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## Our Experience in Home Schooling

By Joan and Kristi Slaughter

Joan Slaughter is an alumna of the Texas Alpha Kappa chapter, of which Kristi is also a member. In addition, Kristi served on the National Council as student representative from Region I.

*Shortly after moving to a small Texas town, Lee and Joan Slaughter began home schooling their four children in 1994. Before home schooling, Kristi, Graham, Michael, and Scott had attended both public and private schools. Kristi graduated from home school in 1997. In 1998 the boys returned to public school. Now that her children were no longer occupying all her time, Joan began taking classes at Tarleton State University. She graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in Spanish in May 2000, and she is now teaching at a local public high school.*

*As for the children, Kristi entered Tarleton in 1997, where she was accepted to the Presidential Honors Program and has a GPA of 4.0. She will graduate with a B.S. in mathematics in May 2001, and plans to continue her education or begin teaching. Graham is attending Tarleton also and has been accepted to the same honors program. Michael and Scott are in high school, where both are strong students and lettermen in soccer.*

*This version of an oral presentation at the 2000 Region I Alpha Chi convention follows the original format of alternating comment by mother Joan and daughter Kristi.*

**Joan:** Parents don't often think of their own home as uncharted territory, but in the autumn of 1994 our home became our children's school. Leaving the system of public education behind, we plunged into unfamiliar paths right here inside our own four walls. Certain frustrations and concerns led us into the path of taking personal charge of the kids' education. We were pleased to be rid of many conventions: lack of control over the content of their studies, a schedule imposed by a remote board, and the imposition of empty philosophical viewpoints, to name a few.

But in walking away, we left the comfort of being "normal" in the eyes of our associates, the ease of letting someone else be primarily accountable for their education, and, for me, the luxury of filling my days however I chose. And, yes, it was scary. My husband agreed to the idea but insisted that this should be done only if we thought we could exceed the academic expectations of our children's public school counterparts. My agenda for the experiment included enjoying my children's presence while I still could. Both my husband and I also believed that home school would help reinforce our family's moral and spiritual life.

When the decision was made, only then did the enormity of the task dawn on me. Many friends thought we were on dangerous ground. As a result of their concerns, we

plunged ahead into organizing a classroom, trying to assuage the feeling that we were now “abnormal.” The kids would have desks, an American flag to pledge; books would be acquired for traditional disciplines of study.

**Kristi:** As a high school sophomore in this new arrangement, I faced a wide variety of reactions. The faces of those who offered no comment said what they could not say out loud. “You poor dear. What’s going to happen to you? You’ll be a mess by the time you leave that house.”

These reactions never bothered me. I was sold on home schooling and for more than a year had been asking my parents to try it. Since our family had moved the year before, I felt lost at the large public high school. I rarely made more than a B. Every day I simply listened to lectures and did the homework, but why should I do more? With no motivation to exceed minimum expectations, I really had never tasted academic success.

The one exception was my biology class, where I received plenty of personal attention from a wonderful teacher who expected me to do well. Because she expected my success, I achieved it, and each success encouraged me to seek more. I knew that this was what school should be, and I was sure that home schooling would be the same way.

**Joan:** Studies on home schooling are difficult to conduct because (1) there is not a consistent or central agency to which all U.S. home schoolers must be accountable, and (2) the population of participants is spread very irregularly across the country. Yet we learned that we were not alone in trying this unconventional form of education. In 1991 the U.S. population of home schoolers was estimated to be about 300,000 (Van Galen and Pitman 21), and I believe it has grown in popularity since then. The typical home schooling family is Caucasian in the income range of \$30,000 to \$40,000. Sixty-one percent of those parents have some level of college participation with 1.6 to 1.9 children actively studying at home while one younger sibling is present. Like us, these families have often participated in private schools before diving into a home school situation.

The beginning of our adventure brought lifestyle changes to all of us. Having accumulated all the necessary scholastic paraphernalia, I sat down to figure out what we would do before “school” was in session. The availability of materials was a pleasant surprise. We had access to a plethora of texts containing approaches from a variety of perspectives, and there were book fairs that supplied every educational need. The Annual Home School Book Fair in May in Arlington, Texas, is an event that welcomes thousands of participants. Shelves of vibrant texts beckon from every aisle, materials of every sort, and curricula of every discipline, age level, and perspective. We chose to order a curriculum from the A Beka Company, which would cover English, science, handwriting, literature, and health. For mathematics and physics, the Saxon Company supplied outstanding texts. For the foreign language requirement I imposed my love of Spanish and chose a McGraw Hill publication.

