

## **A Tale of Five Brothers**

*Carleen Sing's story as told to Susan*

My husband and I both trained as primary school teachers, and it was whilst teaching that I began to question the mandatory school entry age. I did some research and found that children in many other countries started school later. After reading Dorothy and Raymond Moore's *Better Late than Early* I decided to keep our children home until I thought that they were old enough to cope with school.

Lessons were conducted at the kitchen table every morning when my first child Joel was around six years old. In retrospect, having been a teacher was the worst possible background for a home educator. I had always believed children have a natural love of learning, but my training suggested that children learned in twenty-minute blocks, that there was one set-in-stone way to learn and that if the rigid progression was not followed, children would not 'get there'.

When he was eight, Joel decided that he wanted to go to school. I was not keen, particularly given he was academically beyond his peers and I had seen what happened to children like him in the system. He loved reading, researching and learning. I suggested he interview every child he knew about whether they liked school. Not one of them did! Joel still felt that school would open up a bigger and broader world and hoped to make good friends. He spent several terms in school. Each day he arrived home morose, lay on the couch lethargically and spoke abusively to the rest of the family. It turned out that he was being bullied.

We pulled him out and he returned to his normal self within a few weeks. At that stage, Joel did not want a bar of bookwork and I realised that he needed time to recover. He did his own thing along with his younger brothers and it became evident that children do not learn in the twenty minute blocks that my teacher training decreed. Actually, it seems to me that they learn in about six-month blocks. I had thought that the adults in the system knew how children should learn and had the mistaken belief that whoever invented the system knew what they were doing.

Joel spent months learning the piano, playing the guitar, experimenting with electronics, ferreting and rabbiting, and continued to learn. I began to wonder if adults had any clue about what children learned and how. Who says that the curriculum writers got it right? I reverted to my original belief that children have an innate love of learning and that if they are provided with whatever materials they need, they will retain that desire to learn.

Our learning evolved into a state of just living and learning as we went and the children thrived. We've never done anything recognisably academic. All of the boys can cook, clean, wash and know how to run a household. Beyond everyday living skills, I have not encouraged them to learn any particular thing but allowed their natural interests to lead them wherever. What I have done is to keep an eye out for anything that they are interested in and helped them find the information, equipment, or expertise they needed to follow up that interest. Sometimes this has involved finding other people with a knowledge or passion for what the boys are interested in. Living on a small farm means there is always much to do. They each learned to milk goats, feed sheep and help with other daily activities. The boys have spent lots of time fishing, camping, building cubbies, rabbiting, shooting and inventing their own games and imaginary worlds. In this way, they have had the opportunity to learn how to learn, develop their autonomy and strength, and learn that the sky really is the limit.

At the age of 13, Joel decided that he had learned what he could at home and enrolled at TAFE, initially in a part-time welding course followed by an Information Technology Certificate. Despite having never been exposed to computers before he found that it was something he both enjoyed and excelled at. He went on to complete a Diploma course and

transferred into the second year of a Bachelor of Computing degree at LaTrobe University. His lecturers commented that his interest and enthusiasm got other students involved also. At 18, Joel became the youngest student ever to graduate from that course and achieved the best academic performance for a final year student. He then went on to do Honours, be nominated for Young Australian of the Year in the Science and Technology category, start a computing partnership, lecture at LaTrobe University as their youngest academic staff member, complete his PhD and he currently works for Google.

Joel, and his wife Nikki, now have a young family of their own who they intend to home educate. As Joel says, 'Home education has been a way for me to achieve a lot of things I wouldn't otherwise have done, such as graduating at 18. There have been so many advantages that I have experienced. I would be a lunatic not to pass that on to my children.'

My second son Dion has always preferred the outdoors and had little interest in books or academics. He was eleven before he learned to read. I have always believed that there is a place in the world for everyone and that university is not the only way to succeed, so I encouraged Dion to search for his own interests and future occupations outside the academic field. His fondest home education memories are of building cubbies all over the property. He started work at 15 and has had a variety of jobs – ranging from beekeeping to building. His employers have always been impressed with his versatility and willingness to work hard. He currently works for St Luke's charity looking after at-risk teenagers. In doing so, he is fulfilling a desire he has always had to help people. Dion says, 'Some of us are not necessarily cut out to go to uni or anything like that, but definitely home education has stood me in good stead to succeed in everything I've ever done.' Recently, in his role with St Lukes Dion has been required to obtain a Diploma and has approached this with enthusiasm. He has received very positive remarks and results in his written work showing that, when the need arises we can learn new things at a later stage.

