THE NETWORKING CHALLENGES

by Carol Moxley

Homeschooling, while it's come a long way, is still not without its challenges. Skeptics abound; legislative threats hover; philosophical differences divide; support can be elusive . . . These challenges confront most homeschoolers and advocates work to address them. Although there have been many changes, there's still a lot of ground to cover.

Here are some examples of how these obstacles have been met head-on. Hopefully, these examples will inspire you to follow the examples of those committed to building and strengthening the homeschooling network that is growing on local, state and national-yes, even international-levels! Let's meet some homeschoolers who have met the challenge!

THE CHALLENGE OF BEGINNING

Shelley Costantino and Marnie Jones live across the state of Florida from each other. Sharing the same vision-a state network though which homeschoolers could obtain and share information-they teamed up to create TOO (Teaching Our Own). According to Shelley, "TOO emerged from listening to others who were not getting support. . . [I] believe in my heart that there are more home educating families just like me and that they are the ones who TOO will be reaching out to. "

Not yet a year old, TOO has relied upon the Internet to make itself available, but good, old-fashioned word of mouth has also played a key role. "There are ways such as phone trees and asking others to share information to stay informed. Our office number for TOO is new and it never stops ringing with calls from new home educators wanting information," says Shelley. The target date for TOO's first hardcopy newsletter is May 10th, and they are already planning TOO's first statewide event, Family Fest 2000.

While it's not always easy, Shelley does admit it's important for a person coordinating a state group to remain objective in the face of issues that arise. She also encourages anyone who wants to start a state network to do so. She says her only regret thus far is that she waited so long to start TOO, thinking the situation in her state would change. She cautions to "Keep up with your health-both physical and mental. Walk away every now and then. Always praise everyone around you and know when to say you're sorry." Good advice for anyone, not just coordinators of state networks!

In South Dakota, Rhonda Conner also felt the distinct absence of a cohesive network among homeschoolers in her state. Rhonda spent months of searching for information pertaining to support groups, legislation, an accessible way of connecting with homeschoolers in her state. After this, coupled with listening to the complaints and concerns of her homeschooling friends, Rhonda concluded a viable network in South Dakota simply didn't exist. She decided to change that. But how? She'd never done anything like this before and had no idea where to start. The existing groups in her area offered little encouragement or assistance. But with the help of some friends and a vision in mind, Rhonda's determination grew.

Rhonda volunteered to work with NHEN's Support Committee months before she decided to meet the challenge of creating a state network. It seemed natural that she would turn to NHEN for help. "NHEN has a basic belief in helping all homeschoolers. That includes helping them to help themselves. The members of NHEN go far out of their way to share their experiences and knowledge. I had enough from my other Internet resources to have an idea of what I needed to do,

but I got actual, detailed, useful information from NHEN members. "

Rhonda's new network is still in the planning stages; so much so, it doesn't yet have a name. But the vision is clear: "We will give support group information out to those seeking it, we will keep abreast of legislative issues throughout the state, we will keep information flowing between all the groups within the state, and we will connect each homeschooler with needs with those that have something to offer. A lot of information should be available [through] us."

THE CHALLENGE OF KEEPING IT ALIVE

Initially begun as WHENet, the Washington Home Education Network has been nurtured by various people over the years. With no formal leadership, and open to all homeschoolers, it remains a consistent source of support to homeschoolers in Washington State. Thoughts of turning WHEN into a full-blown, statewide support group were discussed and abandoned in lieu of maintaining the friendly, informal, online gathering place that WHEN had always provided. Out of this informal group, many good things have come to pass over the years. In a recent post to NHEN, Barb Weirich described one such outcome: "One of our members lost her husband last fall, and must get her house ready to sell. It's a double lot with lots of landscaping and chores that need doing. Our list members are organizing a work party to prune, trim, edge, mow, fix and spread bark for her . . . I am so proud of our WHENetters! People are coming from all over the state, and those who can't make it are making donations of food, etc. This group is composed of all kinds of homeschoolers from all kinds of groups: inclusive, exclusive, loners, undergrounders. You name it; we've got it. We've worked hard to step above our differences to find our commonalities, and now this wonderful effort is happening when someone needs help. It can be done."

Serving on the Board of Directors for NHEN, Barb shares the vision of homeschoolers nationwide working together to strengthen homeschooling. She says, ". . . [H]omeschooling is the cement that holds everyone together. It really helps if one has members who earnestly wish to find similarities and build bridges rather than get bogged down with emphasizing differences. Frank and heartfelt discussions go a long way towards building up a community like [WHEN], with open-mindedness and a willingness to try and see the others' point of view being very helpful."

WHEN exists solely in cyberspace and in the hearts and lives of its members. Barb feels strongly that many homeschoolers without internet access face a networking disadvantage. "People without internet access are cut off from an easy source of information. They are cut off from instant knowledge about changes in legislation, unless they happen to be part of a very good phone tree. I doubt if non-internet users are as well informed about the incredible diversity among the homeschooling movement, nor about their options for homeschool support groups that reflect their own philosophy."

