



Remarks by Melanie Burgi at the Opening Session of WPA's 21st Annual Home Education Conference on May 1, 2004, titled *Honoring What Brings Us Together*. [The Conference theme was *Celebrating Our Common Goal: Homeschooling*.] Published in *WPA Newsletter #80*, June 2004, pp. 7-8.

Spring is the most perfect time for us to gather together. It is a time of renewal. We find support and talk with others who share the same passion for homeschooling. It is a time to look forward. We collect information and ideas that will help us, help our children. And it is a time to celebrate. Although we come together with many different views on education and personal beliefs, we have a common bond and a common goal. Just as a quilt has a variety of textures, interesting shapes, and vibrant colors, our homeschooling community is rich in diversity. But there is a common thread that draws us together, nurtures us, and provides warmth. Today, we honor what brings us together so that we may celebrate as a community.

**W**e understand that homeschooling is not just a form of education; it is a lifestyle. As families we immerse ourselves in the rhythm of life and relish each and every moment.

- We share our child's joy as they discover the quiet magic of a butterfly.
- We witness our child's pride when they master a new skill such as tying their shoes.
- We dry their tears when the family dog dies and are surprised when they comfort us in return.
- We worry when our newly-licensed teenager drives off alone for the very first time.
- We experience those bittersweet feelings when a child moves away from home and we wish them all the luck in the world as they take the next step on their journey.
- We hope our adult children will find a soul mate with whom they can share life's adventure.
- And we stand by as they struggle to overcome defeat for that is what life hands all of us at times.

Some may say these experiences are not unique to homeschooling families and indeed they are not. What makes us different is that we simply experience more of these events. We not only spend a lot of time with our children; we embrace the opportunity. And as a result, our lives are enriched and we are forever changed.

We celebrate that learning happens all day long, 365 days a year. It happens in the sandbox, at the theater, on vacation, in the barn, on the soccer field, in the car, at the neighbors', in the grocery store, and at the junk yard. Wherever life takes us, whoever we meet, whatever situation we encounter, there is a lesson. It doesn't matter if we homeschool using conventional methods or we consider ourselves unschoolers. Everyone here understands that our community is our "classroom," and our community is wherever we are. Rich environments surround us providing infinite learning opportunities.

We know that our children are not pieces of clay that we mold or vessels that we fill. Knowledge is not gained in this fashion and development cannot be rushed. We allow our children to be children, being ever watchful that everything has an appropriate time. And we give them that time to unearth the wonders of their world - to create without criticism - to ponder complex ideas and to draw their own conclusions. We know how difficult it is to trust that our children will learn when the time is right. In our fast-paced society where the trend is to push academics at younger and younger ages, we try to be patient while providing an environment where our children may learn at their own pace. Some years, this creates an inner struggle because we wonder if growth and learning are even happening. During these times, we may even see our children take one step backward before taking two or three forward. Today, we celebrate our ability to look beyond those feelings of doubt and uncertainty that we have from time to time.

We value the freedom to set our own schedules and determine priorities. This results in allowing our children to immerse themselves in a chosen interest whether it is snakes, skyscrapers, or scuba diving. They not only have time but we help them find resources and we rejoice as they strive to learn everything they can about a topic. However, this is not always easy. Some of us are squeamish when it comes to snakes and would find it hard to embrace one as a pet. For others, this may mean supporting a daughter as she develops an interest in rabbits. Soon you are building cages for 100 rabbits, raising baby bunnies in the house, and getting up at 4:00 on a cold Saturday morning, traveling to a show clear across the state. For other parents it may mean building a new garage for a son who has a passion for everything that has a motor - from weed trimmers to tractors. You soon get used to tripping over engine parts, housing broken 4-wheelers, and eventually seeing wrecked cars in your driveway, awaiting some body work.

As a homeschooling parent, you value that learning process. It's not the end result or the finished product that is most important. It doesn't matter that your daughter who raised rabbits for eight years no longer wants to become a veterinarian. We understand that was never the goal. We supported her interest so she could learn to be responsible while discovering something about herself. She learned to deal with competition and that life isn't always fair. She learned that success comes with a lot of hard work, a little luck, and some help from your friends. She experienced the thrill of winning and an ache in her heart when she mourned the loss of an animal she raised from birth. We serve our children well by standing by them, by speaking words of encouragement, and by comforting them. And we honor each other for the energy it takes to do this for them, each and every day.

