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Home Schoolers' Motivations Are Diverse;

Their Teaching Styles Vary

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The movement is broader than conservative Christians

By 8 a.m., Lucy and Sally Gotch are showered and ready to begin their school day. There is no bus to catch or lunch to pack because the Gotch girls are like 1.1 million children in America: They are home-schooled.

Their mother, Karla, a Purdue University graduate with a degree in nutrition, prints out a daily lesson plan that mixes math and reading with Bible studies and character development.

On this day, Albert Gotch returns home at lunchtime from nearby Mount Union College, where he chairs the chemistry department. For the next hour, as his daughters nestle on the couch and he sits comfortably in a love seat, Dr. Gotch teaches logic using *The Fallacy Detective* by Nathaniel and Hans Bluedorn.

They freely exchange ideas on deception, red herrings, loaded questions, inconsistencies, equivocation and circular reasoning as Gotch pushes his daughters to master critical thinking.

The Gotch family of Louisville is the picture of home schooling in America.

They are part of a vast, growing and persuasive movement that quietly and steadily has altered the education landscape in the past 20 years.

In 1984, the Gotch family would have been an anomaly nearly anywhere in the United States. Now, just about everyone knows a family member, neighbor, fellow member of the church, co-worker or casual acquaintance who home-schools.

Just about everyone has an opinion -- positive or negative -- about those families.

The Gotch story is akin to those of hundreds, if not thousands, of families profiled in the media, an image -- parents involved, children succeeding -- that has allowed home schooling to evolve from outlaw status in almost every state in 1980 to legal nationwide today.

Karen and Albert Gotch are Christian, white and conservative, but they represent only part of a movement that is far more diverse and includes parents home schooling for myriad reasons including personal, academic, political and religious.

With almost no oversight and little accountability, the power to educate and raise children has been entrusted solely to parents. At its heart, home schooling is a parental rights movement.

In focus groups, home-schooling parents told the Akron Beacon Journal that the U.S. Constitution protects the right to home-school.

``I don't take government money. I have a right to raise my kids the way I see fit,'' a Christian mother said in a Beacon Journal focus group. (All focus group participants were granted anonymity.)

Some home-schooling parents go further, maintaining the rights are God-given and it is their responsibility to raise and educate their children in God's image.

Distrust of schools

The rise of the home-schooling movement can be traced to a growing dissatisfaction with public schools.

For the most part, home schoolers distrust a public school system they say is unresponsive to their needs. They see unions and bureaucrats -- often referred to as ``educrats'' -- suffocating children rather than teaching them.

Home schoolers look at the school setting and see negative peer pressure and a form of socialization that runs counter to their beliefs. They are troubled by the curricula, they oppose the idea of testing and the exams used, and they are concerned about random violence.

From the parents' viewpoint, they can give their children individual attention, teach to strengths and address weaknesses, set the pace for learning and spend more time with their children.

Most do.

Parents whose children have special needs, and others who have gifted children, have turned to home schooling after being disappointed by the way public schools dealt with their situations.

There also is a religious component in many cases. Parents want some semblance of spirituality in the lesson plan.

Others, such as Christopher Klicka, feel even more strongly.

Klicka is the Home School Legal Defense Association's senior counsel, and in his book The Heart of Home Schooling, he warns parents to keep their children out of the godless public schools.

``Never become tempted to send your children to public school. It is tantamount to sending your children to be trained by the enemy. If Satan could choose which school system he wanted you to send your children to, he would choose the public school system,'' Klicka wrote.

Gotch family in Stark

Albert Gotch said he turned to home education after public school officials in Kansas, one of the places the family lived before moving to Louisville, attempted to tell him how to be a parent.

``Some of it crossed the line,'' he said. Gotch also knew his children were bright, even gifted in certain subjects. ``We were thinking we could do as well or a better job.''

It is no surprise that Lucy, 17, and Sally, 13, are top-notch in math and science. They excel in other areas, too, and their scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills prove it.

Each year, the Gotch children take a full battery of Iowa tests, although Ohio doesn't require testing of home schoolers. At times, the parents administer the exams -- obtained through Bob Jones University in South Carolina -- and they have also taken tests in group sessions with other home schoolers. The tests help pinpoint problem areas. When one of the girls had trouble with spelling, Karla began to emphasize that topic in the lesson plan.

Lucy finished calculus a year early, and the Gotches are considering enrolling her early in college for advanced math classes.

``We've set a fairly high bar and seen some good progress,'' Albert Gotch said.

Academics, however, wasn't the only issue discouraging the Gotches from public schools. Children in the public schools were from divorced and single-mother families, and the Gotches were concerned about negative influences on Lucy and Sally, their father said.

The Gotches are a deeply religious family active in their church, and the parents wanted the Bible to be part of Lucy's and Sally's lesson plans. They want to be the gatekeepers for their daughters, ensuring that the girls' values are the same as theirs.

Karla also was motivated to home-school for other reasons: By not losing Lucy and Sally to the public school system for as long as eight hours each day, Karla feels reassured the family is strengthened, and like many home-schooling mothers, she wants to witness each child's eureka moments and epiphanies.

Now they spend full days together. Sitting at the kitchen table, Karla advises Lucy to narrow her topic to manage a research paper on photography.

``Hopefully, we've trained them well, and they are going to make more good decisions than bad decisions,'' Albert Gotch said.

Counterculture origin

Christian families such as the Gotches often are the first image that comes to mind when people picture home schooling. The roots of the modern movement, however, are more hippie than Christian in nature.

In 1964, John Holt, anticipating the challenge to authority to come in the latter half of the decade, wrote How Children Fail.

Holt and the group he inspired, known as ``unschoolers,'' rebel against the so-called production-line, corporate aspects of the public school system. They don't want their children programmed as pawns for a capitalist society, so they home-school to empower the child to direct his or her learning.

For different reasons, the '60s also inspired the Christian home-school movement. Many Christians believe the seeds were sown then for a breakdown of the family and society's growing acceptance of abortion, homosexuality, the sexual revolution and women's liberation.

In 1979, about a year after the unschoolers' Holt founded the first magazine for home schooling, Growing Without Schooling, the Christian movement found its voice. Raymond S. Moore penned School Can Wait. He and his wife, Dorothy, started the Hewitt-Moore Research Foundation in Washington state to support the modern pioneer home-schooling families.

The ideas germinated for about five years and sprang to life in President Reagan's first term. Public schools were taking a critical beating with the release of A Nation At Risk in 1983. The alarming federal report said, in part, that ``our social structure would crack, our culture erode, our economy totter, [and] our national defenses weaken'' if the United States did not make immediate attempts to remedy its education system.

The Christian right soon became the face of home schooling in America.

Professor Mitchell Stevens of Hamilton College in New York contends in his book Kingdom of Children that the Christian wing took the lead because it was better organized and had money. ``Both groups have managed to create lively, talkative, durable causes, but one version of home education is larger and wealthier and more handily directs the national conversation on home schooling,'' Stevens wrote.

Stevens, who lived among home schoolers for five years while writing his book, sees fundamental differences between unschoolers and Christian home schoolers.

``Part of the trouble, as I learned from many parents, was that unschooling's presumption about the inherent goodness of children did not sit well with conservative Protestants, who tended to balance their high regard for children's potential with a strong conviction about the inherent sinfulness of humankind,'' Stevens wrote.

The gains made in the last 20 years have opened the movement to diverse religions, races and methods of teaching children. Home schoolers today are black, Hispanic and Native American, Catholic, Presbyterian, Quaker, Mormon, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist and Jewish. There are atheists and pagans, even practicing witches.

The unschoolers have evolved into a broader group known as ``inclusives,'' who embrace most religions, races and sexual orientations.

Barberton `unschooler'

Since she was young, Rachel Coffman loved to work with plants, running her fingers through moist dirt, watching shoots blossom into flowers.

When she was 14, she pruned her mother's wilted rose bush and felt the joy of bringing it back to life.

``I really like plants. I wanted to learn about plants, so this is the best school,'' Coffman said as she sat in the library at the Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster. As she sipped from her ubiquitous cup of mint tea, Coffman, 19, talked about studying greenhouse production management.

She has been directing her own education for years. Her parents became unschoolers after Coffman went through the fourth grade at Portage Elementary in Barberton.

Her teacher that year falsely accused her of plagiarizing a report on salamanders, claiming the writing was too good to be Rachel's.

Coffman already was feeling social pressure at school.

``You had to be cool. I was trying hard to fit in. Now that I'm older, I see how silly it was,'' she said.

The first year at home was ``different,'' Coffman said. She worked through encyclopedias and workbooks. Eventually she moved toward more hands-on learning.

``We figured out unschooling worked much better. You learn from life. I studied plants. I worked in the garden,'' Coffman said. ``Your learning is custom-fit. A lot of people learn in different ways.''

