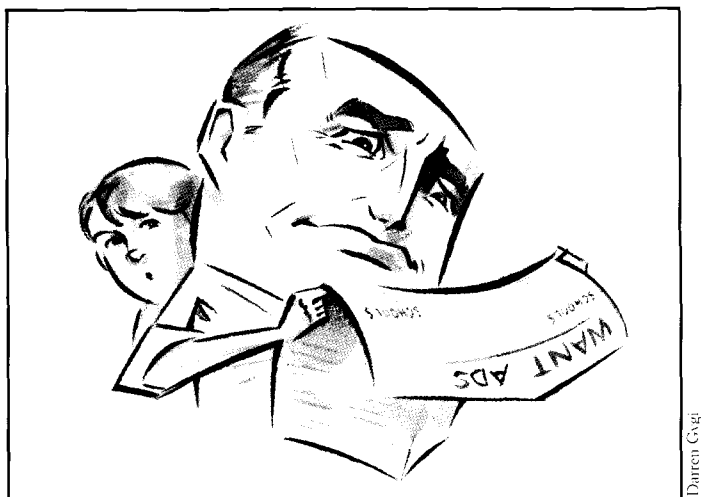


# Magistrate Mahoney

Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Started Homeschooling

by Scott P. Richert



In May 1995, when our first child was born, my wife and I were living in Northern Virginia. I had just completed the course work for my doctorate, and my wife was the exhibitions registrar at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. But just two weeks later, the day after our daughter was baptized, we packed all of our belongings into a Ryder truck and headed north.

Although I had no job lined up (nor even any real prospects), we never once doubted that we had made the right choice. Several months before, as the reality of Rebekah's impending birth had begun to sink in, we had realized a number of things. We wanted my wife to stay home with our children; we wanted to bring our children up in a more healthy environment than Washington, D.C., could offer; and we wanted them to have an advantage that we had both enjoyed—growing up close to family, especially to their grandparents. And so we headed back to our home state of Michigan.

After four years and two more children, I still have no doubt that we made the right decision—although there were some anxious moments during the seven months without a paycheck. Some clichés become clichés because they are true; and our children are truly the most important responsibility that God has given us.

That is why it surprises me to realize that we had never given much thought to our children's education. We had uprooted ourselves, cut our income back drastically, all "for the sake of the children"; but we had always assumed that the education of our children would be handled by "experts"—public (or possibly parochial) schoolteachers "who knew what they were doing." Amy had attended a Lutheran school through eighth grade, before going on to her local public high school in a suburb of Flint; I had attended public schools in my little village in

West Michigan. My elementary school was a true neighborhood school, just around the corner from my house, and my junior high and high school were just across the street. We had each received a solid education, both intellectual and moral, and we expected nothing less for our children. Then we moved to Rockford, Illinois.

Over the past two years, readers of *Chronicles* have probably become more familiar with the Rockford school desegregation case than they care to be. Now in its 11th year, the desegregation lawsuit has cost Rockford taxpayers almost a quarter of a billion dollars, raised our property taxes to the third highest in the nation, and destroyed public education in Rockford. Forget *Star Wars* and *The X-Files*—for sheer evil, Darth Vader and the Cigarette-Smoking Man have nothing on Rockford's own emperor, Federal Magistrate P. Michael Mahoney, and his master, Eugene Eubanks.

We realized rather quickly that we could never send our children to Rockford's public schools, and so began the hunt for a suitable Catholic school. Sometimes clichés are less than true, and that seems to be the case with the popular statement that private schools have about 20 years to go before they will be as bad as public schools are today. We had entered school 25 years ago, but the quality of education in Rockford's Catholic schools (and private schools in general) runs far behind that of the public schools at the time that we left them, only a dozen years ago. The problem can be traced partly to the desegregation suit—private schools expanded too rapidly as they tried to capture their share of the students who have left the public-school system—but the root of the problem is the failure of American education as a whole.

And so, reluctantly, we began to look into homeschooling. I say "reluctantly" not because we had any animus against homeschooling; on the contrary, while still in graduate school, I had written two courses for a college-level homeschooling curricu-

---

Scott P. Richert is the managing editor of *Chronicles*.

lum that Mary Kay Clark's Seton Home Study School was developing. But to Amy and me, homeschooling was something that we would do if necessary, something to tide us over until we could find a "real" school for our children.