THE CHALLENGE OF CONTINUED GROWTH

Susan Frederick agrees with Barb. "Yes, it is much harder to stay informed about events if you don't have access to the information online. Communication is slower and may not be received in a timely enough matter to do anything about it. There's still many smaller communities in Texas where the homeschoolers don't have a lot of online access," says Susan.

Seven years ago, when few people could navigate the awkward online world, Susan started the TAFFIE (Texas Advocates for Freedom in Education) email list. TAFFIE has since become a solid

networking tool for homeschoolers all across the Lone Star State. Every effort is made to include contact information on TAFFIE's website for support groups with an online presence. Homeschooling events from all over the state can be found there. Susan does extensive research and spends a lot of time communicating with homeschoolers in order to build and maintain the comprehensive resource that TAFFIE has become.

Susan recalls one significant event in Texas through which homeschoolers did "pull together" to examine a state-wide homeschooling issue: "Back in 1998, [sic] it came to light that the Perez Gun Control Case had been quietly filed in San Antonio by HSLDA without most homeschoolers knowing about it. It was hard for many to sit through the in-depth discussion about the case, [with] so many posts each day, but overall I think it was very important to have that discussion because it let people know about the case."

Texas homeschoolers have learned that TAFFIE is a reliable source for obtaining information about upcoming hearings in Austin that might affect homeschoolers. Even when Susan left Texas to temporarily reside in Illinois, this resource continued to grow, thrive, and keep Texas homeschoolers informed. Given the geographic expanse of the state, getting information as quickly as possible enables folks from all over Texas a better chance to drive over to the capitol if they feel they should. For some, that might mean an eight-hour road trip.

Not only have people like Susan Frederick spent an incredible amount of time and energy building networks like TAFFIE, but they have also taken time to help people like Rhonda and Shelly by sharing the knowledge and experience gathered over the years. Such sharing is networking at its best!

THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING IT FUN

A rich mix of online and offline networking can be found in Home Educators Resources Organization (HERO) of Oklahoma. Both telephone and email conferencing are offered to help homeschoolers. Website and hardcopy newsletters are available. Email discussion groups and an annual retreat/conference connect Oklahoma homeschoolers, bringing them together to support, share, and learn from each other.

For the past three years, HERO's retreat/conference has provided a fun-filled, relaxing way for homeschoolers to get together. This event is a camp-out, complete with all the activities one would expect in the great outdoors: ball games, hiking, picnicking, roasting marshmallows, and sleeping under the stars to name but a few. This get-together is centered on a homeschooling theme. The workshops, used book sale/swap, and vendor bags normally expected at a conference are also available, but with a refreshing twist: vendors can't sell there, and the workshops . . . well, star-gazing, camping skills, and rural homeschooling were among the offerings in 1999! Lodging doesn't get much more affordable than a canvas tent so even a tightly budgeted family can enjoy this event.

Julie Miller of HERO reports that attendance has varied over the past few years, but "We've had at least 25 families who chose to stay one or more nights and then additional families (particularly those who live close to the camp) who come during the day to visit and attend conference sessions. We have even had families from Arkansas and Texas make the drive to attend. Many Oklahoma families make a 4-5 hour drive to attend."

How has such an event improved networking among homeschoolers in the Sooner State? Julie answers, "Being an inclusive organization, we get a wide variety of families and it is a wonderful

thing to see people from nearly opposite points of view come together and form deeper friendships based on the one thing they have in common-educating their children at home. There is much more tolerance and understanding on our email list once we've met in person. New homeschoolers feel better after meeting a large group of veteran homeschoolers and leave with much more confidence in homeschooling."

YOUR CHALLENGE

Strengthening America's homeschooling community depends on reaching out to its members to join together, to learn together, and to prosper together. Divided, we remain vulnerable to those seeking to challenge our rights to homeschool. How can we present a unified front while the chasms grow? How can we, in little pockets of isolation, correct public image or educate the mass media? Here are some ideas:

- Get connected with homeschoolers in other area support groups
- Be aware of and contact support groups in other states
- Make yourself available to help those struggling with new groups or looking for resources
- Take steps to create new, or change, resources as needs arise and change
- Keep informed of what's happening in your state and across the country
- Look for and share ideas to strengthen homeschooling
- Decide for yourself what's useful and what's not
- Insist on respect for the right of parents to homeschool their kids
- Set aside non-homeschooling issues that interfere with networking potential
- Remember why we're homeschoolers in the first place!

Work together. Play together. Learn together. Set aside philosophical differences long enough to support and strengthen each other. This, in turn, serves to strengthen the entire homeschooling community. It builds bridges across the chasms that exist among homeschoolers. To do otherwise is to ignore homeschooling's potential to positively impact our world. To accept the challenge, however, is to help build a worldwide network strong enough to support homeschooling for us all.