

JOY – August 2001

Home schooling – Home educating in the bundu

MARTIE DU PLESSIS

For me, living in the bundu means living on a hilltop outside Sutherland, in the Northern Cape.

Our combined high- and primary school also has a combined hostel, but if that doesn't appeal to you, the next best thing is Calvinia – 200 kilometres of hard dirt road away. This road is often washed away during the rainy season, leaving children stranded during weekends.

We live here, with our three sons, because my husband is the on-site instrument technician at the South African Astronomical Observatory.

Every day we hear reports of how our education system is going down the tubes. We all know about the child-of-a-friend's-friend who has been physically, emotionally or sexually abused in a hostel or public school. Now it's your turn to send your precious gifts to school and a hostel – and you're wondering, will they be okay? What other options do I have? Why not home school?

In me, the question evoked a blind panic. I felt I could not do this, I wasn't equipped to do it, I wasn't trained to do it, I wasn't sure I wanted to do it! Today I can only smile at my initial reaction and wonder how I could ever have considered doing it differently.

God has trained and equipped you to teach your children. It is as natural as breathing – though not quite as effortless.

I must admit, we tried the school first. I wanted my free time; I wanted my comfort zone. I believed I knew the teachers. Then the bubble burst!

At the age of nine our eldest son had become another statistic. He'd become a "problem child," another ADHD case. Later, psychiatric counselling revealed the dark depression and violent anger that had been the legacy of the physical and emotional abuse he had suffered. We would never trust a stranger with our children's lives again.

Starting out

I started out with a pre-packaged curriculum. I needed to know someone else had worked out the curriculum for me as I needed time to find some self-confidence.

Collecting books about anything and everything noteworthy also became a passion, and today my personal library contains over 400 books! Those I need, but do not own, are gladly lent by anyone who happens to a copy. We've invested in a computer and good software, but have found that it's used more for games than teaching. Only the encyclopaedias get any real amount of attention – when projects are due.

Socializing – involving Everyone

The Sutherland home educators now number 20 children from eight families. This equates to roughly 10 percent of the local high- and primary school's combined student count. Moms are anything from ex-teachers to housewives, and we even have a very courageous home-educating father! Mostly, however, the sports days and such social events are the father's domain.

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Teaching your child about anything he is interested in takes on a new twist when you know each and every member of your small , but scattered, community's strengths.

When Kenneth had to do a project on the post office, our local postmaster took him along with him all morning. He patiently explained everyone's jobs and how things worked and which services the posts office offers and how to fill in each form, how to write a telegram and many other little details. Kenneth loved it! Actually, they both loved it.

Time goes a little bit slower in the bundu and people like to talk and share, given half a chance. Even grandparents get dragged in. Our latest event-to-come is a course in pottery and raku firing, presented by such a grandfather. Where would they ever do that in a public school? Our children are getting better-than-the-best schooling, with love and our vested interest in them as a bonus. In case you were wondering, pottery involves Art, Science and Geography. Learning isn't always about textbooks.

Occasional sports days are a wonder in teamwork, with everyone, from the three year olds to the parents, playing along. Amidst much laughter old games are played and new ones invented. No spectators, but who cares?

Finally, I often ask the boys if they want to return to school, but they have ever said yes. I can only thank God.

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I love the way my life is now. I thought home-schooling would take away my freedom, but I have never felt so right about my life before. I thought it would prevent me from growing, but I have learnt so much from teaching my sons. I thought it would bind me to the house, but I have travelled far and wide in my imagination with my sons.

My family has grown spiritually and emotionally. We are no longer little fragments, each doing their own thing until the weekend comes around. We are a whole unit, with place for individuality.

We have grown in wisdom and knowledge in our roles as parents and mentors and our children have benefited from having our daily examples. Even when we have fallen short, they have learned that God forgives us for being human.