While contacting this company and attempting to obtain student and teacher texts, I ran into a glitch. Attached to the rejected request for the teacher’s edition was this note: “Could you please send your request on school letterhead stationery?” A call to the company revealed that they had never heard of home schooling and that I was suspected of being a renegade parent trying to acquire answers illegally. Though the company eventually released to me my requested copies, later requests over the next two years always needed special explanations.

**Kristi:** Extracurricular activities become a crucial issue for home schoolers. I will cite specific examples later, but countless resources are available to a home schooling family. Community centers and groups offer classes for almost every interest, and local sports teams involve children in softball, soccer, and karate, to name a few. Private lessons in art, musical instruments, and even voice are available in almost any town. Also, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, and many other groups provide not only extracurricular activities but also valuable peer interaction. Many home schoolers form groups that meet a variety of needs by hiring tutors and organizing field trips, drama programs, and sports teams. A home school family is limited only by the imagination of its members.

**Joan:** On “opening day” we put the kids into the nice little cubicles we had created for them. I attempted to hover over each of them as they did their work. Somewhere in my mind I was justifying our format and our approach to an imaginary authority. In reality, Texas legally regards the home school family as a private school. However, regulations vary significantly from state to state. Some require yearly approval of the individual family by the board of education. Some require certified teachers to inspect and oversee student progress. For other states, annual testing satisfies any concerns, but most liberal of all is Texas, which says, “Any child in attendance upon a private or parochial school which shall include in its course a study of ‘good citizenship’ is exempt from the requirement of compulsory attendance” (qtd. in Klicka 46).

**Kristi:** One concern about my home school education, put more bluntly, came down to this question: “How can you stand your family anymore?” I am sure that the picture of my mother hovering over me as I worked brings that question to the minds of many readers. Sometimes I could not stand my family, but that dilemma is common to every high schooler. However, because of the time that I spent with them, I grew as a person.

I learned so much about how to handle conflict from this time with my siblings. I had gone from spending roughly six hours each day with my brothers to as many as eleven. If I was going to survive, I had better learn to cooperate. It might be more accurate to say that I had better be less of a bossy big sister. I was determined to tell my brothers what to do, but this obviously caused more problems than it solved. As a result, I had to learn when to speak and when not to speak. For example, you don’t correct your brothers while your mom is correcting them. It is just a bad idea. The boys also had battles to work out. Spanish was always an ordeal, with Michael and Scott competing for attention and insulting one another. However, the most important result of all this was that I got to know my family. I learned that they could be more obnoxious than I had previously thought, but also that they were a wonderful bunch of people. Although it was not always easy, I think that we are closer as a result of home schooling.

**Joan:** The cubicles were nice but were soon abandoned for the comfort of the sofa, bed, or pillow on the floor. The kids liked the dress code—anything they felt like wearing. Because there was only one student per “class,” the kids could work at their own pace to be freed up from school for the rest of the day. It made me nervous to see how quickly they finished. Since television was forbidden, how would they occupy the hours we still had in the day? At this point our classroom really expanded. Home schooling presented otherwise unavailable opportunities to learn. Graham became a favorite helper at the local animal shelter, managing the army of cats and dogs and assisting the volunteers in a

variety of ways. Kristi decided she would like to earn money to buy her own horse, so she took on a baby-sitting job for our local piano teacher. When the right horse came along, she joined the 4-H club and learned to show him, having time during the day to study about her new love. The younger boys learned marksmanship skills from the Granbury 4-H group and joined the Boy Scouts. We also traveled to the stock show in Fort Worth and other places of interest.

