

Home Sweet School

The education of a home-schooling family.

Monday through Friday mornings bring turmoil to most families with school-age children, but the Kolesnik household remains calm. No cries of "Hurry up and get dressed!" or "Get your books—here comes the bus!" echo through the house. Instead, 11-year-old Jason comes downstairs, leisurely eats his breakfast, and starts les-

by Michael Kolesnik

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM TEEBKEN

sons while still in his pajamas. He is a home schooler. Three years ago, we had never heard of home schooling. Now we cannot imagine educating our son any other way.

When Jason was in the second grade, we considered various ways to enrich his education. His classroom teacher encouraged us and even suggested that we might educate Jason at home. (Our tiny Vermont town doesn't have any private schools.) We looked into correspondence courses and talked to a couple of home-schooling families. But inertia won out. We didn't decide anything, so Jason advanced to the third grade.

That year, however, he began to dislike school. In his two-room elementary school, third-graders shared the class with first- and second-graders. With three different grades to accommodate already, the teacher didn't have time to deal separately with a child like Jason, who was reading at a much higher level than his fellow pupils. He was often bored and wasted more time than he used productively. Yet he still came home tired after school, making it hard for him to concentrate on piano lessons or do things with us as a family. During Christmas vacation, my wife, Sami, asked Jason if he would like to do his schooling at home. He responded with great enthusiasm and made home schooling his "New Year's Revolution."

To legally teach Jason at home, we had to comply with state regulations. We worked frantically to complete the application and submit the required documentation so our son would not be considered truant. Certain items, such as a daily schedule or the name of our local superintendent, seemed irrelevant. Nevertheless, we dutifully filled out each section. We submitted everything the state required—about 25 typed pages describing our curricula, texts, techniques, evaluation procedures, and teaching qualifications.

Being good parents counted not at all. But we had an advantage over many would-be home schoolers. I was a public-school teacher and chairman of the local school board; my wife had also taught public school. We knew the proper educational jargon and the expected way to map out a curriculum. Our teaching experience also gave us credibility. Six weeks later, we received approval from the State Department of Education.

Unlike some home-schooling parents, we have no great antagonism toward the public-school system. (Our older son, who is more social and athletic and less academic than Jason, still attends public high school.) But we realize its limitations. A public school cannot duplicate the one-to-one student-teacher ratio or the flexibility we incorporate in our home-study program.



We design a curriculum specifically for Jason. He can work on math at a sixth-grade level while reading books at the tenth-grade level. Once he chooses a history topic, we integrate the literature, art, music, and science of that time period. When he studied American history last year, he read the novel *Johnny Tremain*, which reflects the spirit of the Revolution, and *Cowboys of the Wild West*, a nonfiction book set about the time of the Civil War. We checked out art books from the library to look at paintings of each period. With other home-schooling families, we took a field trip to Boston to see the *USS Constitution* and nearby Plymouth Plantation.

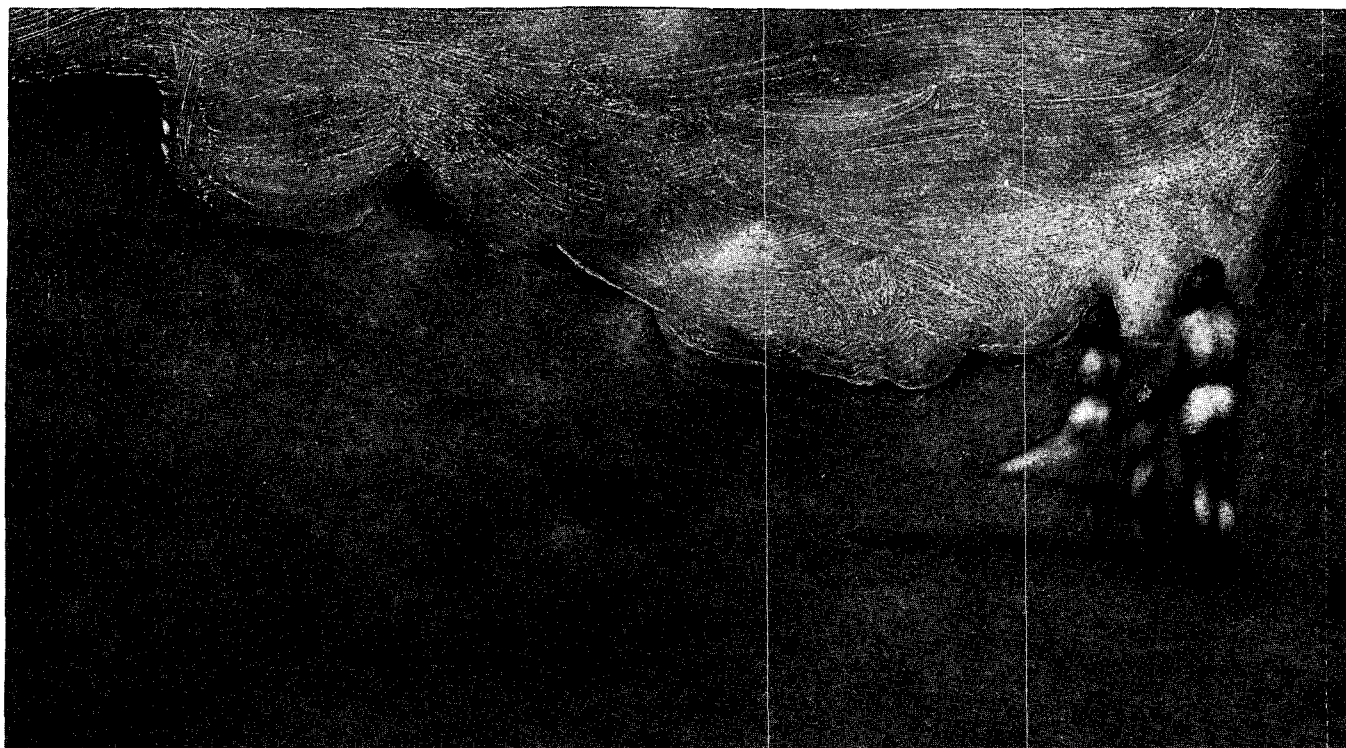
Jason spends as long as he wants or needs on a concept. If he takes 15 minutes to master multiplying fractions, he doesn't then spend another 30 minutes doing unnecessary repetitions to fill up the 45-minute math block. Last year, we spent extra time on grammar because Jason had scored relatively low in it on standardized tests; his scores improved significantly. We do set general goals for the year but allow great flexibility in daily activities. On that first warm day of spring we can venture outside, walk through the budding greenery, and feel happy to be living in Vermont.

