

Homeschool Resource Centers

A Conversation with Ken Danford and Joshua Hornick

Ken and Joshua are the directors of Pathfinder Learning Center, a resource center for homeschooling teenagers in the Amherst, Massachusetts area. Now in its fourth year, Pathfinder serves as a social meeting place, offers classes and activities, and helps teenagers and their parents work through the challenges and issues that come up as they make the transition to self-directed learning. Members pay an annual fee of \$1500; those unable to pay that fee can reduce it by helping with Pathfinder's fundraising efforts.

Susannah Sheffer: Three years ago you were two middle school teachers dissatisfied with your jobs. When you left to create something else, why did you decide to create a resource center for homeschoolers instead of an alternative school?

Ken Danford: Creating a school wouldn't have addressed the concerns we had as teachers: having to deal with a curriculum, having a preset notion of what kids would have to learn. And if we opened a private school, the tuition would be rather expensive for the families. We wanted something that would be affordable — something that any of our students who wanted to leave with us could decide to join.

SS: It's interesting that you say "who wanted to leave with us." You started Pathfinder with the idea that your particular students might choose to leave school as you did?

KD: It's critical to understand that Pathfinder was developed to make homeschooling an appealing and successful option for kids who were still in school. We knew a lot of kids in school who we believed would benefit from another approach. Our main goal wasn't to collect all the homeschoolers who were already out there and have

them join us, although of course they were welcome as well (there weren't too many in this area, though). From the very beginning, we were about helping people choose to be in control of their education.

SS: As you were making plans to leave teaching, did you tell your students what you were going to do?

Joshua Hornick: We were very careful not to be actively soliciting kids. We didn't say anything in any forceful way; we just let kids know what we were doing. We never told kids they *should* leave school. A few of them did leave and join us, but most of our current members of Pathfinder were not actually Ken's or my students in school.

KD: We never recruited kids, never even cajoled. In fact, I think most of my students had enough misconceptions about homeschooling that they just thought it was kind of goofy. I was going to tutor homeschooled kids, is how they thought of it. They didn't realize it had any meaning to them.

JH: When kids would ask, "Why are you leaving?" I would say, "Because it makes me crazy to be here. I get the feeling most of you would just as soon

not be here, and I'm uncomfortable having to watch over you like that." But as Ken said, not too many students left school right then. Subsequently many did leave, but Pathfinder has caught on by word of mouth rather than because we urged kids to leave.

KD: Three years ago we started out with 20 or 25 kids. We moved up to 40 or so and had over 50 at one point.

SS: What do kids get with a resource center that they wouldn't get with a school?

JH: The real question is what they get from homeschooling that they don't get from school, and you and your readers know the answer to that as well as we do. But from another perspective, starting up a resource center is a lot less work than starting a school. Schools are required to play a custodial role, so you're in a situation where you have to be watching the kids all day long. Here at Pathfinder, the kids come and go as they choose. Most come in only two or three times a week and not for the whole day.

KD: And with very rare exceptions, schools make kids learn certain material. Pathfinder supports parents and kids to make their own decisions. Another question is, what is the difference between homeschooling with Pathfinder and without. I think the difference is simply that we make certain things easier. We provide a critical mass of people and of energy, for certain kids of field trips, classes, and activities. We certainly know lots of people who homeschool successfully without Pathfinder. Some people join, discover they don't need us that much, and leave.

JH: The other thing is the support services we provide for the family. We meet with families and help them develop their plans and help them review on a regular basis – are they doing what they wanted to do? At least twice a year we sit down with every family and talk about which of their goals are being met, which aren't, if there's disagreement between parents and kids, how should you go about trying to deal with the problems and support the successes. I perceive that service as extremely valuable to some families and at least moderately valuable to all of them.

KD: Some of those meetings are valuable even to families who have been homeschooling successfully for years. Just to have a brainstorming session or a counseling session can be helpful.

SS: Do other people have trouble distinguishing Pathfinder from a school?

KD: Almost everybody has trouble. My parents say, "Ken's school." They think that since we're teachers, and we have these kids coming here, that's a school.

SS: What about the families you work with? Do they understand the difference between a resource center and a school, or do they sometimes expect you to do what a school would do?

KD: A teenager might say to his friends, "I go to Pathfinder," because that's easier to say. But in the beginning when we talk to families, we do have to make it clear what we will and won't do. We won't make teenagers learn certain things, we won't hold them accountable, we won't be taskmasters. At some opening meetings with parents, they may think we're going to "do the homeschooling for them."

JH: But to our credit, I do think we make it pretty clear at the outset what we are not and what we won't do.

KD: Some kids may begin

homeschooling expecting us to make them do math, and then when we don't make them, they don't do it, and they end up resenting us for the fact that they didn't learn it.

SS: So they're really thinking in school terms, then.