Rockford, it turns out, is full of Catholic families who are just homeschooling until something better comes along, at least according to Michael Brunner, a long-time homeschooling parent. "How many Catholics have you met who are 'temporarily' homeschooling, for four, five, and then it's twelve years?" he asked me. Quite a lot, in fact; but I have talked to very few evangelical homeschoolers who feel the same way. Mr. Brunner ascribes the divergent attitudes to different approaches to public education. "For many years, there were no evangelical schools in the United States," he explains. "In many parts of the country, evangelicals were the backbone of the public-school system." When that system broke down, evangelicals had no place to turn, and so they led the homeschooling movement. Catholics, on the other hand, had their parochial schools—at least for a while. Now, while evangelicals still make up well over half of the homeschooling families here in Rockford, Catholics are playing catch-up. (Estimates of the total number of homeschooling families in the Rockford area vary widely. Illinois has among the most liberal homeschooling laws in the country, and since parents are not required to tell their local school district that they are homeschooling, most wisely do not. Rockford homeschoolers agree, however, that the homeschooling community here is among the largest in the country.)

The divergent attitudes toward homeschooling have another religious dimension. All of the evangelicals that I have interviewed have shared the conviction of Lisa Miller, the president of Christian Home Educators of Rockford (CHER), that their responsibility for their children's education is a religious obligation, one that should not be handed off to someone else unless absolutely necessary. While many Catholic homeschoolers eventually come to share that vision, they often make their initial decision to homeschool for non-religious reasons. Tom and Rita Sullivan, Latin Mass Catholics who have been homeschooling for eight years, decided to teach their children themselves after meeting some homeschoolers at a lecture by John Taylor Gatto. The Sullivans had gone to the lecture concerned about their oldest son, Kevin, who had begun kindergarten but was very unhappy attending school. Gatto's talk had been sponsored by a private day school in Rockford, but his message of separation of school and state attracted many homeschoolers from around Illinois and Wisconsin. When the Sullivans described Kevin's situation, the homeschoolers suggested that the problem might lie with the schools, not with Kevin—and so the Sullivans' homeschooling odyssey began.

Michael Brunner's decision to homeschool his children also arose primarily from necessity rather than religious conviction. After returning to his hometown of Stockton, Illinois, Michael and his wife enrolled their children in the same public schools that he had attended, and Mr. Brunner was elected to the school board along with two other candidates who were concerned about the quality of education. His candid criticisms of teachers who viewed their profession as a retirement plan rather than a vocation earned him few friends in the teachers' union, and some began speaking openly of "punishing" his children for his views. The situation came to a head when his son, David, then in eighth grade, broke his arm in two places during

gym class and was not allowed medical treatment for an hour. From then on, the Brunners have homeschooled their children and have been actively involved in homeschooling organizations in Rockford.

Mr. Brunner's passion for homeschooling comes across in his conversation. When I ask him what he considers the hardest aspect of homeschooling, his answer is surprising: "Thinking up enough challenges—making it as challenging as the schools were when I was young. But if you raise the standard, the children will meet it." The trouble with today's schools—both public and private—is that standards are constantly being lowered. While acknowledging some of the institutional pressures that have led to the "dumbing down" of modern education, Mr. Brunner ultimately blames the teachers, who "brought about the problem by not insisting on standards." One of the most positive aspects of homeschooling, he believes, is that most parents who decide to teach their children at home loved school themselves. Homeschooling parents do not view education as a form of "certification" or job training, but as an integral part of life, a process that never ends.

That is a distinctly minority view these days. As I look back on my own education, I realize how focused it has been on meeting certain "goals," with the implication that, once the goals are met, education can come to an end. It is refreshing to hear Lisa Miller describe homeschooling as a "lifestyle" and talk about the pleasure of "seeing the light bulb click on" as her children grasp a new concept—an experience, she notes, that many parents never have, since their children's education is confined within the walls of a school. And Rita Sullivan points out that homeschooling is an educational experience for parents as well as children: "Homeschooling changes your whole view—just living life is an education." In order to be able to educate your children, your own education needs to be renewed, refreshed, extended.

All of the homeschoolers that I have talked to were quick to point out that homeschooling also has many benefits that might be considered "non-educational"—most importantly, a sense of family closeness. Both Rita Sullivan and Lisa Miller attribute their strong relationships with their teenage sons to their homeschooling experience. While homeschooling may not be a panacea for teenage angst, the opportunities for rebellion are, at the very least, limited.

One of the most common objections to homeschooling is the issue of "socialization." When I mention this to Rita Sullivan, she simply laughs, saying, "That's why we keep them home." Kevin Johnson, the president of the Institute for Christian Apologetics and cohost of *Perspective Underground*, a weekly radio talk show, offers a similar observation: "In the wake of the recent school shootings, nobody asks me anymore why we homeschool." For homeschoolers, a more important concern seems to be that their children become what we might call "familialized"—that the bonds between siblings and between generations be strengthened. Lisa Miller likes the fact that homeschooling encourages the integration of age groups. "When I was growing up," she says, "you hung with your own." Her children, she believes, are much more comfortable with adults than she was at their age.