At first, Coffman worried she would miss her friends at school, but her family, like many others in home schooling, became involved in home-school support groups. Her sister and brother also are home-schooled.

Coffman was active with other home schoolers, staying at friends' homes and taking part in study groups. She visited museums and historical sites.

She has a few regrets, including not learning more math, she said. ``When we're shopping and I see 20 percent off, I really wish I could do that. Mom can do that in her head,'' she said.

Coffman failed the essay part of the GED test her first time. Home schoolers don't earn standard high school diplomas, so many colleges require a GED for admission. ``I had never done an essay question. That was difficult,'' Coffman said.

She said the GED surprised her because she passed the Iowa tests the first five years she was home, and scored a 25 on the ACT -- a score that would have placed her in the top 18 percent in the 2003-04 school year.

Her grandmother, a certified teacher, assessed Coffman each year and filed required reports with Barberton to demonstrate progress.

As Coffman walks through the ATI greenhouse, she rattles off the names of colorful flowers and obscure plant life. She talks about owning a tea shop someday. She'll grow the tea, dry it and sell it, she said.

Her friends at college are curious about her home schooling.

``They ask, `What was it like? What did you do all day?' '' Coffman said.

She tells them it was better than her public school, where ``you're likely to have your lunch money taken and (get) beaten up.''

A third group of home schoolers that has gained prominence in recent years includes families with distinct needs.

Parents with children who are gifted -- intellectually, athletically or musically, for example -- may home-school to ensure time is devoted to these talents.

Societal reasons

Some families are opting to home-school for race, gender and class reasons.

Joyce Burges, who runs the National Black Home Educators Resource Association from her home outside Baton Rouge, La., said an increasing number of black families are home schooling because public schools are failing their children on many levels.

Burges home-schooled five children. Nationally, verified figures for black home-schooling families are as elusive as other numbers. The National Home Education Research Institute estimated the number at 30,000 to 50,000 children in 2003.

``They are tired of a (public school) system their children are suffering in. It's over. School's out. This ship is sinking,'' Burges said.

African-American families have experienced wrath from their own race as other blacks accuse them of abandoning the battle to desegregate schools and gain access to a quality education for everyone.

``They look at us as if we're Benedict Arnolds,'' she said.

Burges said fighting for civil rights was something that needed to be done at the time, but those days are gone.

``The system is not the same. There is a heaven-and-hell difference between the '50s and the system'' now, Burges said.

Financial commitment

Buoyed by their Christian faith, Anthony and Arzella Miller have dealt with the pressure and continued to home-school their five children in Pearland, Texas. They know that blacks are often criticized for home schooling, but they believe they are doing what is best for twins Kamyl and Jeremi, 17, Corinne, 12, Josef, 10, Amanda, 8, and Patricia, 5. They have faced another test to their commitment to home-school. More than two years ago, within months of changing jobs and buying a new house in an upscale neighborhood in Pearland, on the south side of Houston, Anthony Miller lost his job in the pipeline industry.

Miller has a mechanical engineering degree from the California Institute of Technology. To feed the family, he has worked as a home remodeler, substitute teacher, driving instructor and sales representative. He recently landed a job in Houston city government.

Arzella, who has a business degree from California State University at Los Angeles, struggled with the idea that she wasn't working.

``I say, `You are working,' '' Anthony said, but she is about to start an in-home business handling paperwork for real estate agents.

Like many other home-schooling parents, the Millers have made financial sacrifices.

Arzella, like most mothers in home schooling, is the primary educator.

By 8 a.m., the children have gathered in an upstairs classroom for Scripture memorization and discussion. Then the twins head downstairs to work on a play in Spanish, while the four younger children stay with Arzella.

The Millers want the children to follow in their footsteps and go to college. Kamyl wants to be a pediatrician. The others are less sure. They talk about becoming a dancer or an NBA star or going into politics, journalism or physical therapy.

The twins are studying a series of books called World Views of the Western World, by David Quine, that requires them to read classics and then compare those ideas with their Christian views. Arzella Miller said they must explore their ideas through writing.

``They're not very excited about it, but when they come out of it, they should be very firm in their beliefs,'' she said.

Anthony Miller said the children are encouraged to express disagreement.

``Our children are learning they can trust us, but we're not perfect. They've heard us apologize for being wrong, but we are the authority, and we love them,'' he said.

He considers his 19-year marriage to Arzella special, and he wants the same for his kids.

``It has been an interesting adventure. It has been a wonderful adventure,'' Anthony Miller said. ``It's amazing what grace God has shown this family.''