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Posted on Wed, Jun. 10, 2009

Homeschool: The next generation

For alumni of home education, it's a family tradition. They believe in it for their own kids, and are enjoying new resources, diversity, and acceptance.

By Andree Hochman
For The Inquirer

When Emily Bergson-Shilcock dated in college, she kept a list of assertions her beau would have to support should the two marry: She planned to keep her last name, clunky hyphenation and all. She intended to breast-feed her children. And she was determined to educate those children at home.

"Homeschooling is so much a piece of my identity," says Bergson-Shilcock, who was raised in Bryn Mawr and homeschooled along with her two sisters and brother. "I still refer to myself as a homeschooler, even though I'm 31 years old."

Now married to Chris Conklin (a man who passed the first-date assessment with ease) and the mother of Abigail, 2, and Connor, five months, Bergson-Shilcock's convictions are unchanged.

"My parents saw the world as the classroom. . . . I would love up for my children to grow up the way I did."

A brief generation ago, homeschooling surged across the country as state after state made the practice legal (in Pennsylvania, that happened in 1988; before then, permission to homeschool depended on local superintendents).

Now, the children educated in the late-'80s homeschool swell are themselves the parents of preschool and school-age kids. And many are opting to carry on the family tradition; after all, they say, they are living proof that homeschoolers can not only function in society, but thrive.

In a 2004 survey of 5,000 home-educated adults, published by the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), 74 percent of those with school-age children said they had homeschooled at least one of their kids for at least one year.

Bergson-Shilcock credits her clarity, initiative, and rock-solid sense of self to her parents' homeschooling approach, which included field trips, apprenticeships, and service as part of an eclectic curriculum driven largely by the kids' interests.

"I never sat down to learn percentages, but my dad would make pancakes and say, 'We're going to do two-thirds of the recipe.'" Bergson-Shilcock and four other girls formed a violin group, the Pastel Quintet, that played at dozens of nursing and retirement homes over a period of seven years.

At 12, she volunteered in a local T-shirt store; at 17, she opened her own shop, the Destination of Independence, which sold adaptive devices - extra-large light switches, can openers with special handles - for people with disabilities.

And when Bergson-Shilcock enrolled in college at Arcadia - with a portfolio instead of a traditional transcript and no SAT scores because she refused to take the test - "I felt like I had such an advantage over traditionally schooled people because I was used to owning my own education and managing my time."

According to a 2003 count, the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education, about 1.2 million children and teens are being homeschooled. Home-education advocates say the current number is closer to 2 million. But there is no doubt that the homeschool population is both larger and more diverse than it was two decades ago.

"Even 10 years ago, homeschoolers were considered to be on the fringe - either the religious-right fringe or the progressive fringe," says Neil McCluskey, education policy analyst with the Cato Institute. "Now homeschooling has become a much more accepted part of the educational landscape."

Twenty years ago, parents who homeschooled were pioneers, persisting despite hostile reactions from neighbors, relatives, and local school officials. Today's homeschoolers, with the Internet's vast resources, can form online support groups, read homeschooling blogs, download curricula, or subscribe to cyber-courses for their kids.

"Now a new family that begins homeschooling has a zillion options - weekly homeschool classes at church, chess teams, volleyball leagues, museums and zoos that offer homeschool programs," says Susan Richman, who, along with



APRIL SAUL / Staff Photographer

Emily Bergson-Shilcock lets daughter Abigail Bergson-Conklin play with a checkbook in her pretend kitchen at their Fort Washington home.

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her husband, Howard, heads Pennsylvania Homeschoolers, a network, newsletter, and Internet bookstore. "People don't have to feel as isolated."

Gena Conley's mother made up her homeschooling agenda as she went along, educating Conley and her six younger siblings with a mixture of purchased curricula, classic literature, visits to the Liberty Bell, and a homeschool co-op that offered writing workshops and monthly roller-skating trips.

Conley, now 33, regards her own homeschooling of Gabe, 11; Isaiah, 9; Jessa, 7; and Ellie, 4, as "a continuing evolution of what my mom was already doing."