We also have more time and flexibility for family activities. We can attend plays during the day, drive the 50 miles to Montpelier to watch the state legislature in session, go skiing, or just sit around and talk while everyone feels relaxed and refreshed. In the evenings, we play games together, read, listen to the radio, or discuss the news.

Jason also has time to spend on his personal projects. He can now take piano lessons in the morning, and he learns much faster than before. He can sit in front of the wood stove and read for three or four hours; he can design and build a treehouse; he can compose music at the piano or on the computer.

Occasionally we have our bad days and forget patience and understanding. We'll threaten to send Jason back to school unless he stops fidgeting and gets down to business. Luckily, we usually know enough on those days to either stop early or move on to a different subject.

Looking back at the last three years, we feel a sense of reward and accomplishment tinged with uncertainty. Our son has become more responsible for his own education. Jason has learned much that is not in a regular school curriculum because his curiosity has been encouraged. At age eight he was wondering about the Big Bang Theory and was debating evolution versus creationism with a friend. An avid reader, he often bargains to stay up a few more minutes at



night because "there are only seven pages left in the chapter." In spite of all the positive signs, we still wonder what kind of person our son will grow up to be. Did we make the best decision?

We have chosen to teach Jason at home for positive reasons—the individualized program, the integrated curricula, the discovery-oriented learning process, and the improved family life. But some undercurrents of misunderstanding and even suspicion still linger in the community. Often, while we are out shopping during the day, a clerk will look at us quizzically and ask if it is a holiday. Jason will explain that he is a home schooler. Sometimes I think that people then assume that he must have some disability that makes him unable to attend school.

Some people are appalled that we are depriving Jason of a chance to be with kids his own age. We point out that he has many opportunities to socialize—in Cub Scouts, during Pee Wee baseball, and with friends after school. Every week, Jason and three nearby home schoolers get together for a writing class at our house. Every other week, they attend art class in a neighboring town. They also participate in a ski program at a local ski area.

Most people have been supportive, however. Despite our decision to take Jason out of school, the voters reelected me to the school board. Our young school superintendent sees home schooling as a testing ground for techniques that he might adapt to the classroom. Each year, he has let Jason take standardized tests without charge along with the rest of his grade, thus giving us a useful way to make sure he's keeping up.

In the near future, we anticipate one crisis—sports. Jason enjoys athletics and wants to play high-school soccer. He'll be eligible next year, when he reaches the eighth grade. Yet this extracurricular activity will probably remain unavailable to him because to play on a school team, you have to be in school.

My wife and I have also had to make sacrifices. We pay about \$200 a year for books and materials, and publishers charge us 20 percent to 25 percent more for textbooks than schools have to pay. We spend our spare time to prepare materials, research new topics, and go on field trips. Since one of us must be home every day to supervise, we are a single career family. I have remained in public education, teaching high school and now also evening classes at the local community college. My wife raises sheep, gardens, and makes maple syrup.