**W**e celebrate those moments that at the time seem so profound - when the light suddenly goes on in our son's mind and long division finally makes sense. We celebrate those moments that at the time seemed so small - when our daughter apologizes for saying something hurtful to a friend. And then suddenly we realize we have it backwards. Academic skills have value but having compassion is priceless.

We have all experienced the joy of receiving a compliment about our children. A simple

comment such as “your child is so polite” can instantly make a parent misty-eyed, for it warms our hearts that others can see what we already know.

We choose to homeschool to benefit our children but come to understand that we gain so much, as well. I didn't fully comprehend this until last fall when my son moved away to college. For several days that followed there was one thought that played in my mind over and over, everywhere I went. Certainly, I knew the house would be a bit quieter, but I didn't expect to fondly remember size 13 shoes in the entryway. And I was surprised by the twinge in my heart when I noticed the empty shelf where his shaver was typically stored. But I found great comfort in this one thought. “These homeschooling years were a precious gift to me.” I had enjoyed countless hours playing on the floor, reading books, traveling to new places, baking cookies, going to 4-H events, and watching my children build a strong bond with their dear friends. We were a family each and every day. I had spent as much time with my children while they were growing up as any mother could, and there was very little I had missed. This is a comforting thought for me, and today, we celebrate the precious gift of wonderful memories.

We come together to praise our courage. Although society is more aware of homeschooling than even a decade ago, it remains unusual in the mainstream. Often we are asked questions that have no simple answers. And we each thirst for support. In the face of doubt from friends, neighbors, and many times our extended family, we find inner strength to trust our instincts and follow our hearts.

My parents are from a generation that shared wisdom through “sayings,” and my dad always used a story or antidote to prove a point. However, there is really only one that has stuck with me through my parenting years, and somehow I think I understand why. It is this - Anyone can drift and dream but it takes a strong fish to swim against the stream. This one sentence visits my mind from time to time, usually when I need the courage to follow my chosen path. Homeschooling takes courage, another common thread that joins us together.

We understand the difficulty of making choices; and for most of us, homeschooling presents a financial sacrifice; and for all of us, it is an emotional commitment. No matter what our circumstances, homeschooling is a priority, and we do our best to make it work.

**T**oday, we honor our ability to face challenges. For some, that means homeschooling as a single parent. For others, it's helping a child with special needs. For everyone, it means getting through each day. We know that challenge is a part of life so we reach out to each other willingly and lend a hand. This may simply be listening to a friend on the phone when they are worried about their 9 year old who struggles with reading or sharing a story of how we maneuvered through a difficult time with our teenager. We cherish the bond we share with dear friends who not only stand by us, but stand with us during challenging times.

We face obstacles as individual families, but protecting our homeschooling law is a challenge our entire homeschooling community must endure. In the spirit of celebrating our common goal, it is appropriate to dedicate some of our time today in recognition of the people who, 20 years ago, worked so diligently to “get it right.”

I am humbled by the unwavering dedication of the few people who started this movement. Regardless of their personal philosophies, economic status, educational approach, or spiritual beliefs, they came together with a vision and a universal passion. Over the course of just a few weeks and through countless phone calls and meetings during the winter of 1984, this small group swelled to over 2,500 homeschooling supporters who went to the Capitol, sending a very important message to the Legislature. These visionaries focused on a common goal and did not allow their differences to pull them apart. Furthermore, they understood it was their diversity that made their voice strong and their message clear.

Our current homeschooling law has been challenged in different ways over the past twenty years. Through the work and spirit of hundreds of people, it has stood as written and continues to benefit Wisconsin families.

As part of our celebration today, let us join together, building on our common ground and renewing our commitment to protecting the current law. It is so very important that future generations be allowed the freedom to follow their hearts, to serve their children, and to strengthen their families through homeschooling.