



Remarks by Carol Gutenberger at the Opening Session of Wisconsin Parents Association's 16th Annual Home Education Conference on May 1, 1999, titled *Homeschooling Then and Now*. Published in *WPA Newsletter #60 - June 1999* pp. 9-10

How many of you have homeschooled for more than 15 years? You know firsthand what it was like. The rest of you may have some idea of what seasoned homeschoolers went through before Act 512. I am here to tell you my story.

Twenty years ago my husband and I had three small daughters—a newborn, a two year old, and a four year old. We got a letter from our school district inviting our oldest daughter, Theresa, to come for a kindergarten screening. My maternal instincts kicked in 100%. I couldn't bear the thought of trusting my child to total stranger, even if only for a half day. My husband assured me that every mother goes through these feelings and that I'd get over it. I broke the news to him that I wasn't going to send her to school. I had it all figured out—I would teach her everything she needed to know right at home! After I spent a summer of arguing my point and not being willing to accept "no" for an answer, my husband humored me and told me that since our Theresa was only four years old, and since she wasn't required by law to attend school that year, he would allow me to teach her kindergarten at home. He would decide after the year was up if she actually learned anything.

We purchased a structured curriculum from Christian Liberty Academy. All I had to do was present the materials to Theresa, have her do the work, and return it to CLA for grading. They issued report cards showing that our child had straight A's. My husband became a little more supportive of my belief in educating our children at home and gave me the go-ahead to homeschool the following year. First and second grades came and went, again with all A's on Theresa's report card. Our next daughter, Elizabeth, was ready for kindergarten. How would I manage? Two children in school, a toddler, my husband's blind grandmother came to live with us, and I discovered our fourth baby would be due in September.

We forged ahead. Our second daughter was as brilliant as the first and our first few weeks of school held a lot of promise for a great school year. By this time our local school district decided we were truant. We weren't complying with the law! We were served truancy notices and were told that we had three school days to have our girls in school or they would be taken from us and placed in foster care. My sister, who had children the same ages as mine, was sent truancy notices also. Together we hired an attorney from Madison who assured us that our children wouldn't be taken away. But there were a lot of problems we had to deal with.

Our school district had no experience in dealing with anyone who wanted to homeschool their children. They didn't know how to deal with us. They didn't seem to know what, if any, authority they had over us, and all WE knew was that we wanted to continue building our strong family bonds and teach our children at home.

After a year, Grandma went to live with her son. Shortly after, we had our fourth child, a boy. Because there was no specific homeschool law, our attorney did his best to keep the truancy problem very low-key. He told us to continue homeschooling, but we weren't to tell anyone what we were doing. We kept our curtains closed and were as quiet about homeschooling as possible so as not to arouse curiosities. Our children were not to be seen if anyone came to the door. They had their designated hiding spots when the door bell rang. If we had to go somewhere during regular school hours, they sat on the floor of the car so no one would see them.

Then we got a notice from our fire department notifying us that if we felt we were a school we had to have fire drills once a month. I had to record how long it took my students to vacate the building and get to the meeting place and send them monthly reports. We complied.

The fire chief declined my invitation to come to our house during fire prevention week to talk to my students about fire safety, but he did let me know that the street commissioner wanted school zone signs posted a block from our house. When I wrote to the commissioner asking that the signs be placed, he refused saying that he couldn't put school zone signs in a residential neighborhood, even though our property adjoined the elementary school a block away.

The Department of Public Instruction sent us a copy of building codes that apply to private schools. Our lawyer advised us to humor the DPI and comply as much as possible. We were "required" to have two bathrooms, one for boys and one for girls. We had to have EXIT signs over each door leading outside. We had to provide sufficient water bubblers to accommodate our number of students. We were given a "LIST OF SPECIFIC LAWS OF WISCONSIN RELEVANT TO NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS" that we were expected to follow, from displaying a flag, to certifying teachers, to teaching a class called "dairy products," to pledging allegiance once a week. Each employee of our school was required to submit results of a physical exam to the Department of Health and Social Services each year. We complied.

Each September we were served truancy notices. The truant officer and the local sheriff would come to the door (the children were hiding) and read the truancy notice as though I was illiterate. I would quietly accept it. The lawyer advised us that any time public officials asked us questions, we were to ask that their questions be put in writing so we could submit them to our lawyer. We complied.

About this time I was beginning to doubt my sanity. We were informed of a hearing in Madison that had something to do with legalizing homeschooling in Wisconsin. We couldn't believe it! We HAD to go and see that there were really other people out there who had the same ideas as we. If this was true, then other families must be going through the same purgatory of red tape with the public system. We knew that we must attend this hearing and become active with the group fighting for their God-given right to educate their children in the sanctuary of their own home.

We learned that a group of about 80 "secret" homeschoolers had met in Stevens Point a few weeks before the hearing to come up with a strategy of dealing with the upcoming legis-

lation. This group realized a few basic principles, namely, that homeschoolers must become and remain united. All agreed on the basic principle that each family must be free to teach their own beliefs. This was the very beginning of Wisconsin Parents Association. This infant organization busied itself during the next three weeks to inform small Christian schools of their work on Act 512. They circulated written information and sent articles to newspapers informing people of the hearing.

On January 25, 1984, about 2,500 homeschoolers attended the hearing in Madison. Act 512 was passed and homeschooling as you know it became legal in Wisconsin. We answered people's questions. We explained our positions. We listened patiently to verbal attacks on how we were abusing our poor, unsocialized children. We did what we could to help people understand that homeschooling is an acceptable alternative to public education. But mostly, we thanked God for answering our prayers-that WE could educate the children HE gave us according to our consciences.

Many of you didn't have to work for your right to homeschool. For some, all you had to do was fill out form PI-1206 and begin your 875 hours per year. I can not stress it enough-please do not abuse this right. If you aren't a member, join Wisconsin Parents Association and help maintain the law we have. We don't want anyone to have to go through what we did prior to the passage of ACT 512. Support WPA and do what you can to preserve Wisconsin's home-school law. Help us to resist the efforts of DPI and society to erode our rights as parents. ❖