Increasingly in Rockford, the integration of age groups extends beyond the family, as homeschoolers come together to form cooperatives and even schools. In addition to the evangelical group CHER and the Catholic group RARCHE (Rockford Area Roman Catholic Home Educators), there are a num-

ber of smaller organizations tied to a particular church or neighborhood. And while Mr. Brunner's belief that "we are our children's first teachers" seems universally held, an increasing number of Catholic and evangelical homeschoolers agree that parents should not necessarily be their children's *only* teachers. Every Tuesday, many homeschoolers take their children to the Hallstrom School, an evangelical homeschool cooperative which had over 350 students enrolled in grades seven through twelve last year. At Hallstrom, students can take courses in subjects—for instance, foreign languages, math, and science—that their parents might find too daunting to teach, but the parents are also required to attend the courses. Michael Brunner finds the cooperative atmosphere exciting. Rockford, Mr. Brunner believes, "is the best place in the whole country to homeschool because of the support network. And homeschooling can only get better here in Rockford. Its reputation is increasing."

Because of the role that the desegregation case has played in encouraging my wife and me to consider homeschooling, I was surprised to find that most homeschoolers say that it had nothing to do with their decision. Lisa Miller estimates that over 70 percent of homeschooling families in Rockford are doing it primarily for religious reasons. But the number of those doing it for other reasons has increased in recent years, and Mary Hitchcock, a leading opponent of the desegregation suit, believes that broader trends in public education have convinced many parents to homeschool, while court orders and judicial taxation have accelerated those trends here in Rockford.

Everyone agrees, however, that the face of education in Rockford is changing, and that homeschooling will play an even more prominent role in the future. This fall, says newly elected school-board member Stephanie Caltagerone, the racial mix in the public-school kindergarten classes will reach approximately 50 percent white, 50 percent minority. In desegregation cases all around the country, this milestone has represented the point of no return. Unless Rockford proves to be the exception, enrollment in the public schools will drop dramatically over the next decade. With Rockford's private schools already bursting at the seams, more parents may well choose to teach their children at home. The thought worries some long-time homeschoolers, who fear that parents who have waited until this point to pull their children out of public schools will be less committed to homeschooling. Caltagerone agrees. "In the politically charged atmosphere surrounding homeschooling," she says, "it would only take a couple well-publicized cases of dual-income families pulling their kids out of the Rockford public schools and leaving them home all day to give the state a pretense for cracking down on homeschoolers."

Until the crackdown comes, however, my wife and I have made up our minds. We enrolled Rebekah in a Catholic co-op preschool last year, and this year her brother Jacob will attend as well. Both have caught on quickly to their numbers and letters, and enjoy reading (actually, reciting) their multitude of books. Becky has already surprised us by writing her own name before we even knew she could write, much less spell. And while no one so far has questioned our decision, we have memorized a line that Michael Brunner assures us will stifle any criticism here in Rockford: "My child is doing at least as well in homeschool as she would in public school."

Oh, and thank you, Magistrate Mahoney. Despite your best efforts to destroy our children's education, you may have actually done us a favor.

## Madame Preobrazhenskaya

by Constance Rowell Mastores

For too many years I've longed to bring back perfection: a triple pirouette *en pointe* performed in Madame's last class. "Finally!" she murmured, more to herself than to me.

She'd been nagging me all year. "*Souplesse!* Not so stiff! You're plié is too shallow! Head up!" Each time I failed in my technique, we went back to practicing half-pirouettes.

She was eighty-seven—I, nineteen. Three times a week I traveled from my place to hers at La Place de Clichy. She taught sitting up in a straight-backed chair. She was strict;

her French heavily Russian. In her youth she had danced at the Kirov—along with Pavlova. Now she was poor and gave lessons at Studio Walker . . . *At the top of the stairs, you turn left.*

"Stop talking!" she admonishes Zizi Jeanmaire. "Keep your charm for the stage. *Ici on travaille.*" Zizi with a "Yes, Madame," plants her feet in fifth position. "Constance! Up front!"

She performs with her hands—as if to remind me—the steps we've been learning from *Les Sylphides*. As the pianist turns to her page, I extend into open-fourth and prepare for the *tour de jetée* . . . then dance as if I were other. Passion and poise at one with technique. Attitude-turn in elated slow motion. *Spot back. Spot front. Back straight. Arms supple.*

I end with a flourish of three pirouettes and collapse in a pool of joy. "Finally," she murmurs, more to herself than to me. In Leningrad, the curtain falls.