Let's Put on a Show! The Making of a Career Fair

By Mindy Gomillion

There aren't many things about the public education system that I miss, but I always felt that it had the manpower and clout to provide certain services to its students that we homeschoolers could not. After all, we are not a system or an organization, but a collection of independent diverse families happily marching to the beat of our different drummers. However, I do miss the career fairs that high schools always held. At least, I missed the "idea" of them-the reality left a lot to be desired. Not content to admit that homeschooling has any shortcomings, I decided to create the ideal version of the career fair-unconventional yet real world, entertaining yet educational-in other words, the homeschool version.

I started by setting the fair's goals and defining its target market.
(Can you tell I have a degree in marketing?) The goals were pretty straightforward: to present various career options in a realistic manner. What does each profession entail? What is a typical day like? What training and education is required? What income range can be expected? These are the questions I told each presenter to be prepared to answer. Initially, the fair was targeted at older teenage homeschoolers. But this is too narrow an age-range and somewhat at odds with the family-centered orientation of most of us. Why not include the whole family? It doesn't hurt to introduce the concept of careers to younger children or for them to see that homeschooling moms and dads can do something other than drive kids around all day in minivans. As for the parents, are we really too old to consider another career someday? And what about those fortunate people who already know what they want to do when they grow up? Well, perhaps there are careers they haven't considered, or perhaps they ought to find out what the rest of the world is doing. Everyone has something to gain from a career fair.

Once I had set the goals and defined the market, it was time to create the product. Even before I compiled my list of professions, I decided to reserve the location and date for the fair. I did this first for two reasons: The practical reason was to make sure we could count on a location and be able to tell presenters when the fair was. But there was also a psychological reason-there would be no backing out. I often commit to doing something first so that I'll have to fulfill the challenge. Otherwise, great ideas tend to remain just that-ideas. I decided to hold the event at the Dell Jewish Community Center and discussed everything with the center's event coordinator. I picked an approximate time (a Friday four months off), and they narrowed it down to a date. The center would charge us $225 for a 3-hour period. For this fee, they would completely set up 30-odd tables with chairs and take them all down and clean up afterwards. They also had an equipment list for rental (such as VCRs). We could have found a place for free, but would have had to handle a lot more labor. I felt it was well worth the cost and that a $2.00 admission fee was quite reasonable. So the time and place was set and announced on our homeschooling elist and newsletter.

Now the real work began. In the announcement for the fair, I also asked the homeschooling parents to be presenters. Austin Area Homeschoolers (AAH) has over 350 families and an incredible diversity of professions. I also directly asked friends at soccer (our twice-weekly major gathering of AAH) and all my relatives. It was slow at first, but after several commitments I started sending out the list of presenters to our elist each week. This got people interested in coming and emboldened more to sign up as presenters. At the same time, I made a list of professions, starting with the yellow pages of the phone book. I called professional associations and found leads in the newspaper. There is also a Book of Lists available through most chambers of commerce that lists

the ten largest companies in every area of business. It was never my intention to include every single profession. Having a 16- and a 17-year-old, I know most of the older kids in our group, and had some idea of their interests. I also asked if there were any professions people wanted to see. I also used my own biases. I have a theory that homeschooling attracts mostly right-brainers, so our list was weighted in that direction. The process was very dynamic. As the list grew, I could see obvious gaps and actively recruited those professions. It was like a treasure hunt. People were still signing up the day before the fair. In all, fifty people agreed to participate. They included: two people in marketing/advertising; a small business owner; journalists; photographers; a museum director; an archaeologist; a chemist; a botanist; a cultural anthropologist; two architects; civil engineers; a Navy submarine officer; an Air Force recruiter; two police officers; a team of firefighters (who brought their fire truck and equipment to demonstrate); the founder of a charter school; an environmental educator for a nature and science center; a philosophy professor; a Spanish professor; a software engineer from Hewlett-Packard; a vice president of Dell Computers; the president of a computer chip design company; a computer scientist at IBM; an emergency room physician who set casts on children's fingers at the fair; an EMS public education coordinator who brought an EMS unit to demonstrate; a pilot and flight nurse for StarFlight emergency helicopter; a physical therapist; a personal fitness trainer/massage therapist; a midwife; a licensed drug/alcohol counselor; a clinical social worker; a psychologist; a corporate entertainment and business trainer; a screenwriter and director; a stage actor/singer/songwriter; two musicians; and a dancer.

I also found it important to have a system to keep your efforts organized. I created an application that was sent to presenters. It asked for their name, profession, phone number, email address, and special needs during the fair (such as electrical outlets or equipment rental). In retrospect I should have asked for their title (to put on the nametag) and mailing address (to know where to send thank-you notes). I also kept a notebook with sections for the presenters' list, the career applications and emails, prospect history, and the community center contract.

The week before the career fair, everything started coming together.
We checked out the community center. With the event coordinator, we tentatively planned where the tables would go and finalized some details. I called or emailed all the presenters to confirm their commitments and to make sure I had the right information. Nametags were typed up with the person's name, title, and company or general profession. Table labels were typed up with the broad categories such as "Architecture" or "Chemistry". The program was typed up and printed. It was 8-1/2 x 11" folded to 5-1/2 x 8-1/2", printed on 2 sides, containing the broad categories with their list of presenters. We made signs and a poster for outside the hall to let people know where we were. We also had to get $50 in $1 bills for the admissions table, staffed by two volunteers.

On the day of the fair, we arrived three hours in advance to set up. The tables and chairs were already in place, but we had to decide where everyone would go. Despite having thought about it in advance, it helps to actually be there to lay it out. Then you can match outlets to presenters, group categories together logically, etc. At last, it was show time! As the presenters arrived, we realized that our physical layout had to be constantly adjusted. We hadn't anticipated the size of some of the presentations and props. That's why it really helped to work with event professionals who brought in extra tables and chairs and accommodated all our needs.

There are a few things we'll do differently next year. We intend to incorporate a type of "scavenger hunt" questionnaire with prizes for the children to make the fair more interactive. It was apparent that many people did not know what questions to ask or how to initiate a discussion. Many of the presenters were equally as inexperienced. A questionnaire could be devised that would require the

viewers to talk more to each participant in order to find the answers. Also, we decided to have a round robin of introductions early in the fair using a portable microphone-perhaps only 30 seconds per presenter. Some of the presenters were not fully utilized because the nature of their profession was not apparent, and they tended to be overlooked. We'll also set next year's date earlier to get on busy professionals' calendars. We couldn't get some very desirable fields to come because they couldn't schedule us in or they had already done as many career fairs as they wanted to for the year. Finally, we'll advertise the fair more heavily in surrounding areas to share this valuable experience. We could have accommodated many more attendees.

Approximately 150 paying "customers" with an untold number of children aged six and under came to view the career fair. We pretty much broke even on costs, but the true success of the fair is measured in other ways. Connections were made. Possibilities were considered. Perhaps even lives were influenced. That was the whole point.

Mindy Gomillion lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband Marc and two children Chase (17) and Sarah (16), who have educated themselves since the 7th grade. Mindy was also the editor of the AAH News, the newsletter of the Austin Area Homeschoolers.