Does Pathfinder make it possible for people to homeschool who wouldn't have otherwise?

JH: It makes the transition much easier. The families have a clearer idea of what to expect and they have people they can turn to when they're unsure. At first when people look at us, what they see that's attractive is all the activities and the fact that we are a place where kids can come and hang out together. But often they come to realize that the family support we offer is equally important.

KD: The social scene here is very attractive for teenagers coming out of school, too. And both parents and kids like the idea of the kids having an opportunity to learn in groups, but with the chance to choose what groups to be in. That's possible here in a way that it isn't at school. Of course, homeschool support groups also offer classes and activities, but having a permanent and centrally located place is very appealing. Kids know they can just drop in and see who's here today, what's going on. And then it's also very easy to leave, which is important.

JH: When people ask us about setting up a center for teenagers, we always stress the importance of having it in an accessible location where there are places for the kids to go if they leave. If the center is far away and only accessible by car, and the kids aren't driving yet, they'll have to get dropped off and they won't be able to leave until their parents pick them up. At Pathfinder, kids can walk out of here and be right in the center of Amherst with the library, coffee houses, pizza places, stores, and many other places to go.

SS: Pathfinder provides a center for teenagers to be together, and you also focus a lot on helping teenagers

get out into the wider community through volunteer work and apprenticeships. In your experience, which do teenagers crave more – a specifically "teen space," or the chance to be more fully integrated into the community?

KD: I think it's a false dichotomy; both are important. And in fact there are adults coming into Pathfinder all the time too, so it isn't really a secluded teenage hangout. Most of the kids don't come in every day, so they're clearly off doing other things. We're closed one day a week to encourage people to find a life elsewhere if they haven't already, because we did feel there was a small group, maybe five or ten kids, who were relying on Pathfinder too much.

SS: Why have a center specifically for teenagers and not just a resource center for the whole community?

KD: Because we're focusing on the particular importance of independent learning during adolescence, and because we had been teaching adolescents and that's where our concern was. But I can see that we could expand into being a lifetime learning center. I have fantasies of hooking up with the senior center here – maybe having history discussions linked with them.

JH: We had a senior citizen who came regularly to one of our science classes.

SS: This may sound obvious, but I know it isn't obvious to everyone: why do you think teenagers *want* to be doing things like apprenticeships? After all, these days schools and even juvenile courts often *require* community service, implying that it's a kind of medicine that's good for young people but that they wouldn't choose on their own.

KD: I think people want to be really good at something, and also to do something meaningful, something that matters. Sure, it might seem like kids in school would rather lounge around than do anything else, but I

don't think people are really happy just lounging around for long periods of time. In school, their energy is taken up with things they don't really care about, and then they don't have much energy left over. I felt that way when I was teaching. When I came home, it was hard for me to read challenging books or do volunteer work. I'd just watch TV. Now, I don't watch TV anymore and I read a lot, because I enjoy what I'm doing during the day. When people are happy with their lives and feel in control, they have more energy.

SS: What about the adults that all these teenagers are working with? Another thing that I've found is not obvious to many people is simply that there are enough adults who will be welcoming to kids who want to help out.

JH: At the beginning, we kept a file of people in the community interested in providing mentorships or internships. We had about 80 cards,

and if we'd promoted it we easily could have had 300 cards. It drove home to me the point that adults in the community are hurt just as much from having kids secreted away in schools as the kids are, because the adults don't have the opportunity to mentor and teach unless they are full-time teachers. We had many more adults offering to be mentors than kids who could take them up on it. And those teenagers who did have apprenticeships were finding their opportunities in other ways and didn't need our file as much as we had expected. Most families set up their own apprenticeships by thinking of people they know.

SS: What's especially hard for families about adjusting to the freedom of homeschooling?

KD: Letting go of the idea that there are many things that everyone should know and that you should spend most of your time pursuing those things.

JH: And kids have to learn how to structure their time. Sometimes that means setting goals and sometimes it means establishing consequences for oneself if the goals aren't met. But notice I said "for oneself." We feel strongly that if the parent is setting up the consequences for the child, you don't get nearly as positive an outcome. Last spring I was meeting with a family who was having a problem with the 14-year-old girl staying up until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning on computer chat lines. She was mature enough to see that this wasn't good for her, because there were things she wanted to be doing in the mornings and she couldn't get up for them. Identifying it that way – that there were things she wanted to do but couldn't do because of staying up so late – made a big difference. Then I asked the girl what she thought she could do to get to sleep earlier. She said, "I'll set a limit for myself for midnight, and if I don't keep it, I won't use the computer the next day."

