

Stand for Freedom

by Brenda Dickinson

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Some veteran home educators seem to take a firm stand on principles that others don't even recognize as issues. Is it that they are just stubborn, rebellious or cantankerous? Probably not. It's just that they had to live through the history and, like many of the WWII veterans, they had to fight for their freedom. My father and father-in-law both fought in WWII. They tell stories that make it hard for me to imagine what it must have been like to watch a whole platoon die in a matter of hours or to find out that when your plane was shot down only three of the 12-member crew survived. I hear, but since I didn't experience it, I really can't understand.

We, who gave nothing, often take for granted those precious freedoms for which our forefathers fought and died. It is true in every country, in every time period and in every generation. And so it is in the home school community. If we don't stand vigilant when someone encroaches on our freedom, over time, little by little, those freedoms will be stolen away and then it may be necessary to fight again for the ground that was lost.

Most of the pioneers have moved on and a new generation has come on the scene since the home education law passed in 1985. Few of today's home educators understand what the pioneers risked for freedom and why it is so important to continue to stand for those rights. Before 1985 parents were taking tremendous risks to home educate. They did not take their children out during school hours; they lived in fear that a neighbor would report them to HRS for truancy or neglect and that a social worker would show up on their door step to remove their children from their home. These were real threats and real fears. Parents had to really weigh their commitment to determine whether they were willing take the risks and face the consequences.

My husband Craig, was a trial attorney and was willing to fight for our rights through the courts if necessary. Other home educators established private schools under Florida Statutes 617 or 623. But, the right to home educate through a private school was challenged by some superintendents in 1984 and the fear of prosecution became real when truancy charges were filed against five home educating families. One of those cases made it to court before the home education law passed and the parents were found guilty. The other four were dropped after the law passed. The great division among home educators in 1985 over specific wording and personal agendas almost killed the bill in the Senate. Legislators managed to save it by including a sunset provision to require legislative review of the Home Education Act in 1987. Not only could the law be revised, but if it was not reinstated by the legislature, home education would clearly be illegal in Florida. Many people continued to home educate in secret because they didn't know what would happen. Home education was very controversial at that time and most public school officials opposed it. They could not understand how a parent could possibly teach with out the training and certification required of public school teachers. HRS was teaching the social worker that home educators were to be watched cautiously for child abuse.

The state wanted more regulatory power over home educators. In 1990 "the child abuse provision" was added to the law. Had Craig not intervened during the rule writing process and threatened a law suit, home education would have been effectively shut down in Florida. Many home educators know about this provision, but they may not know that in the same year proposals were made: (1) to require "biannual" evaluations, (2) to give the school districts the authority to decide the type of evaluation to be used, and (3) to assign the teachers to do the evaluations. Craig was able to get those proposals withdrawn before they reached the committees.

Space does not allow me to recount all the battles that have been fought, but the struggle is not over. Just because we have the right to take our children out during the day, chose our curriculum, decide how, when and what we will teach our children, we cannot sit back and take our rights for granted.

Yes, the current atmosphere is great in Florida and the articles on home education are favorable. But we need to be careful about giving away our rights or granting more oversight to the government than is

necessary. Complying with requests inconsistent with the law, without understanding our rights, could little by little, erode freedoms we have spent more than 16 years defending. Check with your local support group leaders or state home education group representatives when you have questions. HEF and other state level home education organizations are in constant communication with state and school district officials about the law and can help you know the rights afforded to you by the legislature.

Home education will probably never become illegal, but without vigilance, it can easily become more regulated. If you lose your right to direct your child's education and are forced to conform to conventional practices or someone else's dictates, you have lost the real value of home education.