates the time she has (after chores) to be with friends, spend time outside, and read. She has already decided on a college, and hopes to become a botanist or P.E. teacher.

Vanessa Keith, now 21, of New Hampshire, never went to school. She never studied much, either, except algebra when she was eighteen, and some Montessori-style reading, writing, and math around the ages of six and seven. Neighbors gave her occasional lessons in typing, French, math, and

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writing. Mostly, she followed her interests in crafts, weaving, and sewing. At eighteen she took the GED, her first test ever, without studying, and passed. Growing up, she spent four months of every year at work, picking apples and pruning apple trees with her parents.

John Keller, nineteen, of Minnesota, is currently a freshman at Carleton College. As a teenager, he learned under the guidance of his parents, who work with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He grew up living in Vietnam, Cambodia, and France as well as the U.S.; last year he spent five weeks traveling with his father in Europe. A potential French, English, or political science major, John is an Eagle Scout, a Boundary Waters canoe guide, and hockey player. He comments:

In the eighth and ninth grades I used a prepared curriculum. Once we realized we could do a better job on our own, we bought texts and other materials, and planned grades 10 through 12 independently.

Now that I am in college, I am more sure that I was prepared for it as well as anyone else. Also, I feel that I am a stronger individualist because of home schooling, and am less likely to just go with the flow of popular opinion on campus.

Socialization was never a big worry for me, but all the same it is reassuring to see that I have made many good friends, that I feel comfortable participating in classes and discussions, and am involved in extra-curricular activities.

Suzanne Klemp, fifteen, of Wisconsin, has been out of school four years. “It was my idea,” she writes, “because I didn’t like the negative environment in public school, and because my teachers stifled my creativity.” She studies algebra, English, biology, history, and other subjects using textbooks, but also focuses heavily on ballet; she takes classes *and* teaches classes at the YMCA. She has put together a youth group for teenagers within her local home-educators’ group, and attends a church youth group. She plans to go to college and also hopes to get into a ballet company.

Hanna Lee, thirteen, of New York, rides her horse a lot and skates every Tuesday at an arena. She plans to go to Skidmore College to become a horse trainer.

Jason Lescalleet, fourteen, of Ohio, researches whatever seems interesting, programs his computer, reads a lot, and also uses textbooks and works problems. (For science, he uses the same texts his mother teaches with at Ohio State University.) He draws and reads “spacey, futuristic, high-tech things.” He plays the violin, and advises beginning unschoolers, “If the school sends you a curriculum guide, ignore it.” He plans to attend college and says, “I will definitely get into computers, maybe write video games that will make Nintendo turn as green as a John Deere Tractor.”

Jessin Lui, thirteen, of Maryland, enjoys working closely with her mother in her studies of science, history, social studies, math, literature, and composition. Although she has never been to school, she is aware that without it, she has “extra time on [her] hands” for not only being with friends but also involving herself in interests like drama, singing, piano, ice and roller skating, and swimming. She plans to go to a university, and enjoys trips to the symphony, museums, and many different plays. Also, she says, “Sometimes we travel for long periods during the school year. We’re usually not in a rush to come back.”

Rebecca McGuire, fourteen, of Alaska, enjoys picking berries, making jam, gardening, cooking, sewing, biking, and boating. She appreciates the extra time no school gives her for being outdoors.

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Rosemary McGuire, thirteen, also of Alaska, says that she is able to learn things like cooking, violin, piano, painting, and embroidery since “I have so much more spare time because I do not have to do any useless, boring, repetitive worksheets.” She helps in the barn, garden, and house. Also, she enjoys drawing, swimming in the ocean, bird and animal watching, biking, skiing, canoeing, and hiking. She plans to go to college and to write.

Amanda McPherson, sixteen, of California, practices piano, cares for her rose bushes, reads her Bible, and arranges flowers. Her academic work includes all the “usual” plus music theory, and German and computer literacy at a junior college. (Last year she took algebra and biology through the junior college.)

Jesse McPherson, fourteen, of California, spends most of his time riding his bike, for which he belongs to a racing club/team. Also, he plays violin at least one hour every day, backpacks frequently in the Sierra, works part time, attends church, does chores, swims, and plays pool and basketball with his friends. (Part of his academic work includes Spanish and algebra at a junior college.)

Joel Maurer, thirteen, California, studies only math in a formal sense. Aside from that, he says, to learn, “first you have to be interested in something. The rest is easy. If you really like something you just track it down and soak it in like a sponge.” In contrast, he recalls that in school he once “had a teacher that ran a classroom like a jail. Eventually I gave up and stopped turning in work.” Skateboarding claims a big chunk of his time, and he insists emphatically that “homeschoolers have a better sense of humor than ‘schooled’ people.”

Patrick Meehan, fourteen, of Florida, is thoroughly enthusiastic about this past year—his first out of school. Designated “profoundly gifted” by the school system, Patrick had desperately wanted to quit school since the fourth grade, and finally had a chance to do so this year. “I was frustrated,” he writes, “by the poor attitude of the students toward learning/school, the low caliber of most of the teachers, the cruelty of the students toward each other, and intolerance of differences. Many teachers seemed to dislike students who asked questions.” He reports that the greatest advantage of unschooling is “Time, time, time. I have my life back for my own use.” What does he do with all that time? “I read a great deal,” he says, “I draw, I create graphic art on my computer, I take time to *think*. This is the MOST important: thinking! We go to museums, art shows, travel... We watch a lot of documentaries... I help in the yard and sometimes in the house. I am learning to cook. I do sculpture. I take music lessons and practice.”

Several months after I heard from Patrick, his mother Gwen sent an update:

The projects he has undertaken have been very real, professional quality undertakings. He has just completed an amazing portfolio of his work which was mailed out to a video game company for consideration . . .

The portfolio took great planning, hours and hours of drawing (there are over 63 individual drawings of varying complexity which took anywhere from an hour to three or more hours to design and execute). He then wrote all the descriptions of the games and the characters, a cover letter and the copyright paperwork. It took several months to complete and he worked so hard.

Gwen reports that Patrick, who began his first music lessons less than a year ago, is also learning to compose music, taking a class and using a keyboard synthesizer: “Pat puts in hours and hours a week practicing and composing. He could never have made such strides trying to fit lessons and back-up and creating into the few moments at his disposal were he being crushed under the traditional school burden! A whole, new level of accomplishment for him.”¹²

Rebecca Merrion, thirteen, of Indiana, has never been to school. She says one of the greatest advantages of unschooling is the opportunity to travel “whenever you want;” she looks forward to a trip to Haiti during this “school” year. She does “academics” through reading and talking, and also works on her garden, takes two ballet lessons each week, and swims. She wants to become a photographer and travel to the outback of Australia.

Cathy Moellers, seventeen, of Iowa, has been taking gymnastics for eight years. She sews, hand-quilts, plays the piano, and works with cattle on her family’s farm. She has been president of her 4-H club for the past two years and belongs to wildlife and gun safety clubs. Her goals for her adult life include living on a farm, having a sewing business, and raising a family.

Ariel Mortensen, fifteen, of Washington, has been out of school for four and a half years. After academics, she pursues a wide range of artistic interests. She “draws a lot,” takes two two-hour ballet classes each week, and two piano lessons each month. A major focus of her life is costume design—she sews and designs costumes on her own and for a local theater. She plans to go to an art college in Seattle.

Tabitha Mountjoy, fourteen, of Missouri, writes,

I have three horses, two that I am training. I also like to play hackeysack, swim and ballroom dance. I was on our town’s swim team last summer and plan to be a lifeguard this coming summer. With hackeysack and ballroom dance I go through the Communiversity. It is mainly for older people but they are usually very open minded toward young people.

Helen Payne, thirteen, Virginia, uses six textbooks and spends quite a bit of time on academics. She appreciates the extra time she has for taking six different dance classes, playing on a soccer team, babysitting, and reading. She feels that learning outside of school is more effective because she is not pressured to learn.

Janet Petsche, thirteen, Minnesota, also follows an extensive academic program overseen by her mother. With her extra time (after chores) she enjoys reading, embroidery, fishing, and canoeing.

Aurelia Rector, twelve, Arizona, learns math, English, science, geography, and history “by example, by reading, paying attention, wanting to learn, being curious, working, and just living!” No textbooks, thank you. Very involved in the arts, she takes two ballet classes weekly, sings all over the

¹² See Pat’s essay in *Real Lives*, in which he discusses his further progress toward his goal of designing video games. At age seventeen, Pat went on to become SEGA’s first intern, working on the game Sonic Spinball. Still seventeen, he was hired by a TV producer to work on an animated children’s program, and did all the character development, background design, and animation for the program. His next endeavor was to enroll in an innovative new school for game designers in Vancouver, British Columbia, from which he recently graduated. In *GWS #99*, his mother Gwen comments, “I think that so much of what has materialized for Patrick is the direct result of his absolutely single-minded concentration and his conviction that he *is* a video game designer who knows how to design a successful game, and that he can convince employers of this. At no point has he thought of himself as *becoming* a game designer; he has always *been* one.”

country with a performing group called Kids Alive, and acts in a community theater. She considers her academic knowledge and skills higher than that of people in school, and admits to having a reputation of “being smart.”

Kacey Reynolds, sixteen, of North Carolina, spent seventh through ninth grades out of school. She went back to public school for tenth grade to see if she was “keeping up,” and was placed in several advanced classes and invited into the National Honor Society. She finished the year with a straight-A average and says, “I account this to my homeschool experience.” Being out of school gave her time to focus on her main academic interest—history—and on her love of acting. She’s taken several acting courses at a local theater, and has been in two plays and a promotional commercial for a TV station. She hopes to go to college for a BFA in Theater Arts, and also plays the violin.

Jean Rezac, thirteen, of Massachusetts, is one of the free spirits who informed me that she doesn’t “study,” although she considers her academic skills and knowledge as well rounded and otherwise equal to that of her schooled peers. She says she learns “by whatever I do during the course of the day.” She is very interested in horses and works on a horse farm.

Jeff Richardson, fourteen, Oklahoma, draws and skateboards, with the goal of becoming a pro skater.

Debra Roberts, fifteen, of Oklahoma, takes pride in the variety of household skills she is comfortable with that “most schoolgoers do not learn until on their own.” “I can sew and do household work,” she says, “I know how to change a baby’s diaper and rinse it out, and I know how to handle a houseful of kids.” Also, her responsibilities include washing lots of dishes, and caring for a hundred chickens, two turkeys, and nine goats. Her scores on the Iowa Achievement Test recently showed that she was working academically at the eleventh grade level overall. She often goes to work with her father, where she is training to become an electrician. Some possibilities for college—if she decides to go—include library science, sign language, and veterinary science.