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A Publicly Funded Center

HomeSource in Oregon is a state-funded resource center for homeschoolers. Paula Proulx-Williamson, one of the founders, explains how it works:

Three years ago, a couple of other parents and I got together and began meeting with people in our school district to discuss creating something that would serve homeschool students. The district was open to having students sign up for classes or use the library, but we wanted something more. We worked with Kent Hunsaker, the superintendent of the Bethel School District in Eugene, Oregon, and developed a proposal to bring to the state Department of Education for a resource center that would serve homeschool students on a part-time basis.

At that time, before the more recent charter school laws, Oregon had laws that allowed public alternative schools and private alternative education programs. We fall into the latter category, which means we are able to hire our own instructors (and they can be certified teachers or not). The center is governed by a board of seven families who have children there. We set our own wages. So we're pretty autonomous. We have a contract with the school district that requires us to be audited and generally to share with them what's going on, but the main requirement is that we serve 60% of the registered homeschoolers in the district. Because we're the only thing like this in the area, we actually serve homeschoolers all over the county, from about 16 districts. We had 503 homeschooled students at the end of the last year, and this year, our fourth, I think we'll probably have over 600 students.

Our funding comes through the state and flows through the school district. We receive all but \$100 of the basic school support – that's the amount that the state gives each student in school. But I believe we are very different from a school in many ways. The families are homeschooling families first and foremost, and we are there to support them. The parents have to comply with the homeschooling law just as if they weren't using our center. The classes we offer are 1 1/2 hours a week and students can attend as few or as many as they want. Most attend an average of four hours a week, so right away that's very different from going to school. We don't require any classes. A family might have a year when they're going through a lot and are finding it very difficult to teach much at home, so they'll decide to take more classes here. Then at another point they might scale back and say, we want to be at home more. Or they might just do swimming and tennis with us and nothing else. All this means that the students are there because they want to be. And we don't give grades or provide transcripts. The teachers do evaluations at the end, and because the Oregon law requires that homeschoolers take standardized tests, we offer that as well.

Another big difference is that up through eighth

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SS: It's interesting because I bet that if the parents had come up with exactly that rule, she would have been more likely to resent it.

JH: Right, but since she thought of it for herself, it worked, or at least we never heard about the problem again. When kids are in school, kids often perceive their parents as the enforcers for the school, and we've seen that in homeschooling the kids and parents can feel much more that they're working together rather than working against each other.

KD: Another hard thing about adjusting to freedom can be not valuing what does get done. If a teenager learns a new instrument or writes a whole lot of poetry, people may say, "Yeah, but he didn't do anything else." There can be a tendency to devalue what was done and focus on what wasn't done.

I think in general that the value of the first year of homeschooling is learning how to structure your life and figure out something you love to do. But sometimes people have bigger problems in their lives than education. If a teenager is depressed or has stress from other sources, those problems need to be addressed first.

JH: Or as part of the homeschooling.

KD: We had one girl here who, in a very short period, had to deal with an enormous amount of stress. She had a whole slew of family deaths, friends committing suicide – it seemed that there was a drama of real significance every time we saw her. I think for her, being out of school was essential to her being able to process all this and keep her spirits up. She was able to have a close relationship with her mother during it all, which was very important. I don't see how she could have carried the full load of schoolwork and done well amidst all these tragedies. She's a wonderful young woman who has a lot of plans for her life.

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Then there's an example that is sort of the opposite of this: a young man who came out of school fairly

undirected and pretty unhappy. In our meetings, he told us he basically likes to be left alone with no pressure on him. Mostly he comes here and hangs out and gets involved in some social activities. He doesn't want to challenge himself, and he says he likes it that way. His parents are a bit concerned, to say the least. But that's where he is. We're not able to put a life together for him, though we do offer him many things. He smiles and says no thank you. I think there may be some issues about his feelings about himself and his past – I don't even know all of it – that would have to get resolved before he is ready to accept those kinds of challenges.

JH: There are those who say he should be forced to be in school and made to learn things. I have a strong sense that if he were in school he would become very antisocial because he would be told he was no good all the time.

It's very hard for parents, too, when everything they hear about their child is negative. One woman who spoke with us on the telephone began crying and said, "You mean you're not going to call me up and tell me what my daughter's doing wrong?"

SS: What do you think teenagers need adults for?

JH: I think in a healthy family, kids need their parents for something all the way up until their parents pass on. Of course, the need decreases through the years, but it's still there.

KD: The need for direct oversight decreases, but teenagers certainly need support and encouragement and challenges. They don't need orders – that's the difference. And they need reassurance that they're OK, that their feelings about their lives and, in this case, their dissatisfaction with school makes sense. At Pathfinder, kids want to know that we believe in them. Few adults will tell a teenager that it's a good idea to leave school.

