

A History of MDHSA

Celebrating 30 Years of Homeschoolers Serving Homeschoolers

1986-2016



A Story of
Sacrifice and Commitment

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It has been said that a people who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. In an effort to avoid that doom this brief history is offered.

In the early 1980's families were re-discovering an age-old concept: teaching their children at home. Leaders in the homeschooling movement were men like John Holt, a leader in public education who had become disillusioned with the institutional method of teaching children. He wrote a book, How Children Fail and later started a newsletter entitled, "Growing Without Schooling." About the same time, Dr. Raymond and Dorothy Moore, were also writing about homeschooling and delaying academics until children were ready and able to learn. Dr. and Mrs. Moore were instrumental in waking up the Christian community to the concept of homeschooling with their books, *Better Late Than Early*, *Homespun Schools* and other writings.

Homeschooling in Pennsylvania and in much of the nation, was a high-risk life-style. Some parents were deprived of their children by the state or suffered jail time. In Pennsylvania, permission from the local superintendent was necessary to engage in a home-

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schooling program. A family might move into a homeschool friendly district, only to have a change in superintendents and then find themselves in an unfriendly district and be forced to make a choice: quit homeschooling or move. In many parts of Pennsylvania, families were saddled with heavy truancy

finances or faced litigation in their school districts. Pennsylvania was classified by homeschool legal advisors as one of the worst states in the union in which to homeschool.

Amidst this chaos, in 1983, Mike and Barb Snider determined that God was leading them to teach their children, Rebecca and Jennifer at home. In consultation with their legal advisors, they homeschooled underground, as there had already been successful litigation against a homeschooling family in their school district. If the Sniders had problems with the authorities, they planned to send their children to a relative living in another state where homeschooling

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was allowed. Many times the knock at the front door sent fear into Barb's heart—wondering if it could be a truant officer. This was a fear based on fact for homeschoolers in Pennsylvania as well as other states.

There was no homeschool support group for the Sniders. There was no one to ask "How do we do this? What curriculum should I use?" They earned their knowledge about homeschooling by trial and error. Their support came from purchased books and magazines, of which there were not many pertaining to homeschooling!

A group working towards a new law in Pennsylvania was mentioned in a nationally published homeschooling magazine. The Sniders contacted Jim Gustafson to speak to a group from Franklin County.

In February, 1986, seven families found their way by word of mouth to the meeting in the Sniders' living room. The Sniders were not the only family homeschooling "underground"!

The group soon established a constitution, and elected their first president, Martin Hudzinski, MD. It was felt that due to his very public occupation that he could not hide his children from the local school board, and so was the ideal spokesman for the group. Mike Snider suggested that they call themselves the "Mason Dixon Homeschoolers" since there were families from Maryland and Pennsylvania in the group. The group established itself as a decidedly Christian organization, with a statement of faith, and established its purposes: to support parents in the home education of their children, and to be politically active to change the law of the land to favor homeschooling.

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Networking with homeschoolers across Pennsylvania, the original members of MDHSA divided their time between homeschooling and lobbying efforts that included trips to Harrisburg (sometimes two or three in one week), letter writing campaigns, and phone trees. These activities were in the days before unlimited long distance plans and email! Homeschoolers dug into their pockets to pay for trips to the state capitol, long distance phone calls, and postage for dozens of letters. In between these activities were squeezed housework, laundry, cooking, and church activities. They and their children received a lesson in applied civics like none they had ever imagined. They learned about the legislative process, legislative hearings, and political compromise. They

learned about the shortest route to Harrisburg, and where to park. They learned about the power of presence, persistence, and politeness. Most of all they learned about the power of God to change the hearts of enemies into staunch supporters.

It was great to have a support group. The Sniders now had others to go on field trips with, friends for their daughters, and the good feeling of knowing there were others with the same goals as their family. Prayer undergirded the activities, especially the lobbying activities in which MDHSA members engaged.

Finally, after much work by many homeschoolers in Pennsylvania, including MDHSA members, there was a hearing conducted by the House Education Committee and homeschoolers all over the state flocked to the Capitol. Homeschool advocates, homeschooling parents, and homeschooled children testified. The educational unions were in full force with their attacks at the hearing. Some testimony would have been amusing if the stakes had not been so serious. One lobbyist testified that he had tutored in a home and the home "was the worst environment for teaching youngsters: distractions, phones, televisions, crying babies, deliveries, etc. etc. What about proper heating? What about proper lighting? What about materials? Parents don't have the materials available to them that are available in schools. Those are our main concern."

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Experts including Dr. Raymond Moore and Susanna Sheffler, the editor of Growing Without Schooling testified. Homeschooling parents, including Martin

Hudzinski, testified. But the most significant impact on the key legislators was made by the testimony of children who were being educated at home. Bipartisan support for the bill on the House Education Committee was in place.

However, there was still much work to be done. There were many days of lobbying at the Capitol. The homeschoolers were "green" when compared to the paid lobbyists of groups such as the Pennsylvania School Board Association, the Pennsylvania State Education Association and others. Barb remembers being in the rotunda speaking with a paid lobbyist, thinking, "how are we ever going to fight these guys?" One especially difficult week, the opponents of homeschooling sent all the legislators a letter. This letter informed the legislators that homeschoolers would keep their children locked away from the light of day, confined to the house all day, every day.

Despite all the attacks, the bill passed the House in November of 1988, the Senate in December, and was signed by then Governor Robert Casey in December of 1988. The bill became Act 169 of 1988. It wasn't exactly what we wanted, but it was much better than homeschooling at the pleasure of the state officials.

