

AMHERST BULLETIN

VOL. 28, NO. 45

NOVEMBER 8, 1996

28 PAGES

Pathfinder Learning Center helps home-schoolers

'Self-directed education'

By CHRISTINE RYERSON
Bulletin Correspondent

"I had been thinking about home-schooling for years," says Janet Podell of Amherst. "But I didn't think I had time to put together the documentation the superintendent wanted."

Her son, Raff, was interested in computer animation. After his eighth-grade year in public school, Podell says, she and her husband didn't know how they could send him back for ninth

Center's founders explain
its purpose, Page 9

grade.

The answer turned out to be the new Pathfinder Learning Center in downtown Amherst. Pathfinder helps families develop the education plans required by state and local law, and provides a place for home-schoolers to congregate and work together on projects of mutual interest.

"Raff is at Pathfinder a lot less than most of the kids," Podell says. Instead, he takes graduate classes in computer science at UMass and spends the rest of his school days working at home alongside his freelance-writer parents. "Raff's very self-motivated and there are a lot of things he wants to learn," Podell says. "If anything, school was holding him back."

Lesley Arak, 14, started home-schooling with Pathfinder this fall because she was interested in a more personal form of learning than what she had gotten at the junior high school.

Her father, Joe Arak, was at first unsure about the idea of home schooling. "I associated it with a hippie, anti-establishment attitude," he admits. Another of his perceptions was that parents teach their kids at home. "I see it now as more self-directed education," Arak says.

Actually, when teens home-school, parents are rarely instructors. Instead, kids pursue subjects of personal interest through textbooks, internships, tutoring, travel, volunteerism and Pathfinder workshops. Lesley Arak is currently volunteering on the Amherst school district's new Ecobus, which is equipped for ecological field trips and on-board experiments.

The November Pathfinder schedule of activities includes classes in Native American bead weaving taught by a teenage home-schooler, weekly sessions in U.S. history, drawing classes, meditation groups, field trips to Boston, the Lowell mills and Westover Air Force Base, and an information session on career opportunities in the hotel and restaurant industry.

The Pathfinder office provides Internet access to anyone interested, while CASTLE (Capacitor-Aided System for Teaching and Learning) is a popular, hands-on inquiry into the design and construction of computers.

(Continued on Page 9)



GORDON DANIELS

Tibet Sprague, 15, of Shutesbury works on an electricity project at the Pathfinder Learning Center in Amherst.

'Self-directed education'

(Continued from Page 1)

Tibet Sprague, 15, is one of Pathfinder's strongest CASTLE enthusiasts. "I wasn't even thinking of home schooling, but I went to the meeting last spring and it sounded fun," he comments. "It's really different here; deciding what you want to do and how and when you'll do it. I like that."

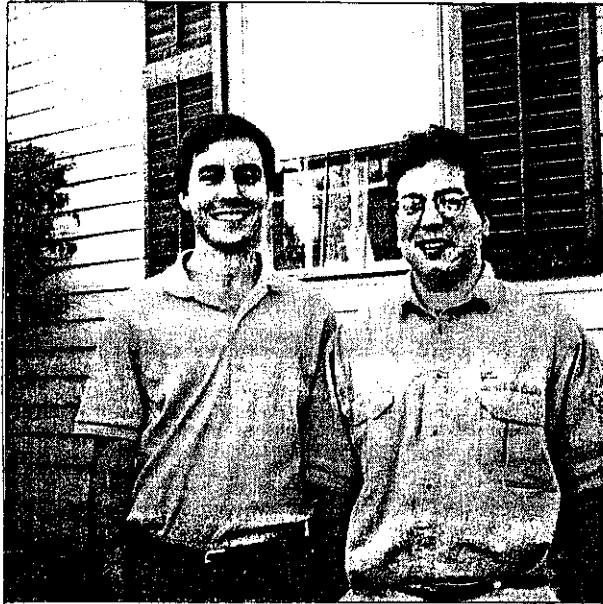
Autonomy in scheduling is a priority for Pathfinder students. Harijap Fuller, 12, of Leverett states, "I spend my time better than I could in junior high. I do the subjects I have to without spending all day, and have more time to myself."

Thirteen-year-old Emily Rosenberg of Amherst is a three-year home-schooling veteran who has enthusiastically embraced Path-

finder. "There are certain things my parents don't know, so they can't teach them to me," she explains. "Also, at home, there are no kids my age. I really like it here."