The crammed dining-room shelves in the Egg Harbor City home she shares with her husband, Jeff, hold some resources from her own homeschool days - hardcover biographies of Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln, Miquon blocks for teaching math - along with *501 Spanish Verbs*, *The Scholastic Rhyming Dictionary*, *The Beginner's Bible*, and *What Your Third Grader Needs to Know*.

Conley describes her pedagogy as "a mish-mash. I really am blessed with the fact that my mom experimented. I don't feel that stress: Do I have to buy a box of curriculum? Do I have to do eight subjects a day?" Instead, she worries about time: "Sometimes I feel that I'm rushing things; I'm not letting the kids linger enough."

While religious conviction was part of the impetus to homeschool for both generations - Conley's schedule includes Tuesday-morning Bible study - she also loves the autonomy and family time that homeschooling allows. And she's happy to shield her kids from the inevitable bruises of school life: the mean girls and the rough boys, the kids who might tease Gabe because he loves to identify birds, the teachers who would insist that Isaiah, her energetic second-born, sit quietly in a chair all day.

"Eventually they will go out in the real world," Conley says. "But I'd like to have a little control over what they get exposed to, and when."

According to the Department of Education's 2003 study, nearly one-third of homeschooling families did so mainly to provide moral or religious instruction. For some second-generation homeschoolers, that remains a defining legacy.

Connie Mellinger, 30, was educated at home for nearly all her schooling life. When she attended an elementary school outside Coatesville for third to fifth grade, she became adept at fielding challenges to her religious faith.

When a fifth-grade teacher said the Earth was 4.5 billion years old, Mellinger raised her hand. "According to what I've been taught, the Earth is younger than that."

Other kids chortled, saying, "You're so dumb." It didn't bother me. I felt stronger in what I thought."

Mellinger and her husband, Scott, an assistant manager at Harleysville National Bank in King of Prussia, are aligned in their principles: They agreed not to kiss until they were married, and they are determined to manage on one salary so Connie can homeschool their children - Mikey, 5; Danny, 3; Abbey, nine months; and the baby, due in October.

Already Mellinger works with Mikey, reading Bible verses after breakfast, playing Alphabet Bingo, listening to classical music, and helping him pick out the sound of the trumpet. And while money is tight - their house is small for six, and they can afford only very slow \$5-per-month Internet service - Mellinger believes the benefits of homeschooling far outweigh any financial sacrifice.

"I'm passionate about my faith, so even more than the family tradition, I feel like homeschooling is a godly tradition," she says. She loves seeing the fruits of her efforts; the other day, after she named various block shapes to Mikey, she heard him tell a friend, "This one is a cylinder."

"It's nice to have learning be more natural. They're so young. Everything at this age is a learning experience."

Forty miles and a world away from Coatesville, Bergson-Shilcock gently urges Abigail to put a plastic otoscope in the doll's ear, not in her own. At the post office, she gives the toddler two quarters to buy 50 one-cent stamps and lets her stick them on the envelopes.

"She's getting a better understanding of the way the world works. For me, homeschooling felt like a choice or a privilege. I hope it's something our kids will want to do."

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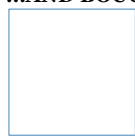
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Posted by **John B.** 08:30 AM, 06/10/2009 [Sign in to report abuse](#)
I find this article to be terribly one sided. I have met individuals who were home schooled who feel that they were misled by their parents. They were only taught subjects their parents wanted them to learn, they were not brought in contact with varying points of view, and they first blossomed when they went away from home and off to college or to work environments. I would like to see an article truly addressing both sides of this issue. I feel that schools are important for both social interaction and for education in the true sense of the word (presenting varying points of view and teaching the child how to make choices about how valid the different theories, ideas, and standpoints actually are). I am also curious whether the author was home schooled, and whether she has religious convictions similar to the ones raised in the article.

Posted by **tpsyoqueen** 09:02 AM, 06/10/2009 [Sign in to report abuse](#)
John B. when you say varying points of view are you referring to liberal propoganda tossed out by the union drons that teach at the public schools?

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