

## **National Home Education Network: *Unity and Diversity Among Homeschoolers***

*What if homeschoolers could have an effective national organization, yet still maintain their individuality?*

*What if reporters and researchers had a central clearinghouse for information about homeschooling?*

*What if there was an organization that would work to promote a positive image of homeschooling to the rest of the country?*

*What if there was a group of homeschooling parents who would be willing to work to put together an organization to do all those things?*

The National Home Education Network (NHEN) is a community of peers working together to create a national organization that recognizes and respects the enormous diversity in the homeschool movement. NHEN strives to foster an understanding of homeschooling at the national level as well as to facilitate networking among grassroots organizations. Countless homeschooling parents from around the country have found a way to put differences aside and work toward building this network.

The conversation about starting the new national network actually began on the American Homeschool Association email list. In 1995, support group leaders and independent homeschoolers began communicating online. We discovered that in spite of all kinds of differences in opinions and lifestyles, much common ground existed. That common ground was homeschooling. One of the recurring themes on the email lists was the fact that many homeschoolers were not always receiving the information that they might need to make informed homeschooling choices. In some states, information was actually blocked. This presented a dilemma. While 100 or so of us were discussing and learning about homeschooling communities around the world, thousands of homeschoolers weren't a part of the conversation.

The email lists networked and applauded when individual homeschoolers responded to threats on homeschooling freedoms. Telephone calls were made and emails flew when legislators attempted to tighten their grasp on homeschoolers. Newspaper and magazine editors were contacted when homeschooling was pigeon-holed or placed in a negative light. Still, these voices were singular, and we knew that if there were a way to collectively speak up, far more would listen.

Toward the end of 1998 - the AHA list was a flurry again, and the conversation about forming a national organization restarted. But something was different this time. A mutual respect had developed and our cyber-relationships had matured. Many of the homeschoolers had been on this list for some time and had seen each other handle difficult issues. We had begun to trust each other. This trust moved this virtual conversation into a reality. Real life meetings around the country popped up in the summer of 1999... and the new national network was born.

Months went into building the structure for NHEN. No one wanted an organization that would send down pronouncements or summon homeschoolers to action. There needed to be a way that homeschoolers could maintain their individualism and the strength of those independent voices, yet still link arms with one another and step into a new era. To accomplish this, the Network has found a lateral leadership style in organizational structuring. It fits us well. No single person is considered the leader of NHEN - instead we share the leadership role. Different individual strengths are utilized and, depending upon the project, different leaders emerge. The heart of the organization resides in the various committees. This is where all members are welcome to participate. Consequently, NHEN members direct the course of NHEN.

Unlike typical hierarchies, the communication flows up from the committees to the committee chairs - the trustees of the board. Their role is simply to hold the committees' actions to the mission statement, and keep their eye on the "big picture." The trustees will help to prioritize the spending, and see that the major projects are fairly well staggered so as to conserve our volunteer manpower. Remember, the volunteers participating in this endeavor are homeschoolers just like you. They too have children running afoot, and pots overflowing on the stove. But they believe in the mission statement of NHEN and agree that the time is right for action.

NHEN is a bridge-building endeavor - and we have many bridges that need to be built! Today's homeschooling movement needs bridges to improve communication within our community, with the media, and the public.

Within the homeschooling community, we need to open up communication lines in a number of different directions. Many homeschoolers are unaware of all of the choices available to them. The choices may be about homeschooling philosophies or methods, or finding their way through the sea of marketing. Some families need to hear how others deal with legal issues or school superintendents. Others may need to see homeschoolers trusting their instincts, and not blindly following self-proclaimed homeschool leaders or poorly informed government officials. NHEN would like information to be more accessible to these homeschooling families. We believe that families should be able to explore all of their options and then be left to make informed decisions for themselves.

In no way are we asking this very diverse group of homeschoolers to all agree on everything. Not only would that be impossible, it would also be undesirable. We celebrate our diversity! We recognize that as individuals, we may come from vastly different backgrounds. Some of us may discover that we have more in common than we thought. Yet with others, we may find that homeschooling is our only common thread. No matter which scenario applies, we believe that each homeschooling family should be able to choose the homeschooling style that best fits their family, and we support that family's right to choose.

Communication between support groups can improve with better networking. Smaller support groups are often struggling to put together information nights or keep their group together. Large statewide organizations as well as longstanding local support groups are willing to share their tips and experiences. NHEN wants to help this networking process. NHEN can be a wonderful resource for homeschoolers interested in forming their own local support groups. Homeschooling support groups have been in existence long enough that no one should have to reinvent the wheel. Support groups are invited to affiliate with NHEN, supporting the mission statement, and at no expense to them. The goal in this area is simply better communication.

The website, <http://www.nhen.org>, is another tool that will be used to improve communication between homeschoolers as well as with those outside homeschooling circles. Whether you're a homeschooler looking for nearby support groups or you're not sure whether homeschooling is right for your child - nhen.org will help you. Reporters wanting to research a homeschooling article, librarians searching for resources, or even politicians trying to understand more - all of these should find something helpful at the NHEN website.

A great deal of time and effort is being spent on the public relations aspect of NHEN. One of the important goals in the PR committee is to help the public see the diversity within homeschooling. So often, the image of homeschooling in the media is one-sided: Mom working in the kitchen, with her children studiously engrossed in their textbooks at the table. While some homeschooling homes may look just like that, we're aware of many that do not. It's time for the media to have someone to contact that can explain and show the diversity that truly exists in homeschooling. The NHEN Public Relations Committee plans to seek out opportunities to promote a positive image for homeschooling in print, on

the web, through the radio and television.

NHEN is aware that many homeschoolers are not linked with the internet. Yet these homeschoolers also need resources and opportunities to voice their opinions. A monthly newsletter will be available to everyone very soon. All members will be informed of how to subscribe. This newsletter will explain what the committees have accomplished, what they are planning, and how NHEN members can volunteer their time and help move the network forward.

Another opportunity to reach homeschoolers that are not online will be through conferences. A conference committee is exploring all of the options - whether to hold a large national conference that will appeal to homeschoolers from all over the country, or to hold several regional conferences, helping homeschoolers network a little closer to home.

All of these committees are open to suggestions and ideas from homeschoolers everywhere. We invite you to participate on any committee that interests you. Let your voice be heard!

The National Home Education Network is filing for non-profit status. This is not a money-making enterprise. Instead, we view the NHEN as a service organization, created to help homeschoolers maintain their freedom and improve the public image of homeschooling. Any money raised by the Network will be used to fund the projects and needs of the NHEN committees.

NHEN is very different from other groups in yet one more way - membership is free. We never want to see a homeschooling family miss out on information that could help, simply because of a tight budget. But if you support the mission and the goals described here, please consider making a financial contribution. Those who contribute over \$50 by December 1, 1999, will be considered NHEN charter members.

Becoming a member of NHEN has been equated with signing a petition. If you agree with the mission statement and would like to see NHEN continue its work networking with homeschoolers and making a positive impact for the homeschooling movement, you may become a member simply by sending your name, address, telephone phone number and email address to : *NHEN, PMB 244, 22 Westerville Square, Westerville OH 43081\**

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*\*Please note that the Westerville address is no longer viable.*

*Any donations may be sent to*

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