Erin Roberts, fourteen, Maryland, is focused in several directions. She uses textbooks some months and other months “just pick[s] up something here and there.” She plans to go to college and despite her loose academic schedule, she figures she’s a bit ahead of her schooled peers academically in everything except possibly math. An avid reader, she consumes mysteries, science fiction, animal stories, sports stories, classics, novels, “just plain anything.” She lives on a farm and keeps busy with the animals.

Jennifer Ryan, thirteen, Minnesota, uses texts for math, computer, and history, and learns science, piano, and writing “by doing them.” She loves to read and write, bake, play sports, act, sew and do crafts, and garden.

Michael Scott, twelve, of Georgia, supplements his academic program by using and programming a computer, “building things,” and biking. He says that his freedom to explore robotics and computers has led him to become greatly interested in these fields, enough that he wants to become an engineer or programmer. He is lucky to enjoy a variety of equipment at home, including tools, a computer, a lab quality microscope, a sewing machine, and lots of books.

Kevin Sellstrom, fourteen, California, volunteers at a school for the mentally impaired and takes piano lessons. His academic work includes math, history, English, and science. As a Boy Scout, he works as a den chief, assisting a group of first- through fourth-graders. In his own troop, he is a Senior Patrol Leader responsible for planning activities. Mechanically inclined, he rides and repairs bikes. He writes:

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I am relatively experienced in repairing gasoline engines on cars, as well as bicycles, tractors, and other mechanical equipment. I learned these skills by watching my dad and other people when they repaired machinery. I like to build power supplies and other electronic and electrical devices that may or may not have particular uses.

In earning my amateur radio license, I had to learn to send and receive Morse Code as well as electronic theory and on-the-air operating techniques. As an amateur, I participate in radio nets as well as talk to other amateurs in person. My dad earned his amateur radio license in the 1950's and still has it and has taught me much of the electrical and electronic theory that I know. He earned his license when he was fifteen and I earned mine at the age of thirteen.

Christin Severini, thirteen, of North Carolina, says,

I dance at a ballet school nearby. I am also in the company. I care for and help animals by not eating them or wearing them; being friendly, kind, and helpful to the animals I come across; and also by being a member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I also make a lot of different crafts at home. Some of them are: dolls, clothes for myself, friendship bracelets, baskets, and cards for special occasions—birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, etc. etc.

Michael Severini, fifteen, also of North Carolina, enjoys karate, woodworking, airplane flying, and ham radio. "I go to a karate school nearby six days a week," he writes, "and I sometimes compete in tournaments. I take flying lessons at a nearby airport and I do Ham Radio at home." Michael plans to earn a black belt and to become a commercial airline pilot.

Mae Rose Shell, thirteen, of Vermont, has never been to school and seems to be a particularly relaxed, healthy person with a wise outlook on life. She spends a great deal of time outdoors—swimming, biking, gardening, cross country skiing, ice skating. She loves to read because "it opens a whole world" to her. From books, parents, friends, and everyday situations, she learns math, geography, history, and spelling. Her "learning" is not structured; she is free to do as she likes all the time. "I ask questions," she says, "I read books." About her future, she says she'll probably take college courses in the event that there's a specific subject she wants to learn more about. She wants to be a mother and a writer, and considers herself very "in tune with nature."

Matt Snead, twelve, of Georgia, plays on basketball, tennis, baseball, and soccer teams. Also, he plays the piano and sings in choirs. He wants to attend college and become a pediatrician.

Anthony Stabile-Knowles, thirteen, of California, learns by completely choosing his activities, books, and interests. "No coercion, rewards, or force are used, no set 'school' schedule." He has never used textbooks or "courses," but reads a lot, especially in the areas that interest him most: geography, U.S. history, science, astronomy, art. He also likes aircraft, watching the news, discussing current affairs, drawing, and designing games. "I read a lot and study a little."

Colleen Stevens, fifteen, of California, was out of school from fifth to eighth grades, although she is now in school. She worked as a volunteer both at a "living history" historical site and at an animal museum.

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Patricia Young wrote to *GWS* #25 after fourteen years of homeschooling her children,

Our youngest is now in college in an honors program having received a scholarship from Interlochen Arts Academy for her last year of high school, graduating with honors. Three are currently doing honors work in college. Older ones have become: a lawyer, nurse, legal assistant, computer company executive, medical secretary. None had the least difficulty going on to the school of their choice. Our oldest daughter now teaches her four children at home.

And an anonymous teenager from California wrote in *GWS* #20,

Almost four months ago, I took the California High School Proficiency test which is equivalent to being a high school graduate. I am now a fifteen-year-old high school graduate. I am going to Los Angeles Valley Junior College—I couldn't afford to go to a university. I go at night and work part-time in the mornings as a tutor for retarded teenagers . . . In the afternoon, I tutor first and second graders at the local elementary school. Each job pays \$300 a month . . . I'm still living at home and probably will for a while . . . I'm still doing some writing, The Santa Monica *Evening Outlook* printed a short story I wrote, and another will be in my college's pamphlet on how to write, for which I am being paid \$50.

What you can do with all the examples in this chapter

1. *Be inspired and emboldened, but not limited.* Pursue *your* dreams; don't try to duplicate someone else's life. If there's something you've dreamed of doing in "the future," dream of doing it now.

2. *Don't you dare be intimidated.*

Do some of the people I just described sound more mature than you? If they are, it's not programmed in their genes; it's just a side-effect of unschooling. It will happen to you too.

Do the people I just described sound more "gifted" than you?

One thing that unschooled teenagers and their parents have continually emphasized to me is that they do *not* consider themselves gifted or otherwise inherently different from other people. And they're not, except in one important sense—they're gifted with time and trust. If you are quitting school, these gifts can be yours too. With them, anyone can develop expertise and a wide range of happy interests. (Many unschoolers spent disastrous, unpromising years in school before they bloomed outside of school.) Of all the points I want to make in this book, this is one of the most important. Let me quote a few people on the subject:

Bonnie Sellstrom, whose son Kevin is described above, wrote me, "I should emphasize that our boys are not gifted. They simply have a curiosity about life and living that we have not tried to squelch. When a question is asked we try to find an answer to meet their needs."

Chapter 26 admires Ishmael and Vita Wallace, talented young musicians. Their mother Nancy wrote a wonderful book called *Better Than School*. In a review, John Holt said:

Many school people [say] that home schooling parents like the Wallaces, taking their talented children out of the schools, leave them [the schools] to struggle along with the less talented . . . The answer, as I said in the introduction to the book, is that it is as sure as anything can be that neither Ishmael nor Vita

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would have been stars in school. Not only would they have done very badly in most school subjects, but they would almost certainly have had all kinds of damaging psychological labels stuck on them—Learning Disabled, Psychologically Disturbed, the whole disgusting package. The school would have seen them not as assets, only as problems, and would probably have convinced them that they were nothing but problems.

Indeed, Nancy reports in *Better Than School* that before she took Ishmael out of school, his first grade teacher had this to say:

Ishmael does seem to have a problem with listening skills . . . I've been playing a record that gives the children instructions on how to follow specific directions, and Ishmael invariably gets lost. His hearing appears to be normal, so I'm just not sure what to do. He also has a problem grasping "whole concepts." For example, if I read the class a paragraph, he can't tell me the main idea. He gets too involved with all the little details. I'm thinking that maybe we should have Ishmael tested, just in case we discover some kind of developmental problem. Then we can send him to the resource room for, say, ten minutes a day, so they can help him.

Maria Holt tells in *GWS #35* about the time the education department officials came to visit her family's homeschooling operation. They were impressed, and Maria reports, "One of them said to me as they took their leave of us, 'You have unusual children.' I returned, 'That is where you make your worst mistake.' And I meant it. Our children are 'average.' There is not a genius among them."

"What amazes me," writes Penny Barker in *GWS* about her kids,

Is that these are not "gifted" children—they spend most of their time doing what they want to do (after chores, that is). In the winter we do structured studies for a couple of hours each morning but that's about it. Most of their learning is completely spontaneous. As I write, Maggie and Britt stopped by the orchard (where I'm typing) to tell me they are going off to the woods to look for a doe Britt spotted this morning and to spot birds and record their calls on paper . . . I could go on and on about my average kids and their wonderful growth. It seems they have simply more time to grow and develop than other children I know who have probably more potential but so much less time to realize it because they are always stuck away in a school building.

3. On the other hand, don't underestimate.

Don't dismiss this list of multifaceted teenagers by saying, "Yeah, well, I take dance classes too, and I go to school." Naturally, just because you go to school doesn't mean you can't also do other things. But the question of time and energy is a big question. People who both go to school *and* want to focus on outside interests essentially have several choices:

1) Skimp on homework time, turning in work which does not reflect their full abilities. End up feeling guilty and humiliated.

- 2) Treat their personal interests as secondary, devoting only a few hours each week to them, or pushing them into weekends and vacations.
- 3) Sacrifice time they'd like to spend with friends.
- 4) Sacrifice time spent with their families.
- 5) Sacrifice sleep or relaxation time. Get stressed.
- 6) Take “easy” school classes which do not require homework (and which may be boring, and which will not impress admissions officers of selective colleges).
- 7) Be born genetically engineered to calculate differential equations in seconds and to carry on a meaningful conversation while rewriting a sonnet.

In other words: if you already live an amazing life with school, you can live an even more amazing and far more relaxed life without it.

Joshua, our last heroic guinea pig in this chapter

Joshua Smith, now busy in college, wrote me a most delightful letter about his experience with quitting school. It made me smile all day. If only I'd read it when I was twelve! In part, it says:

It started about two and a half years ago . . . at the time I was attending what is known as a “magnet” school—a school designed for “advanced” students. During a period in late fall of my junior year, with upcoming exams I found myself stressed out beyond belief. It was not because of the subject content but because of the bulk amount of work assigned. There was essentially no time left for regular life outside of school. I would come home from school worn out and disgusted. Like any other student I would always look forward to Fridays as if they were a blessing from some divine being.

One particularly disgusting week essentially became the catalyst for the dramatic change over in educational methods. Arriving home one Friday I flopped down on the couch and after a few minutes announced my intentions to my mom. She had just recently pulled my sister, now ten, out of school . . . and so was supportive. It wasn't until she had removed my sister from school that I realized that there was an alternative.