Our biggest obstacle has been the State Department of Education, which closely monitors the estimated 200 Vermont home-schooling students. Although the law states only that we must provide an "equivalent" education, overzealous administrators, protecting the "compelling interests" of the state, have greatly increased the scope of their oversight activities through administrative fiat. Each year the application form has become more intrusive.

Until this year. When the education department came out with yet another expanded form, about 25 home-schooling families decided to take political action. To combat this bureaucratic red tape, we formed the Vermont Home Schoolers' Association. Working with a sympathetic state legislator, we

wrote a bill that would have loosened restrictions on home schooling. To everyone's surprise, the bill passed easily in the state House.

Things got nastier in the Senate, as representatives of public education realized that the bill might actually pass. At a Senate legislative hearing, I spoke positively of our experiences and argued that home schooling is a valuable alternative. But the president of the Vermont Education Association (the teachers' union) and a spokesperson for the Department of Education made it appear that Vermont home schoolers are planning the destruction of public education. They implied that only the state should be responsible for a child's education.

But the education hierarchy got our message. To stave off future rebellions, the education department produced a very short new form for families already running approved home-schooling programs. And the department now asks our association for feedback before it changes any home-school regulations.

Jason's "New Year's Revolution" has been a revolution for our whole family. By becoming home schoolers, we have chosen to act rather than react; to correct what is not working immediately rather than wait for changes to filter into the classroom. We are also growing more radical. Before, it was easy to accept the decrees of the educational establishment. Now we question what right the state has to restrict our choice of education for our child. As parents, we seek the best for our child. That is why we are home schoolers. □

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by Bill Kauffman

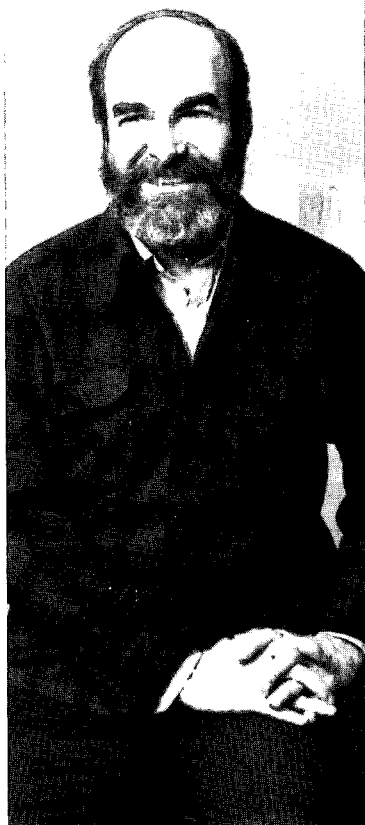
Mr. Marrou *Goes to* *Juneau*

At 8:00 A.M., Representative Andre Marrou of the Alaska House of Representatives kisses his wife, Eileen, good-bye and skips down three flights of stairs at Juneau's Driftwood Lodge, gingerly stepping over a squashed banana and an empty bottle of beer. It's a five-minute walk to work, usually in the damp, gray weather for which Juneau, Alaska, is infamous.

The bearded Marrou, who looks like a cheerful Lenin, studies the day's legislative agenda from his sixth-floor office in the Court Building, overlooking downtown Juneau and the Gastineau Channel. At about 10 minutes to 10, he trots across the street to the grim confines of the Alaska State Capitol (design: mid-century junior high school).

Wearing the standard legislative tweed jacket and tie, the 47-year-old Marrou looks much like the 39 other representatives converging on the House floor for today's 10:00 session. Except for his two lapel pins: an American eagle on the right chest, and on the left a skull, scarved in a red bandana, boasting the Hell's Angels motto "Ride Hard, Die Free."

As Marrou strides down the corridor leading to the House chamber, Finance Committee Chairman Al Adams throws him a mock-Nazi salute, bellowing "Liberty, Freedom!" Marrou ignores Adams, an Eskimo who is perhaps the most powerful man in the House, and takes his seat at the last desk in the last row, just in front of the table occupied by the press corps. (The location has its advantages—easy access to both the



Fourth Estate and the bathroom.) A yellow Post-it note is stuck to Marrou's desk. It's his credo, scrawled in a particularly frustrating moment. It reads: "Statism Rules—But Liberty Should."

Marrou recites the morning Pledge of

What can a Liber-

tarian do if elected

to office? He can at

least become "the

conscience of the

legislature."

Allegiance loudly and with evident conviction. His eyes dart once or twice to liberal Democrat Peter Goll, who enrages some representatives by allegedly (ah, libel laws) refusing to salute the flag. A nervous, thin-lipped young man who could pass for a yuppie Frank Burns, Goll has a whiny voice, stirs coffee with his pinky finger, and is "the kind of guy people automatically hate," as one staffer puts it.