

Changes

by Keegan O'Connor

My first day of homeschooling. Opening my eyes to the morning and thinking, "Wow, it's Monday. I can go back to sleep and not get in trouble." Smiling to myself as I sank back into bed wondering what I might do when I finally woke up. Then, slowly falling back into a restful slumber.

The differences between public schools and homeschooling span beyond educational aspects of what you learn, how you learn it, and when you learn it. You can wake up, work on your "school" work, have a friend over, or anything else you can think of whenever you like (barring parental disapproval, of course). There are also social differences. The amazing differences in the social atmospheres of school and homeschool had a tremendous effect on me, spurring noticeable changes in my personality.

The social arena in school was difficult for me to deal with. It seemed each year in school, I was the shyest of my class. I always had a hard time introducing myself to people, making friends, and, especially, keeping friends that I'd already made. I did manage to have a few close friends. I kept those same friends for several years, throughout grade school and on into middle school, at which point I found it more difficult to make new friends. So I decided just to stick with the friends I had and not worry about making new ones.

During middle school, I developed (as many teens do) a severe case of self-consciousness. I wanted what many kids my age wanted: to fit in. There were messages all over, though, that told me I didn't fit in. I didn't ever seem to be wearing the right clothes, listening to the right music, or participating in the right school activities. And people had no problem with letting me know this whenever they could. It was a constant battle between who I was and who I thought I should be. They simply didn't go together.

On the other hand, I did very well in the academic portion of school. In my mind, a "B" was a low grade. I never studied, yet I always did well on assignments, special projects, and tests. A teacher's dream: quiet, agreeable, and a good student. But, because I never needed to study, I never learned how. Procrastination became my specialty, putting assignments off until the night before. I never worked hard for my grades; the work I was doing was much too easy for me. When I got a chance to leave behind the easy schoolwork and social minefield of middle school, I jumped at the opportunity.

The summer before I entered eighth grade, my brother had been homeschooling for one year. The social pressures had gotten to me, and my parent's had told me that, since my brother began homeschooling, I was always welcome to do the same. I decided to stay home in the fall. I rested easy all summer, knowing that I didn't need to worry about school in September. By fall, nothing was all I wanted to do. I had a small amount of "school" work that I did sporadically. But for that first year, I did as little as possible, trying to adjust.

Not being an athletic person, when my mom proposed that I visit the local skating rink (where gobs of homeschoolers met every other week during school hours), I was less than enthusiastic. Luckily, she dragged me along with her. I didn't socialize much that first time, but decided I would keep going back. Eventually, I made friends there, and invited them over to play games occasionally. The homeschoolers I met were more accepting than most of the kids I had encountered in school. I was no longer ridiculed, and I began to open up to people more easily.

Within a year, I had a larger group of friends than ever in my life. The differences between school and homeschool had become apparent to me, as I found myself fitting in. I felt free to be myself for the first time and was gaining friends because of it. Now I'm much more comfortable with myself, and with dealing with other people. I no longer dread parties; instead, I look forward to them and to meeting new

people. I feel more confident in myself, knowing that people won't reject me because I'm not "cool" enough for them.

Last spring, I felt I was getting behind in math. I needed to get through with algebra, so I signed up for a math course at the community college. With college courses, I figured, came higher responsibility than public school. From the first day, I knew lots of effort would be needed to get through the course. I studied hard, and when finals came, I got a "B". What I learned about studying and time management was just as important as what I learned about variables and the quadratic formula.

Change. The only thing in life that doesn't change is change itself. Whether for benefit or otherwise, change is always there to spice things up. At some point, everyone grows up. I'm sure many teens have gone through a similar change in personality. But there has to be a catalyst, something that begins the changes. It could be a move to a new town, or a certain teacher. For me it was homeschooling. It's changed me, and I know I am not alone.

Keegan O'Connor is a 16 year old homeschooler from Portland, Oregon. He is an avid "Magic" competitor and is a member of a world champion Destination Imagination team of homeschooled teens.