Always being one not afraid to challenge the system I marched into school the following Monday and resigned. And oh did that cause a stink with the officials. My guidance counselor insisted that if I dropped out I essentially was through with my education. (School is not the only place we learn things; there is that small thing known as life.) No matter how much I explained the situation there was no recognition from her or from my ex principal. Oh well, no real big surprises there. The big surprise came when I explained it to my teachers—they were supportive of the idea. And my classmates? Most of them did not know what was happening until it was over for I literally breezed through school that day. The ones I call my friends all exhibited either acceptance, admiration, or envy . . .

I left school early that day and walked into the record of becoming the first official “drop out” of Hume Fogg Academic High School. That is a day I shan't forget in a long, long time.

Over the next week I got an offer from the school board of Nashville to return to the school system but to a different school (rather than the one that I went to and rather than the one I was zoned for, where violence [and teen pregnancy were] common). I was offered a school all the way across town

with transportation. They were willing to break zoning restrictions just to keep me in the school system.

Needless to say I thumbed my nose at them and never regretted the decision. Hume Fogg had marked the eighth school I had been in and I was ready for a change.

Over the next year and a half I worked, studied, traveled. I went back to my home country, Canada, to visit a friend, went to Florida, East Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Over this time I developed an intense interest in photography and psychology. And something else, something more important. I discovered myself . . . I [had] never fit the mold they made for me at school completely. Oh sure, I got along okay with the teachers, but I got away with whatever I wanted to in school. For instance, I didn't like gym particularly so I showed up for roll count and then slipped out walking right past the principal in doing so. I assume they couldn't assume that I was quietly rebelling. So I smiled and stabbed them in the back. Leaving school gave me no one to rebel against so I had more time to self reflect and change subtly, to become someone I felt comfortable with.

To go to college I had to take two tests, the GED (for lack of a HS diploma) and the SAT. I have always done well on standardized tests no matter what I think of them, and these were no exception. The SAT scores put me in the [running for the] "highly competitive" range of colleges. But I chose to apply to two colleges that both had attendance of around six hundred and where there was not an exceptional atmosphere of competitiveness. I had already had my fill of that scene and wanted no more. I was accepted to both colleges and am now pursuing two degrees in Psychology and conflict resolution. I go to Northland College which is in upper Wisconsin away from most major cities. I like it there; the weather suits me better... and there is a large percentage of foreign students, which provides a good way to get a multi-cultural experience . . .

Right now I exist as a quiet but highly influential individual in college. I helped found a chapter of the Green Political Party, worked on implementing environmentally and socially sound measures, such as increased recycling, G.E. boycott and stopping a low level radioactive waste dump in upper Michigan. When I work on campus it is as a photographer and as such my photos have gone around the world when they were included in the college directory which goes to several countries such as Japan, India, China, Canada, Korea, and many others.

Not bad for a drop out, eh?

your allies among the Rich and Famous

I suppose it shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. I'd heard of a few famous people who hadn't gone to school, so I went to the library to check up on them. I steered into the reference section and sat down with a stack of *Current Biography Yearbooks*. I started by looking up the names on my list, but pretty soon I was just turning pages and laughing. Why?

1. On the average, one out of every five or six people featured had dropped out of school or else not attended much formal school. (The *Current Biography Yearbook* is published every year. It contains hundreds of short biographies on people who are currently prominent in some field—worldwide government leaders, entertainers, scientists, writers, artists.)

2. In almost all of the biographies, it was clear that the forces which had shaped these brilliant lives had little or nothing to do with school. Instead, other experiences had inspired and nurtured them.

For instance, Luc Montagnier, French virologist famous for his research on the AIDS virus, was inspired to become a scientist mainly because his father, a CPA, kept a laboratory in the garage; he was allowed to have his own laboratory in the basement; and at age fifteen, he watched his grandfather die of cancer.¹³

Also for instance, Steven Spielberg learned filmmaking by experimenting with his father's 8mm camera. In high school, he spent a lot of time making films in order to escape studying algebra and French. Later, he sneaked onto movie sets to watch (his high school grades were too low to get him into film school).¹⁴

3. Lots of famous people had to go to school—they'd probably never heard of "unschooling"—but made nasty comments about it. Examples at the end of this chapter.

I am not bringing up the subject of rich famous people to suggest that it is necessarily fulfilling to be rich and famous. However, information like this is a good kick in the pants for all the unimaginative, illogical people who believe quitting school generates "failure." Keep your ears open, and compile your own list of admirable independent learners. On the Internet, see Karl Bunday's list.¹⁵ Here is part of mine:

¹³ Information from *Current Biography Yearbook 1988*.

¹⁴ Information from *Current Biography Yearbook 1978*.

¹⁵ "U.S. Founders Learned Without Public School" and "Nobel Prize Winners Hate School" at Karl's "School is Dead/Learn in Freedom" Web site.

Some people who dropped out of high school or otherwise escaped much or all of the usual teenage schooling: Ansel Adams, Joan of Arc, Roseanne Barr, Irving Berlin, Rosamond Bernier, Claude Berri, William Blake, Art Blakey, John Boorman, Pearl Buck, Liz Claiborne, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), Buffalo Bill Cody, Noel Coward, Charles Dickens, Bo Diddley, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Ford, George Gershwin, Whoopi Goldberg, Samuel Gompers, Maxim Gorki, Robin Graham, Patrick Henry, Eric Hoffer, John Houston, John Paul Jones, Cyndi Lauper, William Lear, Abraham Lincoln, Jack London, Beryl Markham, Liza Minnelli, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Sean O’Casey, Florence Nightingale, Beatrix Potter, David Puttnam, Keith Richards, Clement W. Stone, Randy Travis, Frank Lloyd Wright, Orville and Wilbur Wright, Brigham Young.¹⁶

Also: one third of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution of the United States had no more than a few months of schooling up their sleeves. Historian Harry G. Good describes several of them:

Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, a farm boy, became a practical surveyor and learned politics as moderator of town meetings. Roger Sherman of Connecticut was apprenticed to a shoemaker and became successively a writer, publisher, and lawyer . . . Others read medical books and helped a doctor in his practice.¹⁷

And of course, since blacks and other people of color were not allowed to attend school (or, of course, to have governesses and private tutors) during much of U.S. history, many black (and other) leaders during the past few hundred years were autodidacts. For example, John Jones—a leading nineteenth-century abolitionist and activist—taught himself to read and write, became a successful businessman, and lectured throughout Illinois on the rights of blacks. Other prominent nineteenth-century black autodidacts included Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.

Ironically, most biographers share the mainstream prejudice against unschooling. Therefore, if their subject has had little or no schooling, instead of pointing out this very cool fact and showing how that person took the initiative to educate himself, they downplay it or just leave out all mention of “education.”

Wanna-be unschoolers

Brilliant people often got that way not because of school, but despite it.

Woody Allen said, “I loathed every day and regret every day I spent in school. I like to be taught to read and write and add and then be left alone.”¹⁸ *Winston Churchill* said, “I was happy as a child with

¹⁶ Sources: *Current Biography*, *Famous Homeschoolers*, by Malcolm and Nancy Plent, *Dove*, by Robin Graham, various other biographies, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, volume 2, *School Days of the Famous*, by Gerhard Prause.

¹⁷ Harry G. Good, *A History of American Education*, p.84.

¹⁸ *Current Biography Yearbook*, 1979.

my toys in my nursery. I have been happier every year since I became a man. But this interlude of school makes a somber grey patch upon the chart of my journey. It was an unending spell of worries that did not then seem petty, and of toil uncheered by fruition; a time of discomfort, restriction and purposeless monotony.”¹⁹ German novelist *Franz Kafka* said, “As far as I have seen, at school . . . they aimed at blotting out one’s individuality.” According to Gerhard Prause, Kafka

not only hated the system and the increasing anxiety before examinations, but he was also convinced that school offered too little in relation to the amount of time he spent there. Above all he felt it did not offer enough that was practical and relevant. His greatest criticism was aimed at the fact that education in general attempted to make everyone equal and therefore ignored an individual’s talents and abilities.²⁰

Melina Mercouri, a Greek Minister of Culture, former member of parliament, and an actress, hated school. “The one great affliction of Miss Mercouri’s childhood,” reads *Current Biography* 1988, “was formal schooling, which bored her to tears, but since she grew up in a household frequented by politicians, scholars, writers, and artists, she nonetheless received a good liberal education.” *Claude Monet*, French impressionist painter, “grew up a lad of unembarrassed daring, rebellious and self-willed,” says Charles Merrill Mount’s biography *Monet*. According to this biography, Monet said:

I was undisciplined by birth; never would I bend, even in my most tender youth, to a rule. It was at home I learned the little I knew. Schools always appeared to me like a prison, and never could I make up my mind to stay there, not even for four hours a day, when the sunshine was inviting, the sea smooth, and when it was a joy to run about the cliffs in the free air, or to paddle in the water.

Monet was especially rebellious in his art classes, where he made parodies and caricatures instead of the realistic drawings he was asked to do. Although his drawing teacher considered him untalented, by the time he turned fifteen he was in demand as a professional caricaturist. Pulitzer-prize winning historian *Edmund Morris* hated high school, and *Current Biography* 1989 says he “entertained himself by writing novels ‘behind cover of an atlas at the rearmost possible desk of every class.’” And *Charles Trenet*, French singer, songwriter, and writer, went to a Catholic School—the “Free School of the Trinity,” about which he said, “The school might have been free, but I was shut up inside.”²¹

¹⁹ Sir Winston Churchill, *Great Destiny*

²⁰ Gerhard Prause, *School Days of the Famous*, translated by Susan Hecker Ray, p. 38.

²¹ *Current Biography Yearbook* 1989

The journal, etc.,
of
Ms. Kim Kopel,
Autodidact²²

Kim Kopel is sixteen. She's never been to school. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, she gives Irish dance lessons to two young girls, she's teaching herself to play a tin whistle, she weaves, writes, plays piano, and has from time to time been interested in physics, motors and machines. I am delighted to share with you a few bits of her journal, her explanation of the way she learns, and some of her thoughts on the future of her education and lifestyle.

Kim was fourteen years old when she wrote this section.

Tuesday, September sixth, 1988 10:00 a.m.

Today is the first day of a new school year. So why am I sitting at home at the typewriter, instead of at a desk in a classroom? Because I'm self-educated. What I mean by that is that I'm in charge of my own education, of living my own life. For a long time I've called myself a "homeschooler," but I don't like to anymore because I don't think it's accurate in my case. I think of homeschooling as being just that—school at home.