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The families could now do what they had envisioned in their dreams...homeschool their children openly and publicly. They could take them to the store in the daytime and not worry that someone was going to turn them in to the authorities. They did not have to worry that the person in a suit in the driveway was from Children and Youth Services.

The early MDHSA members worked hard for the homeschool law. They were motivated by making life better for themselves and for others who would come after them.



Early homeschoolers get a hands on approach to Civics while meeting Governor Casey.

Even though the law had passed, members continued to "be on call" whenever legislation arose in Harrisburg that would adversely affect families or homeschoolers. Barb Snider remembers a day when she had her husband pull out her stove and refrigerator before he left for work so she could clean behind it that day. She had started making a great mess when the phone rang. It was another Pennsylvania homeschooler asking her if she could leave immediately for Harrisburg to counter another attempt to expand the compulsory school age to 6 and 18. The stove and refrigerator mess were left and she and another homeschool mom and their children headed to Harrisburg. Fortunately, Barb's husband, Mike, shared the same goals as she did...so he cheerfully cleaned up the mess when he got home from work at the end of the day!

The battle continues. The scope of the battle is no longer the right to homeschool but is more subtly expanded. There are ongoing efforts to expand the

compulsory attendance age, limit the evaluator pool, and deny parents access to those qualified to pre-approve objectives for children with IEPs. Until the state's authority to control the lives of children is returned to parents, the battle will continue. This battle should concern all parents, not just those desiring to educate their children themselves.

Getting MDHSA started took time, effort, and money from its early members. Motivation to help others over the rough ground they so recently navigated without help as well as establish homeschooling as a credible educational alternative in the public eye drove the effort forward. These members had no local "homeschool store". Many of them did not know someone with "older homeschoolers" because they WERE the older homeschoolers. There were very few resources available to them. The CHAP fair began in Lancaster with about eight vendors, one of which was Discovery Toys. ABeka Publishers would not even sell to homeschoolers in the late 1980s.

Early MDHSA members pooled their money to order the few homeschooling tapes available. They used their homes for co-op school, using every room of



One of the very first MDHSA co-op classes taking place on the kitchen floor.

the house for different classes: Art on the back porch, math games in the kitchen, finger paints in the laundry room, etc. They had programs in their homes or in their churches or wherever they could find a place.

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MDHSA has played a large part in the growth of homeschooling in Franklin county. There have been other homeschool organizations. However, none have been as visible as MDHSA. The members thought that it was important to have a visible presence from the start. They put up notices in the local libraries, and in the Blue Pages of the phone book, so that those seeking information about homeschooling would have someone knowledgeable about homeschooling to call. This was to help dispel the "mystery" around homeschooling so that the public was better informed and realized that these children were indeed being "educated." Early homeschoolers paved the way for the acceptance of homeschooling today and the availability of programs such as Homeschool Skate or Homeschooling programs at the YMCA.

MDHSA has long been an advocate for homeschoolers. Lobbying has been part of the effort but local advocacy has been essential as well. Many were the meetings with local superintendents who needed a clearer understanding of the law as it applied to specific individuals. Early members worked to ensure the proper application of the law and eliminate extra-legal requirements made by school district administrators. In addition to providing educational materials for state officials, founding members continued to

take time from busy lives to meet with local superintendents to resolve differences in understanding that were adversely affecting homeschooling families locally and across the state.

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The battle for homeschooling is really a battle for the authority of parents to direct the education and training of their children. Every parent now and in the future will be affected by efforts made today by the current members of MDHSA. Gaining the right to educate our children at home is a good start but more remains to be accomplished. Much of the MDHSA overhead covered by the dues makes this job easier. Having a central office with a part time paid staff person, computers, sophisticated printing abilities, and more makes it a lot easier and more convenient to run ALPS, co-op, the newsletter, do lobbying, and more. It gives MDHSA - and homeschooling - a credible presence in the community. That sign on Main Street brings homeschooling to everyone's mind making it seem less threatening and more commonplace, and therefore more mainstream. Homeschoolers are not to be feared or classed as child abusers but normal people that one encounters every day in his travels about town.

Here's what you can do to advance the cause of parental authority and homeschooling:

- READ and KNOW the Homeschooling Law in your state, so that you will know what your responsibilities are.
- Read and learn all you can about homeschooling. Learn about the different philosophies of education as they are practiced in the larger homeschooling community.

- Continue to keep informed about legislative issues regarding education and parental authority.
- Contact your legislators as needed. Let them know that you expect them to promote less state involvement in what should be parental domain.
- Learn how to help new homeschoolers. Think about what was the most help to you when you were a new homeschooler. Be willing to provide that assistance to others.

You can also help carry on MDHSA's legacy of homeschooling freedom and "Homeschoolers Serving Homeschoolers" by doing the following:

- Remember that MDHSA is a volunteer organization. Don't be just a "taker", but be a "giver" also. It is all about families and homeschooling. If you see a need, fill it! Volunteer! If you are afraid that you are not qualified, ask someone who is already active to help you launch your efforts.
- Attend business meetings. This is where you can make your voice heard about policy and protect the future of MDHSA. Consider being on the executive committee, if asked.
- Pray for the well being and direction of MDHSA and its members. Prayer has been at the foundation of this organization from the beginning.

Remember: The battle to return to parents what has been eroded, since the advent of compulsory attendance laws, is ongoing. Thus MDHSA, in fact all parents, can never become comfortable in the freedom to home educate these children, as there are those who would desire to take that freedom away. It was George Washington who said, "The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance."