

The South Islander

Home Education is for Every Child

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An Interview with Carolyn Atkinson

Homeschooling Mother of New Zealand's Youngest Law Graduate



Carolyn Atkinson continually homeschooled her three children throughout their schooling years. In 2006 her eldest daughter Janna-Lee was the youngest student in New Zealand to graduate with a law degree. In the following telephone interview Carolyn talked about her homeschooling experience.

What made you decide to home educate your children?

When my eldest child was still a baby, we went to hear Dr Raymond Moore speak on home education. Over the next few years we became convinced of the benefits of our children staying at home so we could provide a strong moral grounding and help them develop their sense of values so they would be better fitted for the demands of the structured schooling system. We also wanted to give them the freedom to develop in areas that interested them.

How did you structure your home education?

I am a strong believer in the need for balance in the lives of our children and so I would not class myself as an unschooler but rather somewhere in the middle of the road. Structured learning took place predominantly in the mornings from 9am – 1pm. The afternoons/evenings were focused on service (visiting the elderly, St. John duty volunteering, community programs), physical activities (gymnastics, swimming, roller skating), creative activities (building projects, drama, art classes), cultural activities (music lessons/exams, performing arts competitions, St. John youth members), paid work, and enterprising ventures. We continued that pattern throughout the entire homeschooling years as we believed it was vital to balance academics with other important educational aspects, such as strong moral characters, self-discipline and a strong work ethic.



Did you use any particular curriculum?

Our curriculum was developed from a variety of resources acquired in New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America. It was only during the final year/s of schooling that we purchased some 'graded curriculum' for our oldest children. The culture of our children's learning programme centred on inquiry based learning and so I often searched around for material that would captivate and inspire this style. We did a lot of unit-based studies on topics that the children showed interest in.

Carolyn, your daughter obviously achieved a high standard very early. Can you tell us about how she was accepted into university at 14?

When we first began homeschooling, it was our intention that we would only do this for a couple of years. That time-frame was extended as we moved to Auckland and then to Palmerston North. When we settled back in Cambridge we began to look at various options for our eldest daughter. At this stage we were still planning to integrate our children into the regular schooling system but after contact with the local high school, which was unwilling to accommodate Janna-Lee (especially because of her homeschooling background), we decided to continue teaching her at home. I was aware that Janna-Lee was a couple of years ahead of what she would be doing if she was at school since she was a child that needed to be constantly challenged. We contacted The Open Polytechnic who accepted her into their Science & Technology (Level 2) course. Although she was 12 years of age when she started the science course, she enjoyed the challenge of study at that level, and so in order to keep her enjoyment for learning fostered we approached Waikato University. I encouraged Janna-Lee to apply for a paper that was different from Science and Mathematics, and she chose "Legal Method", a practical law paper. On the basis of her polytechnic study and her broad learning environment, she was accepted for this full

year paper. At that time Janna-Lee was 14 and was still completing homeschooling and polytechnic Science. Following successful completion of the law paper, Janna-Lee applied and was accepted into the Law School of Waikato University as a fulltime student.

What was it like for her to go through university so much younger than the other students?

Janna-Lee is very mature and also rather tall and so the other students were unaware of her age until her graduation day! She loved studying law and regularly reminded us that this was something she really wanted to do and complete. She graduated when she was 19 and went to work for a barrister where she had been previously part-time employed. She is now 21 and has recently left her law position to work alongside her brother in Australia. The practice of Law has been rather stressful for Janna-Lee over the past year and I think doing something different will be a good break for her.

What track did your son take with his home education?

Nick, 18 months younger than Janna-Lee, has a spontaneous creative personality and from a young age loved organising a project or carrying out an idea with the neighbourhood children. He is very much an entrepreneur and decided he wanted to study management. With that in mind he completed maths, accounting and economics through The Open Polytechnic and on the basis of these tertiary papers, his grades and learning environment; he was accepted to do one accounting paper at Waikato University when he was 15 years of age. In order for Nick to be accepted, the university did require us to satisfy them that our son had good family support, considering his young age. The following year he was accepted as a full time student into the Management School and after he had completed half of his degree was accepted into Avondale University in Australia, who have fully credited the papers completed at Waikato. He also added a Bachelor of Arts minor in Australia and has gained an award for 'electronic media excellence' last year. He has done very well at university, and will graduate later this year at 19 years of age.

Looking back on your experience, do you think it was good for your children to go to university when they did? I certainly don't think university education is always the best way to proceed. My first two children are very mature for their age and were encouraged to be independent, free-thinking young adults. They chose to go to university and while enjoying the social aspect, were also self motivated to study in their chosen area. Our third child loves working with children and has decided to become a

primary school teacher. We want her to stay at home so we can enjoy these last couple of years before she leaves. To me it is all about what works best for each child and what opportunities arise for them.



A Bouquet

by Robyn Akerman

As homeschool parents we are used to "going the extra mile" for our children. It is part and parcel of the whole commitment. But when people commit themselves to go the extra mile not only for their children, but for others as

well, I think these people deserve a verbal/written bouquet. I am sure you could name a few such people, but I would like to mention two people who have done just that, Gail Midgley and Krysia Krawczyk.

After the excellent Andrew Pudawa Conference, Gail was all fired up and decided to organise an debating team. Krysia was very quick to offer her services. The first meeting was held at Riccarton Library and it was full of eager homeschoolers and their mothers. Krysia was so encouraging and helpful. We are very fortunate to have someone who is so willing to give of her time and expertise, to show our children the art of debating. It must be mentioned here, that Krysia's children are actually too young to participate in this group, and this makes Krysia's commitment to the group even more special. Slowly the group is gathering confidence and there are some who are beginning to form into debating teams. We were looking forward to hearing the first debate and they did not disappoint us. Thank you Krysia for your amazing effort.

Last year Gail's girls became interested in basket ball and she decided it was time to start a homeschool basket ball team, for 14 year olds and upwards. She put the word out and soon we had a team, Waimak Basket Ball Team was born. Gail has worked tirelessly for the team, organising a coach and practising venue. She liaised with the Canterbury Schools Sports, so that the homeschool team could compete against other Christchurch schools. Peter Midgley very kindly sponsored the whole team and purchased their blue T-shirts with white numbers on the back. The enthusiasm of the girls is something to behold. Come rain or shine they are at both practice and the game. The air is electric with nervous excitement! Thanks to their coach Philip van't Wout, their confidence has grown in leaps and bounds. There is never a lack of loyal supporters, some have even arrived baring banners "GO THE HOMEYS" which all adds to the wonderful spirit of the game. The team received a wonderful and well deserved compliment the other day, saying they were well presented, and showed good sportsmanship and were a pleasure to umpire. We look forward to more exciting games.