For myself, I wouldn't choose any form of "school" as we know it—not in a building designated as a "school," not at home, not on my neighbor's front yard. I don't want to have a teacher pour knowledge into my brain—knowledge that someone else decided I should have. I don't want someone telling me what to think, when to think, when to read on what page out of what book, when to eat lunch, etc. I don't want to be "schooled" at all, and since I'm not, I don't want to *say* I'm "schooled." I've decided that "home-educated" isn't really any better than "homeschooled," because it sounds like I only learn things in one place—at home. That's such a foreign concept to me that it seems ridiculous.

So I've come up with the term "self-educated," even though people usually have no idea what I mean. I imagine it sounds like I teach myself everything, which isn't much more accurate than saying I'm "homeschooled." When I say I'm self-educated, what I mean is that I can decide what I want to do, when, where and how I want to do it, and who, if anyone, I want to help me. I can decide what kind of help I want, and find someone who will give me that help, and won't start giving me help I haven't asked for.

Since I'm in charge of my education/life (I have the freedom to decide how I spend my time), people often tend to assume that I just do whatever I want; whatever feels good at the moment. That's not true. I'd rather not sweep floors, wash dishes, do laundry, fix meals, mow lawns, but they're all things that have to be done, and so even though they're not things I really like or want to spend time on, I still do them. (For the obvious reasons that if I didn't, I wouldn't have any clean clothes or dishes, and I wouldn't

²² This chapter ©1991 Kim Kopel; used by the kind permission of the author.

eat!) Besides those things, there are also all the other requirements of daily life here—maybe we need to go shopping, or Mom needs me to watch my younger sisters while she drops books off at the library, or we’re having company, or one of my siblings wants me to help them with something, etc. I’m not just off in my own little world, floating around totally oblivious to what’s going on around me.

I don’t think there’s anything wrong with doing what I want—I don’t see any sense in spending my time doing things I hate! I guess it’s just that people think that if you don’t have someone making you do things, you’ll never do anything that’s hard for you, or take on any challenges, and that you’ll probably just sit around and watch TV, hang out with your friends, party all the time—in short, “vegetate.” In talking with people about self-education, I’ve found that most of them find it very hard to believe that anyone would actually do meaningful or hard or challenging things without being forced to.

I guess that’s because people look at the kids they know, and see that a lot of them don’t like school (which people translate as meaning that they don’t care about getting a “good” education, and are therefore irresponsible), have to be reminded to do homework, won’t do much around the house without being made to, and would rather just sit and watch TV, etc. And so they think, “Look; kids will hardly do anything worthwhile now, imagine what would happen if they weren’t being forced to do things!” If they imagine that if kids were let out of school for good they’d probably just vegetate, I’d say they guessed right. It seems to me that after you’ve spent a good part of your life with someone else doing all the thinking and decision making for you, you’re going to need some time to get used to thinking for yourself, to being responsible for your own life. There’s a period of adjustment that kids go through after they’ve been taken out of school, in which they have to recover from whatever effects school is responsible for having caused—low self esteem and self confidence, etc. etc.—before they can start focusing on what they want to do in their lives.

But I’ve never been to school, so I haven’t had to go through that process of undoing what school does. I’ve grown up thinking for myself, making decisions, being responsible for my life, so I’m at the point right now where I’m finding out what I want to do, and finding ways to do those things. Watching TV, hanging out, etc., are very empty and unsatisfying pursuits to me. I know that there’s more to my life than that. I don’t want to spend (waste) my time on those things; there are too many other important things to do (like watching the grass grow, for instance. That’s how low those other things are on my list).

If I were saying this to someone in a conversation, I’m sure they’d want to know—as it seems everyone does—“Well, then, what *do* you do?”

I hope this journal will answer that question, and many others that I’ve been asked. I’m writing this journal for that reason, and also to try to create a picture of what my life is like, and to express my thoughts about a lot of things.

I’ll tell you a bit about myself. I’m fourteen years old. I love to write—stories, letters, music, in my diary, and now in this journal. This is really the first non-fiction I’ve written—besides letters and my diary, of course.

I have a four harness, six treadle floor loom here at home which I weave on. I’ve liked weaving for a long time and had used a lap loom, but what I really wanted to do was learn to weave real things on a floor loom. In the fall of 1986, I went to an open house at a restored historic home where there was a weaving shop that gave lessons, so I signed up and took lessons for about a year, which I loved. And now I have my own loom. I’m trying right now to come up with a pattern for a Scotch tartan—the plaid the

Scotch weave their kilts out of. I want to make a kilt or something out of the MacGallum tartan for myself, and Grandpa (Mom's dad) wants me to make some placemats or centerpieces out of it for him and some of our relatives (we have some Scotch ancestors on Grandpa's side of the family who we think were MacGallums).

I love music, too—I've taught myself, with some help from Mom (when I asked for it), to play the piano and keyboard (synthesizer), and I can play the guitar a little. I love to sing—when I play the keyboard, or any other instruments, when someone else is playing, when I'm listening to tapes or the radio, and any other time when I feel like it—which is pretty much all of the time! Even when I'm not singing or playing an instrument or listening to music, I think there's always a song running through my head!

I also like dancing. I've taken ballet lessons over the years, but I never seemed to get anywhere—I guess I got tired of all the barre work and of never really dancing. So now I'm going to start taking Irish step dancing lessons—I'm going to learn to do, among other dances, the Irish jig, which you've probably heard of. Sara [Kim's sister] and I are going to take lessons from Mary Mayer . . . at the Mary Mayer School of Irish Dance; our first lesson is September 16th. I can't wait; I've seen the dancing, and it looks really neat—and I like Mary Mayer, so I think it's going to be fun.

Those are my main interests right now, although there are many other things I like to do.

Now I'm going to write down all the questions I'm asked most frequently about my education, and answer them as I wish I had when someone actually asked me! I don't know why it is that I can always think of a million better explanations after the conversation is over!

Q. What do you do?

A. That's the number one question I'm asked—unfortunately, because I hate answering it. It makes it seem as if the important thing is what I do, and not who I am, which is entirely backwards. I do lots of things, and I *could* do a lot of things that I don't. If I said I liked to draw, I don't think anyone could decide from hearing that whether they liked me or not. Now, I don't ask people what they do so I can decide whether they're weird or not; I ask them because I'm genuinely interested in hearing about the things that are important to them. I could be friends with someone who liked to do totally different things from me; just because they're not exactly like me doesn't mean they're weird or mentally ill. But I get the feeling that people ask me this question not because they're interested in hearing about what I like to do and in learning more about me, but because they want to know if I'm really getting an education “like everyone else.” Well, I'm not! If I was, I might as well just go to school! Another reason why I dislike this question is that it makes me feel like I'm under investigation. From how strangely I get treated sometimes, when people ask me what I do, I feel like I should say, “Oh, I eat, drink, breathe, sleep, just like other humans!”

Q. How do you make friends?

A. By going places and doing things, like anyone else—just by being alive. I think people ask this question because they have the false notion that school is the only place where you can meet people and make friends. (Well, if it is, you'd better make some lifelong friends there, or else your social life will be

nonexistent after you graduate!) I think you're very limited if you think that—who you have for friends is left totally up to what kids happen to be in your grade or classes at the particular school you go to. And that's another thing about school—you don't get to have many friends older or younger than yourself, because you spend most of your day with people your age, give or take a year.

I have met most of my friends while pursuing my interests—for example, I count the teachers I had at weaving lessons as my good friends.

[In a later part of her journal, Kim commented, “I don't think it's how many friends you have that matters, but how good a friend each one is.”]

Q. Do you have homework?

A. That sounds like I'm being asked if I have to do work around the house—like sweeping or dusting! But I guess what people really mean by “homework” is extra “schoolwork.” Since I don't do *any* schoolwork, I definitely don't do “extra” schoolwork! But even if I did do “schoolwork” (working out of workbooks, textbooks, doing assignments, etc.), the question is still irrelevant, because I would be doing all my schoolwork at home, so it would all be “homework!” I wonder sometimes exactly what people expect me to answer—“No, Mom gives us assignments after our homeschool is out for the day, and we go to school to do them”?!

Q. How do you learn things your parents don't know about?

A. I don't think of Mom and Dad as being the ones responsible for educating me and living my life, so it has never occurred to me that I should only learn things they know about or that they deem important. I'm perfectly capable of and have always liked doing things and finding things out for myself; I don't need someone to tell me what I need to know or do and how to go about finding out and doing those things. When I decide I'd like someone to help me and ask them for help, I'm not asking them to step in and take over; I'm simply asking them to help me with a specific thing. Mom and Dad are just two of the many people I know who are willing to help me when I ask. If I don't already know anyone who can teach me something I want to know, then I find someone who can. I can either enlist other people's help in doing that, or I can do it myself—usually, I use a combination of both. A good example of this is when I became interested in Irish dancing and wanted to take lessons. I decided to ask Mom to help me get information on the different Irish dance schools in St. Louis, so I could decide which one I wanted to go to. Even though she couldn't teach me Irish dancing herself, Mom was able to help me find someone who could. The most helpful thing anyone can do for me is to listen and respond when I ask them to help me find ways to do the things I want to do.

Q. Is your mom a teacher?

A. No, although she had a minimal amount of teacher's training in college—and that training was part of what turned her off to schooling! (Her own school education also contributed to her decision to quit training to be a teacher, and to allow her children to educate themselves.) . . .

Q. How can your mom teach you if she's not a teacher?

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A. Well, I'm not a "teacher" (in the sense that I don't teach at a school), and yet I'm perfectly capable of showing my four year old sister Katie how to make the letters of the alphabet. My brother Burt isn't a "teacher," but I've learned a lot of things from him by talking to him, about things he's read or heard about, and what he thinks about them. Besides, it would seem logical to assume that if a person understands something and/or can do it themselves, they ought to be able to explain it at least a little to someone else. (I've found that I learn a lot more about something I already know if I teach it to someone else—maybe because I notice things in teaching it to them that I hadn't before, or from a question they asked.)

And since Mom went to school, most people would assume that she learned there, and should therefore be able to pass what she learned onto us. How could anyone dispute that? By saying that you really need to be trained to teach, and not just know the subject you're teaching? Well, most of teachers' training (and actual work in school) is classroom management, and since Mom only has four (going on five) of us, she doesn't need to know how to manage a classroom of fifty. (I won't even get into the fact that many teachers in private schools aren't certified to teach.) Mom's qualified to be a parent, and she doesn't need to be anything else. Mom doesn't "teach" me anything—in the sense that she doesn't say, "OK, Kim, I'm going to teach you trigonometry now." I've learned many things from her, just by observing what she does, how she lives, and from talking with her. She always helps me if I ask her to—but she only gives me the specific help I ask for, no more, no less. If she can't give me the help I need or want, I'll find someone else who can—and often times I'll ask Mom to help me find someone who can.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic

From a longer essay about the way Kim has learned "the basics":

I have had very little formal "school" instruction; Mom has never planned out a curriculum for me, and has never instructed me in English, history, etc. I have learned things in my own way, my own time, at my own pace, while pursuing interests of my own choosing.