JH: We talk with kids here all the time. I think teenagers tend to benefit a great deal from a caring uncle such as we are to them, someone who's not

grade, parents attend the classes with their children. (We serve K through 12.) We felt that this was a good idea because that way the parents don't expect us to be responsible for their child's education and the classes feel much more like a part of the family's homeschooling. The parents know what's going on and they can continue with the same learning or the same projects during the rest of the week. I teach computer technology here, and parents are there learning right along with the students. In classes where there's room, we also allow parents to bring in the younger siblings, so we sometimes have babies and toddlers here as well.

We do have many parents who work and many single parents. In those cases, they can designate a grandparent or someone else to be in the class with their child. We have single parents on staff too, whose children are here with them daily.

We operate in the basement of a church, but we're working on a fund to raise money for our own building someday. As long as you're not teaching religion – and we're not – you can operate a school or educational program in a church. We're open from 8 to 5, and because the kids all come part time, it works. You need a much bigger facility when you are having to keep that many kids in the same place full time. Our facilities make it possible to have seven classes going on at once, and there are about ten kids in a class. We have off-site classes as well. We rent out a church gym to do indoor soccer and volleyball, we contract with a place for swimming and tennis, we use the elementary school gym for swing dance.

Another advantage of being set up as a resource center is that we can hire people who wouldn't otherwise be available to teach full time. We can hire the local meteorologist to teach about weather or a local artist to teach art.

In the beginning, families who used the center were families who had been homeschooling already. But as we became known, we attracted people who had wanted to homeschool but felt they didn't have the resources. It's interesting: Oregon has a lot of underground homeschoolers, maybe because of the testing requirement, but many who had been underground decided to comply with the law in order to use our center. I understand the perspective of people who say they don't want to register with the state because they don't want the state's intrusion. At the same time, I think it makes sense that, because our center is state funded, you have to be registered legally in order to use it. When you use our center you *are* taking advantage of something that is supported by state funds.

In addition to offering classes, HomeSource also gives information about homeschooling to callers. We give out numbers of local support groups, give information about the law, suggest catalogs and web sites and library ideas. We provide a bulletin board for parents to sell their curriculum materials to each other. Although we don't have space to have a library here at the center, my idea is that we are working more and more toward being a clearinghouse.

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the parent but who can give them adult advice. We're just two more adults that they can talk about life with, as they're starting to get a sense of being adults themselves.

SS: What about the reverse: what do you as adults get out of spending so much time with teenagers?

KD: I get a lot of satisfaction out of helping young people feel in control of their lives. It's satisfying to do it and to see the changes in them.

JH: Most of the kids here are extremely idealistic and fun to be with. It just feels great to spend time with them.

Sharing Materials through a Center in Ohio

As we go to press in September, the Home Education Resource Center of Central Ohio has just opened. Belinda Augustus, one of the founders of the center, explains its goals:

About seven of us form the core group of homeschoolers that have gotten this Resource Center going. Our main idea was to provide a way for homeschoolers to have access to books and materials, especially those that it would be too expensive for a family to purchase individually. We wanted to have available the kinds of materials that a family might just use once or occasionally – microscopes, skeletons, expensive items like that.

Many organizations have materials, equipment, and curriculums that they are giving out for free to schools, but they aren't as receptive to giving them to a homeschooling family because they would rather know that the materials were being used by a larger group. As a resource center, we can assure the donors that their materials will be used by a large group of children. Most of the materials in our library have been donated from corporations and foundations. Some science foundations have given us huge science kits, for example. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources has materials that they're willing to just hand out to a group, so

that's another example. Other materials have come from families who used something once and now no longer need it. Yet another way we get materials for the library is through families' participation in book clubs like Scholastic and Carnival. We collect bonus points from them and then are able to turn around and purchase something else. Finally, we are able to get free samples from homeschool vendors because we offer to keep their catalogs available with the sample. In the future, we may decide to purchase high-cost items and then rent them out at a very low cost – say, \$5 a use – until they're paid for.

Before opening the Resource Center, we had been running a homeschool library with books and materials out of my home. It was outgrowing my home and it was difficult to keep it organized. We thought it would be wonderful to have this lending library available in a more accessible space.

The other reason for wanting a Resource Center was to have a place that could house our support group meetings and classes and workshops. Libraries and recreation centers have been supportive and many homeschoolers' meetings have been held in those places, but we've found that it's a low priority for them. The library might easily bump the monthly homeschoolers' meeting if the space was needed for something else.

For all these reasons, we thought that having a regular space just for us would be a wonderful way of providing support to homeschoolers. This way, all the resources will be right there, including homeschooling magazines, legal information, and the chance to tap into a network of others. We've heard that homeschoolers who return their children to school generally do so within two years, and it's our contention that it's because they haven't tapped into a community. We wanted to make that easier.

That's the reason we chose such a simple name for the center. A lot of names got discussed, but the straightforward name won out because we wanted people to be able to look in the phone book under "Homeschool" and find us right away.

Finding a space was of course the