Michael Brooks, 13, of Greenfield agrees that Pathfinder is a social haven. "I was in junior high last year and it was terrible," he notes. "But even though home schooling is better for me, I wouldn't give up my social life to do it. I come here five days a week."

SCHOOL NEWS



Left, Josh Hornick and Ken Danford are co-directors of the Pathfinder Learning Center in Amherst, which helps home-schooled children and their parents from throughout the



region. Right, Willow Hersh of Leverett and Emily Rosenberg of Amherst spend some time at Pathfinder making up a game based on "Lord of the Rings."

Pathfinder Learning Center co-directors Josh Hornick and Ken Danford

'We're like an academic YMCA'

By CHRISTINE RYERSON
Bulletin Correspondent

Ken Danford, co-director of the new Pathfinder Learning Center, doesn't like the term "home schooling." He and partner Josh Hornick say that "community-based schooling" more accurately describes what they offer to teens who have opted out of going to school.

Last August, the Pathfinder Learning Center opened its doors in downtown Amherst to provide networking, support and educational resources to families who have found that traditional junior high and high schools are just not working for their children. "We're kind of like an academic YMCA," Danford says. "One critical point is that we serve no custodial function; kids come and go as they choose."

He and Hornick, both former teachers at Amherst Regional Junior High School, say about 35 teens have chosen home schooling under the auspices of Pathfinder. "As far as we know, we're the only professionally run, community-based center supporting home schooling for teenagers in the country," Danford notes.

He and Hornick left mainstream academia for different reasons. "My general take is that Ken left because he couldn't do the things he wanted to do in class," Hornick muses. "I left because the kids didn't want to be there, even though 'Mr. Hor-

nick's class' was one of the more popular ones."

Hornick, a former Wall Street lawyer, realized that education was his real love while helping to organize a minority-owned bank in New Jersey. "I would drop anything to explain something to someone, to answer questions," he recalls.

Hornick began visiting schools and decided that teaching looked like fun; within a year he was teaching at an alternative school in New York City. "Still, relationships with students were often adversarial and most of the kids were bored in school," he comments. "If I had listened to my inner voice, I wouldn't have wasted so much of my time; Pathfinder is about helping children do that, to avoid going down the wrong path."

He and Danford did no advertising for Pathfinder; instead, they simply held a public information session last spring at the Bangs Center. "We were expecting 20 to 30 people," Hornick says. "Eighty showed up." They officially opened their doors with fewer than ten families. By the beginning of September, 35 had signed on.

Lawsuits in the '70s paved the way for parents to legally teach their children at home. Fifteen years ago, there were approximately 15,000 home-schoolers in the U.S. Last year, the U.S. Department of Education esti-

mated that a half million children were learning at home. Danford says that home-schooling experts put the number closer to one million, or roughly two percent of the country's school-age population.

Hornick says that families home-school for either ideological or pedagogical reasons. "We fall firmly into the pedagogical category," he states. Danford adds that the current boom in home schooling is definitely pedagogical.

"Ten years ago, the majority of home schoolers were in the Christian community," he notes, adding that none of Pathfinder's students are there for religious reasons. "There was already a group of Christian home-schoolers in the Amherst community," he says. "They're very well organized and don't need us."

Danford stresses that students come and go entirely of their own volition. "If parents don't like that, their kids don't come here," he says. "We have parents who trust their kids."

Hornick adds that throughout history, children have taken on adult responsibilities by the age

of 14. "It's a recent phenomenon, only in the last 100 years or so, that we've taken away their authority until they're 18," he claims. "Compulsory education beyond age 12 is only 70 years old," Hornick continues. "In our post-industrial society, we need new models of education."

Still, some parents voice concerns about whether their home schoolers are getting the basics. "There are performance issues, now and later in life," parent Joe Arak comments. "Achievement in basic skills like English and math is still a big question in my mind, and I don't see any easy answers."

Pathfinder provides college counseling and helps prepare the college-bound for standardized tests. "Teens who home school are very well prepared for college," states Danford. "They have focus and direction, and can make choices."

Hornick adds, "In the world of education, the big word is motivation; the mandate is to create kids who think education is a burden. That's crazy! Everyone wants to learn."