

Steve Demme—A Homeschool Journey

By Liz Koon

God began leading Steve Demme to homeschool in 1976, even before he had children or was married. A class he attended in seminary led to the beginning of his homeschool journey and eventually his philosophy that a home education is a lifestyle, not merely academics.

Steve's journey began with a Christian education class. He recalls: "I did a Bible study on everything that had to do with the word *teach* When I looked that up, I was convinced that parents were the ones who were supposed to be responsible for their children's education and the curriculum should be based on the Word of God."

Six years later when he was married and the father of two boys, he and his wife, Sandra, attended their first homeschool conference. He remembers: "We only had two kids. Ethan was just a baby and Isaac was 2, but we were committed to homeschooling from that point on."

During the 1980s, there were legal problems when parents tried to homeschool. Judges were attempting to take children away from homeschooling parents and place children in foster homes. According to Steve, "people who were going to court were having to almost sell their houses to pay the legal fees. There wasn't HSLDA [**Home School Legal Defense Association**] and there wasn't any kind of a network."

The homeschooling atmosphere was very tense. People were afraid to talk to strangers, as Steve discovered at that first conference. He remembers trying to strike up a conversation with a man: "He wouldn't tell me where he lived because he didn't know me and he didn't know if I was a plant with the Department of Education. . . . That was kind of the atmosphere, because people were going to court and to jail." Despite the restrictive environment, Steve knew he wanted to teach his kids and that it was his "Biblical mandate."

Few homeschooling materials were available at that time either. Most Christian publishers of curricula were marketing their materials to Christian schools, not to homeschool families. What was available in 1982? Steve responded: "**Winston Grammar** and Elmer Brooks' **Math-It**. Neither was a complete program, but that is about all that was out there."

Like many first-time homeschoolers, Steve and his wife began homeschooling by "buying desks at a yard sale, putting them in a separate room. We put the alphabet on the wall and the flag in the corner because we thought that was what a school at home was."

Gradually, Steve and his wife realized that "home education isn't really an academic endeavor It is a whole lifestyle. . . . You are learning all the time." They moved from the schoolroom to the kitchen table, and their homeschooling changed from a style of following a set schedule to something they did all the time. "We read together and we watched movies together, and we learned together as we were walking down the road and when we got up and when we would lie down, as it says in Deuteronomy." Steve began taking advantage of teachable moments, and he even taught one of his sons to count using mile markers as they traveled along the interstate.

In 1987, Johnny was born with Down syndrome. The Demme family could have spent their lives running Johnny to therapy sessions. Instead, they found the **National Association of Child Development**, which enabled them to develop a program to homeschool Johnny and continue homeschooling their other three sons—a program that fit their lifestyle.

After moving to Massachusetts to teach in a Christian school, Steve discovered that homeschooling parents in New England didn't have the same access to information and curricula as did parents in Georgia, Texas, California, and other areas. In 1990, "probably half the homeschoolers in Texas were using **KONOS** or **The Weaver Curriculum**," but in New England, they hadn't even heard of these programs, Steve recalls. So he started a company called **Our Family Resources** and sold KONOS, as well as other products that his family had been using. This provided New England homeschoolers with easier access to homeschool curricula.

After teaching at the Christian school for a year, Steve became a "one man co-op going around to homeschool groups teaching math" and other subjects. One co-op asked him to create a math curriculum, something Steve had never done. In fact when he was teaching in the public schools and taking classes to be certified, he had never taken "Curriculum and Development" or "Methods of Teaching Math" courses. Steve developed his own highly successful math curriculum—without the training provided by those classes. According to Steve, "Most teachers don't understand math any better than homeschooling parents do. It is just that public school teachers have been doing it longer." Steve once asked high school math teachers when they really began to understand geometry. They told him, "About the third year that we taught it"—and that's teaching two to three times a day for three years! Steve then added, "Then we expect these kids going through a mid-life crisis, hormones changing, to get it in eight months."

Steve wrote the math curriculum one week at a time for his co-op classes. The first book was completed at the end of the school year, and that was the beginning of **Math-U-See**.

Homeschooling has changed since the Demmes first began homeschooling. One of the biggest changes is one Sandra observed several years ago when the family began attending a new church. Since the Demmes were new to the church, they fielded the typical questions about who they were, where they were from, and where their kids went to school. "Twenty-five years ago," Steve commented, "we were quite defensive" when asked about our kids' homeschooling We would try to tell them about the research and tell them about **Better Late Than Early** by Raymond and Dorothy Moore. We would share about the Colfax family whose kids went to Harvard We would have all these studies and answers and talk about socialization and all those kind of things. Nowadays when you meet somebody, they all know about homeschooling. You are not educating anybody. Usually what they say is 'we tried it, but we just don't have enough patience.' They are convicted and often defensive. You almost have to say it's okay—different things for different families. That is really a huge difference right there."

Today there is a plethora of homeschool resources and support groups. Steve, however, believes the focus of a homeschool education needs to remain on building relationships: "If you stick your kid in a co-op or in front of a computer most of the time, then you are really not developing relationships with parents." And for Steve,

relationships are an important part of a homeschool education and part of what drew him to the movement in the first place. He remembers becoming acquainted with homeschooling families and watching how teens interacted with their parents. These teens had a “very neat relationship with their parents. I had spent most of my Christian life working with teens and . . . that was a very rare thing to see.”

Some things remain the same, especially the need for homeschoolers to be eternally vigilant. Recently in Illinois, a bill that was not favorable to home education nearly slipped through. Parental rights is another issue that homeschoolers must watch. According to Steve, there has never really been a “decisive case saying that parents have the authority to train their own kids. Most of the cases were won on technicalities, or really just God’s mercy. But there has never really been an across the board affirmation of the parents’ divine right to teach their kids That’s why organizations like HSLDA are important. People don’t remember those days when you had to sell your house to defend your right to homeschool.”

As Steve and Sandra homeschooled their boys, they taught them not only academics but also how to love God and how to love their neighbor: “That is the beauty of the family dynamic. As you learn to love each other and understand each other and grow together and give each other space, that is the real preparation” for life Homeschooling transcends the academics very quickly.”

For Steve and his family, their homeschool journey was a lifestyle that was good for them and a journey his older boys plan to continue. The methods, legal climate, and other aspects of homeschooling may change from decade to decade. However, the most important factors of a home education—making schooling a lifestyle and building relationships—never change.

*Liz and her husband, Craig, have three children—two homeschool graduates and one to go! Plus they’re enjoying being grandparents. Liz’s greatest desire is that her children and grandchildren always walk in the truth (III John 1:4). Liz is an assistant to the publisher at TOS and a freelance writer. She loves learning new things and creating dried flower crafts. You may contact Liz at **LizKoonWritingandEditingSvc@gmail.com**.*

*Steve and his wife Sandra have been married for thirty-one years. They have been blessed with four sons: Isaac, 31; Ethan, 29; Joseph, 26; and Johnny, 23. With God’s help, they have all been home educated. He is the founder of Math-U-See (www.MathUSee.com) and has served on various boards, including **Joni and Friends** for Eastern PA. Visit Steve’s website (TheFamilyThatStaysTogether.org) for more information.*

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