**Kristi:** I have been asked many times about my schedule while home schooling. When people realize that I was usually finished by 1 p.m., they are quick to ask what I did with the rest of my time. I had no shortage of activities, and I loved it that they were of my own choosing. My parents only rarely prescribed specific after-school activities. They did require that we participate in sports, so my brothers joined the local soccer teams. Even today they all love soccer. I spent my afternoons baby-sitting until I earned enough to buy and care for a horse. "Casper" and I joined the 4-H group and participated in regular riding events and shows. I also began art classes at a local gallery, where I won several ribbons. I even joined the 4-H marksmanship group and had fun outshooting the boys.

The freedom of our schedule allowed me to travel. I was involved in a high school-level Bible club, which had annual regional and national competitions. Some of my public school counterparts could not attend these events because of their school schedules. However, our club went three times to Chicago and won awards in the athletic and Bible study portions of these national competitions.

My summers had plenty of activities and other opportunities for peer interactions. During two summers a friend and I planned and created a float to represent the church youth group for the local Fourth of July parade. In both years we won the "Best Civic Youth Float" award. During the summers and later during the school year, I worked as a secretary for an air conditioning company. Through this job I gained some practical work experience and people skills.

**Joan:** How could I presume to take on this task of educating my kids in so many different disciplines when teachers go to school for years to learn both content and technique? Together, we and our children discovered that by following the books and teacher's guides, we could accomplish our goals with a little perseverance. We enjoyed grammar, history, composition, mathematics of all levels, and the sciences.

One day Graham was reading about the Doppler effect (the noticeable change in sound frequency due to the relative movement of the source of the sound). Echoes of the phenomenon rang in my ears as I considered how I might demonstrate it to him. In a moment of inspiration (madness?) I put him in our van, drove him to the side of our quiet street, and backed off in the van about 200 yards. While he stood on the side of the street, I accelerated the vehicle until I was going at a good clip, all the while laying on the horn. He looked at me in wonder as I passed. For good measure, I did it again from the other direction. This time he was bent over in convulsions of laughter, having caught the effect of sound wave compression but realizing, like me, how ridiculous we both looked. Fortunately, the neighbors were not home, or they might have suspected some bizarre form of child abuse. I believe Graham still remembers the Doppler effect.

Kristi's big challenge was chemistry. Eventually it dawned on me that we would have to read it together, or she would not be able to continue. I struggled to keep ahead of her. But along the way a funny thing happened: she was learning the calculations and I was

enjoying myself. The high school chemistry that had remained an enigma many years ago began to open wide its mysteries to me. In fact, all the disciplines became sources of real pleasure as I learned them within the context of my forty years of life experience. While home schooling my kids, I was being educated.

Our most difficult discovery came early on: Scott could not read. During his previous school years I had allowed myself to assume that he was progressing normally in this area, but apparently he had been able to mask his incompetence. I had no idea that this inability existed or that it was a profound source of embarrassment. Our home school format provided the necessary one-on-one time to remedy the problem, and eventually shame gave way to an eagerness to read. The change was accomplished one word at a time, as he read aloud while I looked over his shoulder. Since he was not allowed to continue until each word was properly spoken, it was grueling for us both. He now maintains a personal library and regularly asks for new books.

**Kristi:** Academically I developed quickly in home schooling. The freedom to control the rate of my own studies was dependent on my success. If I was not understanding a concept, then I was not allowed to work at my own pace again until I was back on track. This self-controlled style suited me and drove me to do more. One area in which I had never been successful, even before home schooling, was mathematics. At home I read over my lesson and did the assigned problems. I checked my work carefully because I knew that my evenings were reserved for reviewing all my wrong answers with Dad. All four of us were taught math by our dad, an electrical engineer well qualified in this subject. I had missed some crucial concepts earlier in my education, and these evenings could be quite an ordeal. However, when I graduated in 1997, I had successfully completed all the regular and advanced math requirements. My calculus class was so thorough that it was not until more than halfway through my second semester of college calculus that I encountered any unfamiliar material. Before beginning home school, I was in the 37th percentile on the math portion of the SAT. However, when I graduated I was in the 96th percentile. Because of my struggles, I decided to become a math teacher, and will graduate with a bachelor's degree in mathematics with a 4.0 average in 2001.

