



In Like a Lamb, Out Like a Lion

by Shay Seaborne, Woodbridge



I admit I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect, but I went forward anyway. I figured if I wasn't going to do this, who would? It was a damp January evening as I pulled into the parking lot of a Fairfax County library. I was there at the behest of a candidate for Virginia State Senate who had invited homeschoolers to meet with him this night.

When I saw the post on the VaE-clecticHomeschool discussion list, my first thought was, "He's not running in my district, so let someone else respond." But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that, as an experienced homeschooler involved in the community, I was qualified to speak with a candidate, a Senator, or whom-ever — if I could just swallow my fear.

After arriving early and scoping out the meeting room, I walked back to my car to go over my notes — the outline of what I wanted to say. Then I saw the light was on, so I went back to the meeting room, where I discovered I was the only homeschooler to show up. Ulp!

The good news is, I had the candidate's full attention for over an hour. To break the ice I gave him sample copies of a few homeschooling publications — including, of course, the VHEA Newsletter. I also had on hand a VHEA bumper sticker, and a VHEA tote bag for carrying all his goodies. Once the conversation started flowing, I felt like I was talking to any interested person. The candidate seemed like a reasonable person, and truly interested in homeschooling and homeschoolers' issues.

Included in Newsletter samples was the November-December 2002 issue with its member survey results. I flipped through the Newsletter, pointing out that the survey showed only 39% of VHEA members are interested in a homeschool tax credit — which took the candidate by surprise. He said he had heard from one person in his district who stated that "homeschoolers want tax credits and vouchers so they can put their kids in private schools at government expense." He asked, "What percentage of homeschoolers would, given financial ability, put their kids in a private school rather than homeschool them?" My answer was that I was sure there would be some small percent, but I couldn't say how much — and that I and most of the

many homeschoolers I know homeschool for the lifestyle. Not that we don't have any issues with public schools, but we benefit so much from the homeschooling lifestyle that private school wouldn't interest us.

I told him I have seen that tax credits and other government money are inevitably tied to further regulation — as demonstrated in prior sessions of the Virginia General Assembly. Briefly, I touched on the fact that homeschool tax credit bills previously introduced in the General Assembly included a narrow definition of homeschooling, and that most of my expenses — such as theatre tickets, gasoline, historical fiction books, museum memberships and so on — would not be included in that definition.

A homeschooler in the candidate's district had e-mailed him about supposed "college admissions discrimination." I told him that we'd just had a long discussion on college admissions on the statewide list and that it seemed nobody was facing major discrimination, and that, rather than make a law to fix a small problem, the answer was to go to the admissions offices and educate them about homeschooling and homeschoolers. During the discussion of that topic I mentioned that Stanford had tracked its homeschooled students and that one officer stated he found the formerly homeschooled students to have "intellectual vitality." The candidate liked hearing that, as well as my "why fix it when it's not broken" comment.

The candidate and I also discussed public school access. I told him it seemed most homeschoolers want it on principle, but that it's not used much even where it is available — although when it is used, the results are positive for local districts and homeschoolers. I touched on the local division's ability to set criteria for credentials for accepting reports from independent evaluators, but forgot to mention how it might be good to have the law say "any certified teacher."

In addition, I gave him a brief history of VHEA, and noted that we are the only state group that annually polls its members on issues — and takes direction from members.

The question I was least prepared for was "What about those who are not

really doing a good job of homeschooling? How should they be handled?" I said, "My knee jerk reaction is to say 'hard cases make bad law,'" which seemed to make a strong impression. I followed up with, "Really, I have to turn that question on its ear and say, 'How do we prevent schools from doing a bad job?' We can't. There will always be some who fall through the cracks. Heavily regulating all homeschoolers isn't the answer." I took that opening to mention that abuse is abuse, not a homeschooling issue, and there are laws in existence to deal with that.

I was sure to explain the spectrum of homeschooling styles and to note that each of them works. Also, I wanted him to know why — although we understand that standards are needed in the schools — being bound to the Standards of Learning would essentially ruin homeschooling. I think the candidate understood what I meant.

The candidate mentioned that he is an aide to a state Delegate, and it seemed likely he would communicate what he had learned that night. He also asked if there were other events he could attend where he could learn more about homeschooling, so I told him the VHEA-Announce list [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/VHEA-Announce] would be a good place, and gave him subscription info. In a follow-up e-mail, he told me that he had subscribed within a couple of days of our meeting. The candidate's e-mail was largely a thank-you note, which also said that he had "learned a lot — most of which surprised" him. He said that he wants to "stay informed, to look out for all homeschoolers, and to be an effective voice in Richmond" for us.

As I write this, many candidates have or are declaring their intent. Why not take an hour or two to go meet with your state candidate, and give him or her a real "homeschool education?" With a few hand-outs, a brief outline, enthusiasm and a smile, you could win the interest and respect of a future state legislator. Time will tell what good may come of it.



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