Tali would not describe himself as an academic either. He did not learn to read until he was 12 years-old and even when he could read he didn't choose to read, he was always much too active. His main passion and talent has always been music. As a very small child he was taken to see The Lion King movie and afterwards woke us early in the morning quite regularly by singing from it. He spent much of his childhood pursuing music in one form or another. At one stage he spent about six months going from the guitar, to the piano, to the drums, to singing each day and doing little else.

For a time he worked full-time as Office Manager for Joel and then decided on a Bachelor in Contemporary Music. In order to get there, he needed Year 12 English. So how does someone who didn't read until he was 12, works full time, spends his weekends drumming in two bands and has never read a whole book, get Year 12 English? Tali enrolled via Distance Education and after two weeks the tutor was asking if she could put his work on the webpage as an inspiration and example to other students...and he was knocking over the work requirements in two hours a week. Eventually, he decided to take on full-time work in retail clothing which afforded him time for his music as well as ready cash to spend on instruments. He has recently again decided to pursue music as a career and has now applied to enter a Bachelor in Contemporary Music.

Liam and Erik, our youngest sons, became very interested in horses when they were aged 12 and 10 respectively. We soon found that brumbies were more affordable than trained horses. So began a huge learning experience as we researched and purchased two brumbies which Liam and Erik set about training. The work was constant and exacting but, with advice from the horse trainer working with the Victorian Brumby Association, the boys devoted themselves to it. Our farrier was most impressed with how well both fillies had been trained to have their feet handled and said he wished that professional trainers did as good a job.

Their next project was to purchase an extremely neglected Clydesdale, which they nursed

back to health, again impressing the farrier who, it turned out was considering taking on an apprentice and agreed to give Liam a trial. Unbeknownst to us, he had taken quite a number of young men on a trial basis but only ever taken his son as an apprentice because the youngsters always proved unsuited to the work and had difficulty with the early mornings. He has, however, been delighted with Liam's commitment, aptitude and interest and soon agreed to formalise the arrangement. So now Liam rises at 5.30 each morning to go to work with enthusiasm. With Liam we had a year long battle to have him accepted into the TAFE apprenticeship program as he doesn't yet read or write. I had assumed that, as with the others, he would one day pick it up but no matter how we approached it the ability has so far eluded him. This has never been a difficulty for Liam as he has simply found other, more suitable to him, ways to learn. He has an amazing memory and rarely needs to be told things more than once to remember them often word for word. He learns efficiently from watching how something is done also. He has now completed his first year at trade school and has done extremely well. The only alterations needed for him was to have a note taker and to undertake his exams orally.

Now Erik is the only child left at home. At the age of 12 he composed his first piece of piano music and not long after, we began to work at the piano a little more formally. He now takes piano and singing lessons and composes both at the piano and with the use of computer programs. It appears that his future may be largely a musical one also.

School beliefs have long been left behind. I began with a belief that children have a desire to learn but need to be directed. However, my children ended up directing their own learning. I now realise how limiting school is - they don't let anyone do anything for six months! There is no way Joel would have been permitted to complete his degree at 18 if he had been trapped in a lock-step school system. By contrast, the boys have always learned what they wanted to learn, when they wanted to learn it. One of the most rewarding aspects of home education has been to see the children take that one step further and learn to find their own ways to learn and to take the initiative to set things up, contact people, and make arrangements for their learning.

The difficult part has been the lack of acknowledgment by anyone. This was particularly difficult in the early stages when it was hard work. I battled ill-health and an extended family attitude of, "It can't be done... You shouldn't be doing it... Don't be ridiculous." Eventually there came a time when it didn't matter anymore.

I now believe that children should be in total control of their learning. They know what they need to know and don't need to spend time learning what we think they need to know. I tell people, 'Find what you really love and are passionate about. In the end it is far more important than a piece of paper.' People can, and do, go on learning forever and I have learned much myself through the privilege of home educating my sons. There has been much enjoyment in simply having the boys around, conversing with them and watching them grow and develop into the people that they are. This has been enhanced by the conviction that they could never have achieved through the school system what they have through home education. I believe that children have a natural love of learning. I also believe there is a place in the world for everybody. There are academics and non-academics but every single person will find their place if they are loved and supported. I am really thrilled that I have an academic son with a PhD and that I have a non-academic one who is extremely successful and absolutely loved as a people-person. I also have sons who are musicians and a budding farrier. We have also now seen that learning and success are achievable even without the ability to read and write. The only qualifications I see as necessary to home educate children are to want to be around your children twenty-four hours a day and to live a meaningful life yourself because children learn by seeing.

Excerpt from *Tales Out of School* by Dr John Barratt-Peacock and Susan Wight