I learned to write when I was between the ages of three and four; I wanted to be able to write, so I asked people (Mom and Dad and other relatives and friends) how to make the letters of the alphabet. As soon as I could form the letters, I began writing letters to people; I would decide what I wanted to say, and then ask people how to spell the words. In this way, I learned correct spelling and grammar, and gained a knowledge of letters and words that later made it possible for me to learn to read. When I was about ten I began keeping a diary, which I'm still writing in now, and at the same time I also began writing stories.

I learned to read pretty much the same way I learned to write, a few years later. I remember being read to a lot, which I really enjoyed, and wanting to be able to read. I learned to read from being read to, being answered when I asked, "What's that say?" (which was quite frequently), and writing, which helped me to recognize words. Most of all, I learned to read (and write—and do everything I know how to do) because I wanted to be able to. I never used any workbooks, flashcards, etc., when I was learning to read or write.

I learned math by using it—math is logical; you really don't need to have someone explain it all to you, because you learn it naturally while trying to count and figure things out. I learned to add, subtract, multiply and divide simply because I needed to do those things. I may not have always seen the

fastest way to figure something out right away, but I knew what I was trying to find out, and what I needed to do in order to get the answer . . .

Unfortunately, when I was around thirteen I took the CAT (my first test) and discovered I was below grade level in math—mainly because I didn’t know the different processes by which they expected you to come up with the answers (although I was perfectly capable of finding them my own way). And being timed made me nervous, besides the fact that finding answers as quickly as possible had not been the focus of the math I had used before. Accuracy was the most important thing; speed comes from using math many times, and I really didn’t need to do a whole lot of figuring at that time in my life. If I had had some real reason for being able to do math that fast, I know I would have been able to. But being able to figure quickly just so I could pass a test wasn’t a good reason for learning something to me.

And yet, even after I’d finished the test, I felt nervous about not being at my grade level in math; I got it into my head that I needed to study math to “catch up”—merely for the reason of being at a certain place that some person who didn’t know me at all had decided that I should be at simply because I was a certain age. So I got our workbooks and textbooks, and asked Mom to work with me on math, which she did.

That turned out to be a disaster—I ended up with a math block, because I’d worked myself into such a state over the test and trying to catch up that there was no way I could learn anything. I decided that math was stupid, because that was better than deciding that *I* was stupid because I couldn’t understand it.

Also, I was unconsciously rebelling against doing something that had no real meaning or importance to me in my life. So I was making it impossible to learn math, because underneath, I really didn’t want to learn it; I was just doing it because I felt I should. Finally I wore myself out with it so that I had a block toward it and was saying I hated it.

It’s taken me nearly three years to get to the place where I can think about math again without panicking or feeling inferior—and I’m still not completely over the block. I’m trying now to regain the practical, applicable understanding of math that I once had.

Facing the future with integrity

In this later piece, Kim reflects on issues that have confronted her in her late teens.

About two years ago I began to feel dissatisfied with my life the way it was. I was bored and restless; I wanted to be doing more things, but I didn’t know what. I had a sense of standing on the threshold of a whole new world, of coming to a turning point in my life. I started asking myself a lot of questions about what purpose my life had, where I belonged, what I wanted to do; struggling to find myself.

In the midst of this, people began to question me more frequently about what plans I had for my life, and the tone with which they asked was noticeably more serious and intense than it had been a few years before. After all, I was high school age, and, “it was high time I knew what I was going to do with my life,” they seemed to be saying. Needless to say, I started to feel pretty stupid for not knowing what I wanted to do with my life. I no longer felt comfortable saying, “I don’t know,” when people asked me if I was going to college, because, inevitably, they would be shocked, and start impressing upon me how

impossible it is to get a “good job” (whatever *that* is) without a college degree, that one would never be able to live happily and be accepted by society if one did not attend college and pursue a career for the rest of one’s natural life. So I couldn’t *seriously* be considering anything but the “traditional” route of college and a career; that would be dangerous and immature. So I was told.

That made me angry—if I felt like ruining my life, it was no one’s business but my own! And being expected to do something, anything, really irritated me—so much that at times I felt like going out and doing the exact opposite of what people said I was “supposed” to do.

I also resented having college, careers, decisions, etc., shoved in my face, because dealing with them distracted me from my search for a meaningful life. It was very frustrating to feel that I needed to be resolving the conflict and turmoil in my life, but not be able to because I had to deal with the confusions other people injected.

By continually pushing and pressuring me to go to college and do this and do that, people implied a complete lack of respect for and trust in me. I felt that they were saying, in effect, that I was incapable of taking care of myself, and would never “turn out all right” if they didn’t hold my hand and steer me in the “right” direction. All in all, I was infuriated over the whole matter.

But at the same time, I was also scared. Suppose what they said was true? What if it really was impossible to get a job and support myself without a college degree? Hundreds—no, thousands—of nagging doubts, worries, and “what-ifs” crowded into my mind, and I began to feel that I should seriously consider attending college. I sent for information on several colleges and carefully read through it, feeling all the while that I was trying to wear a shoe that didn’t fit. I spent a lot of time trying to decide where I wanted to go to college, what I wanted to major in, and what single thing I wanted to spend the rest of my life earning a living at. I bounced back and forth for a while—one minute I was definitely going to college, and the next wild horses couldn’t drag me there.

I finally decided it was time to face all the pressures and fears, and find out if they were truly valid. I started to question the beliefs that had been presented to me as truths and facts. Like the idea that people should pick one thing to do (as a career) and then spend the rest of their lives doing it. How can you know and decide today what you’ll be interested in doing ten or five or even two years down the road? Furthermore, should you be expected to know? And why isn’t it considered normal to grow and change your priorities—what’s wrong with moving onto something else when you’ve outgrown where you are right now?

I began to see that so much of this pressure to go to college, get a “good job,” be successful, and so on, was based mainly on fear. “Do this, or this will happen to you.” “Go to college, or you’ll never be able to get a ‘good job’ and support yourself.” And so forth. No one expected me to go to college because I thought I’d find a life worth living there, or that it’d be a place where I would mature as a person. They expected me to go because I’d end up a social reject and starve to death on the street if I didn’t.

Something inside of me snapped at this realization. “That’s it,” I said to myself. “I’m not going to run my life on fear; what point is there in a life in which you do things because you’re afraid of what will happen to you if you don’t? How can you ever be happy if you live on fear—there will always be something else you have to do to keep something terrible from happening to you. I’d rather starve to death and be rejected than be afraid forever and never have a moment’s peace!”

With that pressure off my shoulders, I was determined to get to the bottom of all the myths and fears. As I looked closer, I discovered a fear that was greater than all the others put together—the fear of not “measuring up” to society’s standards, and therefore being unacceptable and rejected. You must go to college, because that’s what every respectable person intent on “making something” of themselves is doing so they can get a “good job—one they can make a lot of money at, and that has prestige.

It became clear to me that schools exist for the purpose of instilling the “moral” that acceptance is the most important thing in life. I also realized that this “moral” is instilled so people can be controlled—if people believe that happiness is being accepted, they’ll do whatever they’re told they “have” to in order to be accepted, because they want to be happy.

After this revelation, I was able to see all the pressures and worries for what they really were—basically a lot of false fears and insecurities. It was sort of like turning on the light and finding that what had looked to be a terrible monster was just a shadow.

Now I had the time and space to focus on resolving the personal conflict and dissatisfaction with my life that I was feeling. I began to look closely at my life, and question many things about it. I asked myself, why had I always followed my interests day by day, letting them lead me? Why had I never planned my life out? Once I’d become interested in writing, why hadn’t I immediately begun looking for places to have my writing published, or for people to read and criticize it? Why hadn’t I said, “I’ll write short stories for six months, then experiment with the essay format for two months, then delve into poetry for three months, try my hand at journalism for a month, revise my short stories and work on publishing them for the next six months after that,” etc.? Why had I been content to live each day open to any new ideas for articles, or stories, or something entirely different to write; unafraid of the uncertainty that tomorrow held—actually, welcoming that very uncertainty as a possible exciting opportunity? And was there anything wrong with living that way? Did I need to abandon it, after it had served and suited me perfectly for so many years, because I felt the need for a change in my life?

After a lot of searching and questioning, I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t have to find one thing to do now and for the rest of my life. The whole world has opened up to me in a new sense since I’ve come to this revelation, and many important opportunities are becoming available to me now.

For example, last year I read an article about a children’s choir here in St. Louis that sounded neat to me because I’ve always loved singing. Although I’d never had voice lessons, or been in a choir before, I decided to audition for the choir. I was accepted, and now, six months later, I’ve moved up into the highest levels of the choir, have ten two-hour rehearsals per month, and am planning to go on the choir tour to Atlanta this summer. Choir has become a very big part of my life.

As a result of being in the choir, another opportunity became available to me just recently. About a month ago I became interested in taking voice lessons, so I asked one of my choir directors if he knew any voice teachers he’d recommend. He told me that he wanted to start giving voice lessons, and asked if I’d like to take lessons from him. Because he’s a really terrific person, and we get along very well, I told him I’d rather take lessons from him than anyone else. So I’ve been taking voice lessons from him for the past month, and I love it! And who knows what other opportunities will become available because I’m taking voice lessons—maybe chances to perform solo, etc.

Along with choir and voice lessons, writing is also very important to me. I’ve always loved to write—letters, stories, in my private diary, a journal of my education, and most recently, articles about

homeschooling and related subjects. While I was trying to deal with the pressures and fears surrounding college, careers, etc., I spent a lot of time writing, in order to straighten my thoughts out. When I write, things that have been blurry become clear to me, and I see more and more of the picture, instead of just a tangled, confusing mess. Even when I'm not trying to describe and analyze beliefs, fears, philosophies, etc., it helps to write what I feel *without* trying to figure out why I feel the way I do. It's like I have to get it all off my chest first, and then I can start trying to work things out.

I'm almost always working on some article—whether it's one I've been asked to write, or one I've thought of myself. Even when I'm not working on anything specific (which is rare), I'm still writing; in my diary, and letters to people. I like to write a lot about learning, homeschooling, educational philosophies, and that kind of thing, because those issues are important to me. Right now I'm in the revising stages of an article about how I learned to read, write, etc., which I wrote not too long ago. I'm planning to submit it to a magazine, or several, once I'm finished with it. And I've got lots of ideas in the back of my mind for more articles I want to write.

