

HOMESCHOOL SOUP

Homeschoolers are an enigmatic lot. They seem to make news with increasing regularity, whether it's by winning academic contests, volunteering in their communities, climbing the music charts or speaking out through the local newspaper or television. But the facts behind who they are and why they make the choices they do are often obscured in the fifteen-second sound bite or local-interest story. Little understood, they are often mischaracterized or homogenized into white-bread pawns in an educational war fought by increasingly bitter opponents.

What do we really know about these independent people who have chosen to buck the most ingrained, influential and life-forming institution in American lives? Who are they and why did they make the choice to homeschool? Where do they live? Why are they so hard to find when the media comes calling? And what do they actually do?

First, they are everybody! They are your neighbors and the neighbors of your family members and your friends. They live in the cities, in small towns, in the suburbs, and in the most remote rural areas. They live in apartments and on houseboats. They live in huge mansions and in government housing. They live in housing developments and in trailer parks. Although most are middle income families, some are downright poor, and a very few seem to have money to burn.

The family faces reflect their racial composition: Caucasian, African, Asian, American Indian, they run the racial gamut. Many families are a wonderful combination of races and cultures. For instance, some have adopted or fostered children of different ancestry from the parents. In other cases, grandparents have custody of grandchildren who they are educating at home. Single parents. Fathers at home, mothers working. Families working together at a home-based business. In short, the homeschooling community is beginning to mirror the greater community in terms of its composition.

The children, too, are a complex group. There is every range of ability, disability, gift and attribute. Some are so bright their stars shine out into the world, some so sweet and giving their gifts are a blessing to all they meet. Some are troubled and healing. Some are afflicted and learning to cope in ways education experts declared would never be possible. Each is special in some particular way. You could not possibly be in a room filled with homeschooling children and fail to recognize their uniqueness.

The more complex question of why families choose to homeschool is easily answered. They do it because it works! Most happy, long term homeschoolers will tell you that, although they may have decided to homeschool because it fit their philosophy of life, or because their kids were having problems in school, or even because their pastor told them they had to, they continue because it became the satisfying way they live their lives. They may have their occasional hurdles to overcome, but their children are getting educated, their family is strong, and they have a great deal of flexibility in dealing with life.

What families do when they homeschool varies incredibly. A very rare few sit at desks each day for five or six hours and "do lessons." Some simply live their lives and the learning happens in the process. Children learn about what interests them and parents support that learning process. Most homeschoolers have at least a little structured learning, but in general they are flexible about a great deal of it. Music and art lessons, learning clubs, Scouts, 4-H, academic classes and the internet all provide opportunities for homeschooled children. Some

families laughingly say they "car school" because they are on the move so much of the time.

Therein lies the reason for their elusive nature. They are busy, focused on their family and community, and have very little time for the curiosity of strangers. Some have fielded inquiries about their lives until they simply don't feel they can answer another question. Most are fiercely independent and value their family's privacy.

In an effort to provide a "balanced piece," media coverage, unfortunately, often pits homeschoolers against the public school system. Institutional educators are utilized by the media as authorities in an arena where they have no experience. Professional educators, professors, researchers - none can really comment knowledgeably about homeschooling unless they have actually homeschooled their children, and very few have done that. Their information is often anecdotal and rarely firsthand, based more on myth than on fact.

Teachers' unions are always good for an anti-homeschooling quote, but given their financial incentive to have children enrolled in public schools, that is not so surprising. Homeschoolers read the comments printed by these dubious experts and cringe at their ignorance.

So when the media comes calling, homeschoolers are sometimes understandably reluctant to answer the call. And it is the families who have no political, religious or other agenda to promote, the hundreds of thousands of families that belie the usual stereotypes, that are often the least accessible. What incentive could they possibly have for giving up their time and their family's privacy to make themselves available for interviews?

It is coverage of real issues, ones that require research and thoughtful inquiry, that will get the attention of these homeschoolers. Being treated as the knowledgeable, experienced people that they are - the real experts in this field - rather than rank amateurs in the latest fad, will go a long way toward building trust. When homeschoolers sense a genuine interest and respect, they will begin to participate, and the stories that result will be richer for it. But more importantly, they will be a truer reflection of what is actually happening in the homeschooling community.