**Joan:** Home schooling benefits many areas. While developing strong identifications with basic family values, children are freed from the tyranny of the "teach to the middle" syndrome or the distractions of typical classroom management problems. A gift can be pursued aggressively and individually. Conversely, weaker subjects can receive more attention. Interestingly, studies have shown that the level of educational achievement of the home schooling parent does not correlate with the achievement of the home schooled student. One controlled study indicates that these students are consistently scoring in the 65th to 68th percentile on standardized tests as compared to their public school counterparts (Van Galen and Pitman 45). I have heard of students having the freedom to pursue national dog shows or horsemanship or international travel. The possibilities are limitless, but the kids are not extraordinary. They are regular students given individual room to excel along with significant parental support. This discovery of the effects of parental involvement has ramifications for all our educational programs.

Throughout the course of our four years, I began to develop the philosophy that no singular system of education is ideal for all students. Every year we reevaluated each child in light of other educational options. There were indeed problems in our setup that

were alleviated when the boys returned to public high school. Conforming to a public school schedule was good for them, and there are advantages to the more well-endowed athletic programs offered.

After dedicating our entire lifestyle to the education of our kids, I also had a new perspective on the heavy responsibility of our public school teachers. They labor selflessly to benefit all the students sent their way.

The four years of our time in home school came to an end in 1998. Kristi had fulfilled all the requirements needed as a senior and had graduated in a nice ceremony attended by about 120 family and friends. Graham had chosen to attend the local public high school in the middle of his junior year. Though he had excelled academically, by this point he truly needed interaction with his peers for motivation. Michael entered the local high school in ninth grade in order to get in on the ground floor of the school soccer program. Scott followed in his path a year later, and we officially closed our “school.”

**Kristi:** The final concern I will address is the transition from home school to college. My first problem was simply getting into school. Because home schooling is still relatively new, some colleges and private scholarship programs do not recognize the transcript of a home schooled student. They do not know how to interpret a home schooler’s GPA, and of course class ranking in a class of one is a joke. Extracurricular activities do not come from a traditional school setting, something that can also cause problems. However, my top college choices all recognized my nontraditional transcript and GPA. College entrance exams such as the SAT and the ACT allowed me to overcome many of these obstacles. These tests are, of course, required for every entering freshman, but they can be used to judge the authenticity of a home schooler’s records as well.

When I entered the scholarship program of Tarleton State University, two other home schoolers entered with me. One has already graduated *summa cum laude*, as will the remaining two of us in the next couple of semesters. We are also participating members of our Alpha Chi chapter. Another home schooler who entered Tarleton at the same time received the Freshman of the Year award for her involvement in the university.

Entering Tarleton raised some other concerns. I was very unsure of whether I was really qualified for college. For three years I had no peers to measure myself against. I wondered if the progress that I thought I had made was real or imagined or even created by my parents’ bias. However, my study skills have served me well in college. The personal responsibility required of a home schooler prepares a student well for the very similar demands of college. I have never felt that there was a lack in my education, and have never been asked to do something for which I was not prepared.

I have also been asked about my social adjustment to college. The home schoolers I have met at Tarleton do not stand out socially in any way from other students. Perhaps as a home schooler myself, I would not notice a difference. However, other students from traditional backgrounds have told me that they also find this to be true. Home schoolers do the same things that the traditional students do: join school organizations, struggle with their studies, make friends, date, and enjoy college life.

I need to follow this positive assessment with a disclaimer. Some home schoolers are social isolationists. They enter home schooling to escape not only problems in the school system but also the world beyond. These families are a very small minority of the home school community. However, the home schoolers who graduate from such an arrangement are, I believe, at a disadvantage socially and sometimes even academically. I

say this having met some of these students. On the other hand, there are also students in the public school system who have no grasp of social skills.

**Joan:** What had we accomplished in these years? In retrospect, I feel that we not only solidified our family ties but also put all of the kids on a solid academic platform on which to build further growth. Certain weaknesses and inabilities in their education might never have been dealt with had we not taken this path. It should be noted that there are people who abuse the concept of home schooling. They choose to use its banner to mask their new status as high school dropouts. Although this danger exists, I firmly support the right of parents to opt for unconventional (non-public) forms of education.

**Kristi:** Each student is an individual with a unique style, needs, and desires. Should not our goal be to find what method works for individual students and then make it available to them?

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