My biggest project at this time is revising the journal of my education that I kept from September 1988 to 1989, and I'm hoping to have it published. The journal is full of descriptions and accounts of everything I did and read, people I met, etc., during that year. I poured out my thoughts, feelings and ideas about so many things into the journal as well; trying to understand myself and the rest of the world, trying to find out where I stood, and why. It's essentially my self portrait. I have so much material that revising it is a long, hard process. But it's worth all the time and work.

During the past four years or so I've established a writing apprenticeship with Susannah Sheffer, editor of *Growing Without Schooling*. Susannah always has helpful suggestions and comments on whatever I send her—for example, she'll say, "This part isn't very clear; is this what you mean?" "What you said here makes me curious to know more about such and such; maybe you'd want to expand on it," or, "You could change this sentence around like this to make it clearer," etc. Those kinds of suggestions really help me when I'm revising, because a lot of times I know that I've left something out somewhere, or that a paragraph needs to be rewritten, but I can't put my finger on exactly what's wrong, or how to fix it. I think that being able to have Susannah read and critique my writing is making me a better critic of my own work, because she makes me more aware of how my writing is going to sound to someone else.

Working on writing with Susannah has led to several trips to Boston to visit her, and the chance to volunteer in the Holt Associates office, to meet a lot of neat people, including one of my closest friends. Not to mention that Susannah has become one of my best friends as well.

I don't have all the answers to my questions yet, but as I continue to try to resolve and find the answers, things are falling into place and becoming clear to me. I've realized that it's okay to not have all the answers. I know now that all through my life I'll be growing, and that going through these periods of confusion and frustration is just part of the lifelong process of growing up. Instead of dreading these processes, I should welcome them, because each time I go through another one of them it means I'm moving onto the next stage of my life

After the first edition of The Teenage Liberation Handbook was published, Kim kept at her journal, and during the next few years she chronicled her further adventures. One of the things she did was to set up an internship, with the help and encouragement of her friend and mentor Susannah Sheffer, at a living

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history farm in New Hampshire called Strawberry Banke. She spent over a year there—demonstrating spinning, working on event planning with the director, and undertaking other challenges. You can read a lot of her Strawberry Banke journal in GWS #99. Here is a bit, which conveys some of the things interns do at living history farms and other sites:

August 6, 1992

I met Kathleen in her office and she took me down to the visitor center so I could watch the brief orientation video and then take a short guided tour of the museum. Afterwards we went to the museum's Nutter House and Thomas Bailey Aldrich memorial; I'll be working in the latter as an interpreter from 1:00 to 3:00 every Tuesday and Thursday . . .

Kathleen and I made up a tentative schedule for me to follow until my spinning wheel gets here. Two days a week I'll be doing research for two projects of Kathleen's. The first one is to find out what kinds of spinning were done here at Strawberry Banke, what kinds of fibers were used (wool, flax, etc.), where they got them from (were the sheep here?), what kinds of materials were made from the yarn. She wants me to write a paper about what I find out, if I collect enough to write about.

The second project came up because Kathleen wanted me to help her plan this year's Fall and Halloween festivals. She asked me if I would do some research and find out what was going on at Strawberry Banke during the Salem witch trials, if there were any reports of witches or witchcraft here, and read up on witchcraft, superstitions, the origin of Halloween, and so on.

I'm also doing some reading on Thomas Bailey Aldrich so I'll know enough about him to answer questions visitors have when I interpret at the TBA memorial. TBA was an author, famous at the time he lived, I guess. Aldrich's book is sitting on my desk, along with a stack of about ten other books, all on spinning and weaving, which I plan to read.

After she'd been on her own for a while (and moved on into more adventures, like becoming a massage therapist and getting married), Kim wrote, "One thing I've always believed, and that being on my own has reinforced, is that it's impossible for me to think in terms of forever. I have to look at what I want to do now, and find a way to do that; when I'm ready to move on, I'll know."

the unschooler's bookshelf

I put only a few books and other items in this resource list, with excerpts, so you'd notice each of them. There are now many good books on unschooling; you can find others on your own at the library. The resources here are the cream of the crop *and* the most relevant choices for teenagers. They deal with unschooling or learning in a general sense. Numerous resources for particular subjects are, of course, recommended throughout this book.

Books by John Holt

John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*. This book goes beyond the issue of school, covering many other ways that “minors” are prevented from living fully. It argues that children of all ages should have access to the same rights as adults: to work, vote, own property, travel, choose a guardian, control their own learning, etc.

For a long time it never occurred to me to question this institution [of childhood]. Only in recent years did I begin to wonder whether there might be other or better ways for young people to live. By now I have come to feel that the fact of being a “child,” of being wholly subservient and dependent, of being seen by older people as a mixture of expensive nuisance, slave, and super-pet, does most young people more harm than good. I propose instead that the rights, privileges, duties, responsibilities of adult citizens be made *available* to any young person, of whatever age, who wants to make use of them.

John Holt, *Freedom and Beyond*. In this book, Holt started questioning whether we need schools. He investigates the nature of freedom, choice, authority, discipline, and the relationship between schools and poverty.

Not understanding freedom, we do not understand authority. We think in terms of organization charts, pecking orders, stars on the collar and stripes on the sleeve. If someone is above us on the chart, then . . . he has a right to tell us to do what he wants, and we have a duty to do whatever he tells us, however absurd, destructive, or cruel. Naturally enough, some people, seeing around them the dreadful works of this kind of authority, reject it altogether. But with it they too often reject, naturally but unwisely, all notions of competence, inspiration, leadership. They cannot imagine that of their own free will they might ask someone else what he thought, or agree to do what he asked, because he clearly know or perhaps cared much more about what he was doing than they did. The only alternative they seem to see to coercive authority is none at all. I have therefore tried to explore a little further the nature of freedom, so that we may better understand how people of varying ages and skills may live together and be useful to each other without some of them always pushing the others around.

John Holt, *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better*. This book gives many ideas for ways to improve and change communities so people have more opportunities to learn outside of

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school. It also develops the idea that learning and doing are the same thing, and explains the difference between healthy teaching and school situations and unhealthy situations.

This is a book in favor of *doing*—self-directed, purposeful, meaningful life and work—and *against* “education”—learning cut off from active life and done under pressure of bribe or threat, greed and fear.

John Holt, *Teach Your Own*. This is the first and still the best overall introduction for families who want to get out of school. [Great news: there’s a [40th anniversary edition](#) available as of September 2021, thoroughly updated by Holt’s longtime colleague Patrick Farenga.] Despite the title, Holt does not advocate that parents teach in the usual sense; rather, it encourages them to support their kids’ learning, largely by staying out of their way. Some of the information won’t apply to you, as it concentrates mostly on younger children and talks a lot about the way people learn basic math, reading, and writing skills. However, it also has solid thought and information on good work situations for unschoolers, on the philosophy of unschooling, and other topics. This is an especially good book to have your parents read; a chapter called “Common Objections to Home Schooling” will help them clarify their own thoughts.

Even in supposedly “free” or “alternative” schools, too many people still do what conventional schools have always done. They take children out of and away from the great richness and variety of the world, and in its place give them school subjects, the curriculum. They may jazz it up with chicken bones, Cuisenaire rods, and all sorts of other goodies. But the fact remains that instead of letting children have contact with more and more people, places, tools, and experiences, the schools are busily cutting the work up into little bits and giving it to the children according to some expert’s theory about what they need or can stand.

What children need is not new and better curricula but *access* to more and more of the real world; plenty of time and space to think over their experiences, and to use fantasy and play to make meaning out of them; and advice, road maps, guidebooks, to make it easier for them to get where they want to go (not where we think they ought to go), and to find out what they want to find out. Finding ways to do all this is not easy. The modern world is dangerous, confusing, not meant for children, not generally kind or welcoming to them. We have much to learn about how to make the world more accessible to them, and how to give them more freedom and competence in exploring it. But this is a very different thing from designing nice little curricula.

Books by or about unschooled teenagers

(Also see autobiographies or biographies of any of the people mentioned in Chapter 40.)

Tania Aebi, *Maiden Voyage*. When Tania was eighteen and living in New York City, her father worried that her life was going nowhere. Instead of pushing her into college, he gave her a sailboat, with the stipulation that she circumnavigate the globe—alone. She did so, becoming the first American woman to sail the world solo. Her resulting book is many wonderful things: a dramatic story of adventure, a romance, and an inspiring narrative of intense spiritual and emotional growth.

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There have always been people who called my father crazy. We never thought so. Why walk when you can run? he'd say. Why be inside when you could be out? Why stay home balancing your checkbook when you could be off riding a camel in Timbuktu, or climbing Mont Blanc, or driving a Land Rover across Africa? His dreams for himself and for us were all we wanted to hear when we were growing up. The world through his eyes was full of excitement and promise, of taking risks and landing on your feet, always with another great story to tell.

David and Micki Colfax, *Homeschooling for Excellence*. After three homeschooled Colfax boys went to Harvard, their parents wrote this book and explained. It tells some of the books and other resources they used, points out that the boys' main "curricula" were their activities around their homestead, and answers the usual questions about socialization, etc.

Later that year Grant interviewed at nearly a dozen colleges and applied to two. We submitted a letter to each, describing his course work and evaluating his strengths and weaknesses as objectively as possible. In lieu of teacher and counselor recommendations, Grant provided letters from a half dozen people who could variously attest to his work in the community health center, his character and intellectual potential. He wrote a long essay that described his years on the ranch, his homeschooling experiences, and his hopes for the future. He was admitted to Yale and Harvard and entered the latter that fall.

Robin Lee Graham, *Dove*. In 1965, sixteen-year-old Robin quit school and sailed a 24-foot sloop around the world in an extraordinary, romantic five-year-long adventure. Here, at eighteen, he has just met his future wife Patti:

We were children as we sailed the islands of the Yasawa group, kids reveling in sun and surf, knowing a glorious sense of freedom and timelessness. When the sun had risen high enough to warm our bodies and light the caverns and ledges in the coral reefs, we dived for shells and poured our treasure into *Dove's* cockpit. We found violet conchs, zigzag and spotted cowries, grinning tuns (*Malea ringens*), quaint delphinia snails, pagoda periwinkles, murex, tiny moon snails, fashioned with a jeweler's skill, delicate striped bonnets, tritons, augers and olives. The cowries we loved best—some as large as a fist, skins silken smooth, dappled in warm browns. We swam together, Patti graceful as a dolphin.

Kendall Hailey, *The Day I Became an Autodidact*. Fed up with formal education, Kendall arranged to graduate early from her ritzy prep school, and at age sixteen took complete control of her own education. While her classmates graduated on schedule and went to college, Kendall wrote (a play, a novel, a mystery), read (Dostoevsky, Dickens, James), and acted (in her own play, *The Bar off Melrose*). In this book, she also describes falling in love, relating to her family, and feeling frustrated with the lives of her

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college-bound friends. Her book is an especially great companion for anyone with a literary bent. Kendall is warm, honest, funny, and insightful. In this passage, she hasn't yet graduated from high school:

A little time left for education before school starts, and I just read the sentence "I am writing for myself and strangers" from *The Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein.

That is the way I have always felt, but I never knew how to say it. Little did I know Gertrude Stein had said it for me.

I can't wait to say to any teacher who makes a snide remark about one of my papers, "Well, I only wrote it for myself and strangers."

However, I have still not got the courage to write on a quiz, as Gertrude Stein once did, "I do not feel like taking a quiz today."

I wonder if Miss Stein would have had the courage had she not had a great teacher. He wrote on her empty quiz paper, "I know just how you feel—A+."

Grace Llewellyn, editor, *Freedom Challenge: African American Homeschoolers*. Fifteen essays by parents, teenagers, and younger children. Sunshine apprentices at an herb nursery and learns about architecture, Spanish, and astronomy from family friends. Khahil and Latif collect bugs and read physics books. Tunu wins piano competitions and joins with other black homeschoolers to learn robotics from an engineer. At six, Maya taught herself to read; at seven, she decided to learn to row a boat... The writers discuss self-directed learning, socialization, how single parent families homeschool, and they examine issues particular to African American homeschoolers.

Un-/homeschooling certainly is not for everyone. But if you think that school is long and boring, I'd consider it. Talk about it with your parents, because (although it may not seem like it) they generally know what's best. At first people (even your friends) may be a little skeptical of the idea. But hold on, they'll get used to it. (And if they don't, who needs 'em anyway?) Some people might call you a dropout. In this case just remember, there is a distinction. Dropping out means that you left school, got a bum job, and aren't doing anything educationally worthwhile. Un-/homeschooling means you left school, got a bum job, but are still pursuing learning, instead of just giving up.

Every time I look at the lives of schooled kids I see what I don't want to become. I don't want to be "normal." I want to be me. Some kids have been in school all their lives. Some kids have been homeschooled all their lives. I've done both. I've even gone to school part-time while still unschooling. I wouldn't call my experience incredible or unique, it's just the way I live. It's normal to me. —Fahiym Basiyr Acuay, fourteen

Grace Llewellyn, editor, *Real Lives: eleven teenagers who don't go to school*. These writers tell, in-depth, what it's like to be responsible for their own educations. Their adventures include: publishing a newsletter on peace issues, volunteering at a marine science center, writing to over fifty pen-pals worldwide, biking alone through Colombia and Ecuador, performing with a violin quintet, working at a

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shelter for homeless people, raising honeybees, compiling portfolios of writing and artwork to prepare for a career in video game design, talking with people all over the world on ham radio, building houses with Habitat for Humanity, working through the mail with a writing mentor, playing banjo in bluegrass jam sessions, answering the phone at a crisis line, and helping midwives at births. They also discuss issues such as socialization and finding work, and answer the question, “Do you have to be a genius to unschool?” From an essay by Ayanna Williams:

I have a pen-pal in South Africa in his forties who teaches people about my age. He writes long interesting letters and illustrates them. I have another pen-pal who is a native of Ghana, went to school for a year in Cuba, and now works in Libya. In Nigeria I have many pen-pals, one of whom is an eighteen-year-old Igbo:

The Christmas celebration was very dull this year in Enugu state. The reason was that many people moved out of the state since the creation of new states recently. During Christmas day everywhere was so dull that it looked like a ghost town. The masquerades that usually chase people around were nowhere to be seen. I went out that afternoon with my brother in our car. We drove to some of the places that are usually congested with people and masquerades, but no one was seen. Only a few people loitering around. Back home we celebrated happily with our family. After prayers, we dined on rice cooked with coconut juice, stew with chicken, and goat meat and some drinks.

Nancy Wallace, *Child's Work: Taking Children's Choices Seriously*. Nancy watched with sensitivity, insight, and trust while her homeschooled kids grew up. Both her son and daughter focused their lives around music, so this book will be especially (but not only) interesting to musicians.

Vita and Ishmael now spend most of each working day playing and composing music. Aside from the sheer glory of doing my own work to the melodic strains of Chopin ballades, Beethoven sonatas, and Bach preludes and fugues, living with Vita and Ishmael's music and being as involved as I am in their musical work has meant that of everything they do, it is the way they approach music that I understand and know most intimately. Often, I find myself using this understanding as a base or guidepost for looking at how they work on everything else in life. Watching the way Vita explores a new piece on the violin or piano, for example, teaches me about how she explores spelling or numerical relationships or art.

College admissions and credentialism

John Bear and Mariah Bear, *Bear's Guide To Earning College Degrees Nontraditionally*. This is the best strategy book for getting a degree, if you need one, without sacrificing some of the best years of your life and your parents' life savings. Discusses credit for life experience, correspondence and on-line

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coursework, unusual programs (earn while you hike), and scams to avoid. Well written, overtly opinionated. In addition to the discussion sections, over 1,600 schools are listed and described briefly.

Whether pursuing a degree for the learning, the diploma, or both, the alternative student seems far more likely:

- to be motivated to complete his or her program;
- to select courses and programs that are appropriate and relevant to his or her needs;
- to avoid cluttering up campuses and dormitories (which, in the words of former Columbia University president William McGill, are in danger of becoming “storage houses for bored young people”);
- to save years over the time of traditional programs (or, alternatively, to pursue educational objectives without giving up job or family), and, perhaps most importantly for most people, to save a tremendous amount of time and money, compared with the demands and costs of a traditional degree program.

Cafi Cohen, *And What About College? How homeschooling leads to admissions to the best colleges and universities*. This is a decent *overall* guide to homeschooling as a teenager, but it focuses on preparing for and then getting into college. Cafi’s son went on to the U.S. Air Force Academy (after also being accepted at many other institutions, and offered numerous scholarships). Her daughter entered a selective liberal arts college with a substantial scholarship. Cafi tells what their homeschooling was like (*not* “school-at-home”), how they kept records, and how they conveyed it all to college admissions people. And she offers well-researched information for other college-bound homeschoolers in a variety of situations. The appendices include copies of the Cohens’ homemade transcripts, cover letters, application essays, and course descriptions.

University of Denver has also good experience with homeschoolers. Our son, Jeff, applied to one of their high school summer programs called “The Making Of An Engineer.” According to the admissions officer, they had 180 applicants for 60 spaces. The admissions officer told me he filled the first 30 slots with students who had sky-high standardized test scores. Jeff did not fit into this category. That left 150 applicants for the remaining 30 slots. The admissions officer told us that Jeff got one of those 30 places *because* he was a homeschooler. Their experience told them that—all other things being equal—homeschooled students would do a better job.

Other very important resources for life and learning

Thomas Armstrong, *Seven Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences*. Based on the Harvard research which “proves” the radical notion that there is more to intelligence than linguistic and mathematical aptitude. Armstrong points out the importance of each intelligence—“word smart,” “picture smart,” “music smart,” etc., and gives fascinating examples. (Heart-surgeons operate on

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body-smart, William Shakespeare and Jane Addams were people-smart.) He also offers self-tests to discover your own hidden strengths, and numerous strategies—some quick, some intensive—for developing each intelligence in your own life. I really love this book—it’s packed with useful ideas, and easy and inspiring to read.

Spatial thinkers should also consider working with their ideas in three dimensions. James Watson and Francis Crick stunned the world and won a Nobel Prize in 1962 when they discovered the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule by using a large three-dimensional model as a thinking tool. Designers at General Motors and NASA regularly create elaborate cardboard mock-ups of cars and space modules that save them millions of dollars in development costs. You can create your own visual thinking lab at home with inexpensive materials such as Styrofoam or Foamcore (a laminated paper-and-Styrofoam sandwich) for mock-ups and miniature models; soda straws and paper clips or commercially made sticks and connectors for geometrical shapes; and a box of miscellaneous odds and ends (string, tape, blocks, toothpicks, clay, wire, wood scraps, rubber bands, tinfoil, paper scraps, and so forth). In addition, consider the power of modern technology in aiding visual thought. The computer industry has opened up a wide range of options for visual thinkers through CAD (Computer Aided Design) programs, “paint and draw” software, interactive video, and other emerging technologies.

Clifton Fadiman, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan*. This book introduces you to 130 of the best writings that have come out of Western civilization—not just novels and poetry but also history, politics, philosophy, psychology, biography, and autobiography.

The *Iliad* is probably the most magnificent story ever told about man’s prime idiocy: warfare. The human center is Achilles. The main line of the narrative traces his anger, his sulkies, his savagery, and the final assertion of his better nature. He is the first hero in Western literature; and ever since, when we talk of heroic qualities, Achilles is somewhere in the back of our minds, even though we may think we have never heard of him.

Richard Fobes, *The Creative Problem Solver’s Toolbox: A Complete Course in the Art of Creating Solutions to Problems of Any Kind*. Unlike most books on thinking skills, this one deals with solving real-life problems, rather than made-up brain teasers. Strategies you can use on all kinds of problems—the hunger of homeless people in your city, a friend’s offensive jokes, the challenge of finding a great summer job.

A very useful way to create new ideas is to create new combinations of existing ideas. A simple form of combining ideas consists of combining existing objects to create a useful new object. For example, the clock radio was invented by combining a radio with an alarm clock. Notice that the resulting

combination offers an advantage—namely the clock can turn on the radio—that isn't available if a radio and alarm clock are simply placed side-by-side.

John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down*. If your parents, relatives, or friends have any doubts as to what school does to minds and souls, let Gatto wake them up! Gatto taught for 26 years, winning titles like New York State Teacher of the Year. Powerful and uncompromising, this book lays down the truth.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to listen to a stranger reading poetry when you want to learn to construct buildings, or to sit with a stranger discussing the construction of buildings when you want to read poetry.

Ronald Gross, *The Independent Scholar's Handbook*. Proof that unschooling doesn't have to stop when academically inclined people reach college and grad school level. This excellent, detailed book will help you become an expert in any subject without giving up control to a university or other institution. Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and Betty Friedan are among the many independent scholars who have used the approach Gross describes.

Major intellectual journeys quite often begin with browsing. As a teenager, Joel Cohen was browsing at his local bookstore . . . leafing through the pages of *Elements of Physical Biology* by Alfred J. Lotka. "Here's a guy who thinks the way I do," he recalls exclaiming to himself. "Mathematics might be a useful way to make some sense of life." Cohen had been amazed to learn that the degree to which an earthworm turns its head in the direction of light is directly proportional to the logarithm of the intensity of the light. "I had just learned about logarithms in school. This simple organism was behaving in a mathematically lawful way, and it knew logarithms without school! It seemed to me I had better learn some math." Another book, Abraham Moles's *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, so captivated the youngster that he wrote the author in France, asking permission to translate the book into English and enclosing his version of the first chapter as a sample. Moles granted the request and Cohen then wrote to the University of Illinois Press, which subsequently published the translation. Neither author nor publisher knew that their translator was sixteen years old. Twenty-five years later, Cohen conducted his research in "biology by the numbers" as head of the laboratory of populations at The Rockefeller University.

Herbert Kohl, *From Archetype to Zeitgeist: Powerful Ideas for Powerful Thinking*. A wonderful guide to the language of ideas. Thorough definitions of several hundred intriguing and important terms (like *postmodernism*, *paradigm*, *synergy*, *semiotics*, *pluralism*, *colonialism*, *gaia hypothesis*, *stream of consciousness*, and *anarchy*). Organized by topic: arts, literature, religion, psychology, economics, political science. Definitions (with historical anecdotes) range from a couple paragraphs to a couple pages.

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Pedant: ‘ped-nt, n [from Greek *paidagogos*, from *pais*, boy + *agogos*, leader]. The word pedant is derived from the Latin *pedagogus*, which means teacher. This meaning has been extended to refer to a teacher who adheres to strict and formal rules in teaching, and is dry and uninteresting. More generally a pedant is a person who is unduly concerned with book learning and formal rules and regulations without an understanding or experience of practical affairs. A pedantic argument is one that is full of quotes and references to books and authors but lacking in intelligence or wisdom.

Howard Rheingold, editor, *The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog*. This giant book opens up more options than you ever knew existed, by describing and quoting from the best books (and other resources) in every imaginable category, from Exploring Space to Storytelling. It is also a graphic masterpiece, full of fascinating drawings and photographs charmingly splayed across the pages. Also see the earlier (still very useful) versions: *The Essential Whole Earth Catalog*, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, *The Next Whole Earth Catalog*. Look for all in libraries and used book stores.

Barbara Sher, *Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want*. The best book I know of to help you first set delicious goals you really care about, and then make those dreams come true. Helpful, too, for people who feel unmotivated and not thoroughly excited about anything. And excellent for adults who wish they’d unschooled—it’s not too late! Here, Sher introduces a concept she calls the “Buddy System”:

The Buddy System is a way of creating your “ideal family” in miniature. It’s the most compact and efficient way I know to give yourself the kind of support system I’ve been describing throughout this book. Its principle is simple: you and a friend make it your shared goal to meet both your individual goals. It works because it’s about a thousand times easier to have faith, courage, and good ideas for someone else than it is for yourself—and easier for someone else to have them for you. So you team up and trade those positive resources: your buddy provides them for you and you provide them for her or him.

How do you pick a buddy? She or he can be a close friend or roommate, but doesn’t have to be. A new acquaintance or a neighbor can be just as good. This is an action-oriented arrangement first and an intimate friendship only if you want it to be. Your buddy will be giving you emotional and moral support, yes, but for a purpose: to keep you in motion. In fact, if you are close friends, you’re going to have to keep the long, rambling heart-to-heart talks out of the business part of your relationship and save them for after hours.

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afterword to the second [1998] edition

When I finished the first edition of this book and cast it to the wind in 1991, I had no idea what to expect. I didn't know if the first thousand copies would sell or just dent my bedroom floor. I wasn't confident that even one person would read my wild words and be convinced to leave school and get a bigger life, but I felt that if even that one person did so, my efforts would be worthwhile.

Seven years and 20,000 copies later, *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* is still underground, obscure, nowhere near the bottom rungs of anybody's bestseller list. Yet, through letters, phone calls, articles and letters in homeschooling newsletters, e-mail, reliable gossip, and face-to-face meetings, I've heard from and about *hundreds* of teenagers who have read this book and unschooled themselves (so I figure there may be many more I haven't heard about) ...and hundreds more who were already homeschooling but have started living more proactively. Teachers, parents, college students, and other adults also write to me. They tell me how they are unschooling themselves, recovering trust in their own brains and desires, and how they are trying to respect and support the young people they teach, or their own children.

So, I live in a state of continual ecstatic shock. Hardly a day goes by that I don't feel grateful and stunned that I happened to be at the right place and the right time, that *I* was the person who got to rephrase the wisdom of the unschooling movement for teenagers. To be sure, it took a lot of work to write this book (and again, to revise it) and I am pleased with myself for doing that work as well as I could, but I'm also immensely thankful that my life offered the opportunity to do so. Most of this book is communal wisdom; I just absorbed it, digested it, and re-directed it—like a passive solar wall.

Where the unschooling movement has gone since the first edition of this book

It's gotten bigger and bolder and although the term *unschooling* still mystifies Jane Average on the street, everybody at least in the U.S. has heard of *homeschooling* by now and thinks they know what it is. Urban unschooling is growing rapidly—people used to think of homeschooling as exclusively a rural trend and if that ever was the case, it isn't now.

Recently, the media has discovered the term *unschooling*. (It's annoying, though, when they call it a new subcategory of homeschooling, as if John Holt didn't launch it in the 1970s.) In general, homeschooling laws are better now, and in most states it's quite simple to get out of school.

Partly because of this book, many young people have themselves initiated the process of unschooling, rather than waiting for their parents to think of it. For that reason, and also because the homeschooling movement in general is growing rapidly, and also because homeschooling toddlers get older every day, there are now way more unschooling teenagers than there were in 1991. Go, team. And, I see again and again that our movement evolves not only because unschooling makes sense, but also because unschoolers consider themselves a community and are heartbreakingly generous with each other.

Unschoolers keep leapfrogging over the backs of other unschoolers, and thereby getting better and better at living and learning. As always, many choose activities that are deeply fulfilling for them but that are not particularly “newsworthy”—lots of reading, neighborhood volunteering, questioning everything, watching birds, intimate friendships. Others choose spectacular adventures or large projects—undertakings which do often happen to be newsworthy, but that's not the point: bicycling alone

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through Columbia and Ecuador. Writing and editing books. Designing and building a recumbent bike. Opening and operating a retail store. Publishing a serious unschooling zine for several years. Building a yurt, a straw bale house, a solar oven of one's own design. Bicycling alone across the U.S., becoming the youngest American woman to do so. (Of course, the people who accomplish these feats also spend long quieter periods at home reading, watching birds, questioning everything....)

How this revision is different from the original edition

I added: A section on international homeschooling laws and practices. E-mail addresses and Web sites. More resources (books, suppliers, camps, etc.). More anecdotal examples and quotes from people inventing unschooling—including new excerpts from *GWS*, whose cutting-edge articles continue to knock my socks off. An armload of my own new comments and suggestions. An appendix packed with favorite letters from readers.

I deleted: about three cuss words, to make my mother happy and have a better chance of infiltrating a broader range of households. Recommendations for resources which are no longer available, or which are not as good as newer stuff. (I did *not* delete mentions of important out-of-print books, since books go out of print lickety-split and are still findable at libraries and used book stores.) The long list of U.S. homeschooling organizations, since they change quickly and it's best for you to get current information, such as the annual directory published by *GWS*.

I changed: not much. I de-Americanized some passages where the original text was confusing to the rest of the English-speaking world. And since I blasted through the first edition in less than one intense year—I urgently wanted to get this message *out*—I've taken the liberty, this second time around, to do a bit of re-organizing and polishing. But, although I'm a different person now than I was seven years ago, and I now choose and string words together differently, it didn't make sense to rewrite a lot. This book has become its own entity, with a life quite separate from my own, and I don't feel I have the right (not to mention the energy!) to overhaul it much.

Where the author has been

Well, I fell in love, got married [and later divorced], rolled past my thirtieth birthday, started gardening, got better at dancing, spent seven years being the secretary to the person who wrote the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*... and tried a whole bunch of projects related to unschooling: edited and self-published two more books; started about five more books (now lurking unfinished in my ominous filing cabinet); published a newsletter, *Unschooling Ourselves*; worked on a video about unschooling (also not finished, yet); opened a resource center; chattered on a lot of radio shows and a few TV shows and to a gazillion journalists; gave a bunch of talks at homeschooling conferences and other events; gave a few consultations; started Not Back to School Camp; started a support group for unschoolers; started a support group for dropouts; started a mail-order book business. And I answered hundreds—maybe thousands, I lose track—of letters. (Sometimes I am overwhelmed with guilt that I cannot keep up with all my mail, and that I can't be a personal friend or consultant to the many teenagers who reach out to me, looking for support as they begin to take responsibility for their own lives, often with confused or skeptical parents.)

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The biggest lesson I learned by doing all those things is that *doing too much is a sick way to live*, and it's wasteful and ungrateful to live too fast to breathe. I also had a lot of good moments and was able to help a number of people—but not, I feel, as well as I would have had I carefully chosen fewer projects and given each more focused, clear attention. I no longer publish a newsletter, run a resource center, speak at homeschooling events, talk much to media people, give consultations, or run support groups. With the help of my charming [former] husband Skip, I do still—with great joy and excitement—run Not Back to School Camp, operate Genius Tribe (our mail-order book business), answer some of my mail, continue to write, and consider finishing old projects or taking on new ones... selectively.

People often ask how my own views about education have changed in the past seven years. Mostly, my feelings have simply intensified. I'm now *less* tolerant of the kind of homeschooling in which the parents set up school at home and follow a packaged curriculum. (This very morning, I was the reluctant guest on a conservative radio show in Colorado. One irate caller said, "I'm *shocked*. Self-directed learning? That's why I pulled my kids out of *school*.")

But I'm even more excited now about the kind of homeschooling in which people take charge of their own learning. I wrote the first edition of this book on the strength of my convictions about my own adolescence, John Holt's work, and the examples of a bunch of teenagers who were already directing their educations. My understanding runs deeper now, and I've added new material and updated old information on the power of my mailbox and new friendships. I'm fortunate to count among my close friends several grown up unschoolers who remind me again and again of what's important in life, of how *I* want to live. And the letters that have filled my heart and my file cabinets show me, over and over, that unschooling saves lives, that this message is even more important than I realized the first time around.

Eugene, Oregon
Friday the 13th, February 1998

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