

## MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

### Education Series, Part 14 Joyce Kinmont, Homeschooling Pioneer *By Darla Isackson*

Click here for [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#) [Part 4](#) [Part 5](#) [Part 6](#) [Part 7](#) [Part 8](#) [Part 9](#) [Part 10](#) [Part 11](#) [Part 12](#) [Part 13](#)

I recently sat in the audience of the 14<sup>th</sup> annual LDS Home Educator's Conference pondering what I knew about Joyce Kinmont, the organization's president and host of the conference. I had spoken with Joyce several times over the past two years and decided at that conference that I wanted to learn more about the remarkable journey that brought her to this point.

#### Looking Back

Joyce and Dick Kinmont started homeschooling in 1975, when the idea was so new that almost no one had heard of it. To say their actions were controversial is to greatly understate the opposition.

They eased into the idea gradually. After becoming disillusioned with public schools, the Kinmonts enrolled their children in American Heritage School, a private institution run by BYU Professor H. Verlan Andersen and his wife, Shirley. The Kinmonts were delighted with the school's focus on phonics and having the Book of Mormon taught to the children. However, with school taking up most of the children's waking hours, Joyce was worried about when she would teach them all the skills she wanted them to have, and how they would manage to stay close. Also, the cost became prohibitive when their third child began school.

Joyce explains, "When some friends decided to start a cooperative school I jumped at the chance to relieve the financial burden. We joined their private school that met in two homes next door to each other. The price I paid then was separation from my young children who were in one house while I was helping teach the older children in the other. Fortunately, just a short time into the year a phone message went out that there was some sickness and we would all need to stay home for a few days. It was wonderful! The pressure was gone, and my children and I were all together. We cuddled close in our own home, reading the best books, and talking together. We set up a small schoolroom with a table in the middle and some bookshelves. We made a timeline from shelving paper; it went around all four walls. I soon knew that teaching my own children in my own home was what I most wanted to do.

"Of course we had never heard the term 'homeschooling.' I don't think many people had. But Dr. Cleon Skousen's son at the Freeman Institute told us how to do it legally and put us in touch with another family who had chosen to teach their children at home. We never looked back.

#### Creativity Blossoms in the Home Environment

"I soon learned that if I would devote my mornings to schooling, the children thought of plenty of their own projects to work on during the afternoons. In fact, I was amazed at the creative projects my children came up with. I also learned that the opportunities for creativity were an important part of our homeschool. I think my major homeschool expenses for our sons were masking tape, Legos, and miscellaneous "stuff" they requested from the hardware store for all their creative projects. For our daughters, we provided dress-up clothes, all the old musicals on video, lots of baby dolls, an old cash register, and an assortment of blank order forms and rubber stamps.

They played bank, library, grocery store, restaurant, etc. Occasionally I would get my grocery money in small bills and change so they could play with it before I went shopping.

### **Opposition from Day One**

Joyce continued, "Not long after I began teaching my children at home the school district called me in and tried to dissuade me. Jail was mentioned. Fortunately the State Superintendent of Schools was in our ward. He recognized our legal right to homeschool and wrote a letter to that effect. I used this letter more than once. Being in the same ward with this good man actually protected us in our desires to teach our own children. Yet it was in the church setting that we felt most suspect. We were fairly new converts to the Church and had moved from California to Utah to 'gather.' We were pretty ordinary members until we started homeschooling; then everything changed. Back then, in spite of warning from church leaders that all was not well in our schools, people in Utah thought of schools almost as if they were a church auxiliary. Many members considered us near to apostasy when we took our children out of public school. (Official church policy has always been that the education of children is a parental choice.)

"In those days the argument was that we couldn't possibly educate our children ourselves. As the academic superiority of homeschooling became obvious, the argument switched to socialization. (Never mind that public schools were becoming more and more socially toxic. If it were malaria that had invaded the building, we wouldn't say it was somehow good for the children to be exposed, or worry about where it came from; we would rush to get our children out of there and protect them from the danger. )

### **John Holt and the *Donahue Show***

"At first my parents were not happy with my homeschooling. But In 1980 or so my father sent me an article about John Holt, a gifted teacher who had given up on reforming the public schools and was promoting home schooling. I called John; he was very supportive and interested in what we were doing, and we stayed in touch.

"A couple of years after I began actively communicating with John Holt he appeared on the Phil Donahue TV show as an advocate of homeschooling, and received bags full of mail. When he was invited to make a second appearance he asked us to appear with him. The station flew our entire family to Chicago, plus a nanny for the baby. (We had seven of our eight children by then.) The audience was mostly hostile to the homeschooling idea, but Donahue was very personable and made some of the best points on our side. That was our most exciting field trip!

Over time there was plenty of local media interest in what we were doing. Our family was the subject of a number of television, radio, and newspaper interviews. I also sent many letters to editors of local newspapers.

### **Founding of First Organization**

"As other families in our community began homeschooling, we all needed mutual support in this new and controversial adventure, so I founded the Family Education Association. We held a monthly meeting at the library and I started sending out a newsletter. It eventually evolved into a national email newsletter called LDS-HEA Notes. (To subscribe go to [www.ldshea.org](http://www.ldshea.org).) In those days, our numbers were few, but we soon hired a music teacher who formed a weekly children's choir and taught our children to sing.

## **Adventures with Superintendents**

“Whenever there was a new district superintendent, I would be called to a meeting. I would have to teach the new man the law and show him my letter. One man wanted me to keep a precise attendance record. I agreed. The principal would pick it up weekly at my home, and ask if there was any way he could help me. I always thought of something, and he soon stopped coming.

“One year the district was especially threatening, so, at the suggestion of John Holt, I called a parents’ meeting of all homeschooling families in our district and asked everyone to write papers telling about their homeschool. The result was essentially very powerful testimonies of homeschooling. We never heard from that superintendent again.

“One determined superintendent devised a number of ways to harass me, none of which worked. After a few years he left the state, and a few years after that I received an advertisement for a home school conference in California and he was on the program! What changed his mind was that some of his children had chosen to homeschool his grandchildren and he could see the benefits. He had become an advocate! I went to the conference and he apologized to me from the podium.

## **Utah Home Education Association Begins**

“In 1981, Ken & Laurie Huffman, whose doctor had suggested homeschooling for one of their daughters, gathered a lawyer and a few businessmen together on a Board of Directors, and established a state support organization, the Utah Home Education Association. Laurie and I put together the first convention, with author John Holt as the keynote speaker. The UHEA recently held their twenty-fifth convention.

## **Exemption Forms and Legalities**

“The UHEA became a large and successful organization, holding wonderful conventions and curriculum fairs every year and helping parents solve problems with their local districts.

“Utah parents are required by law to notify the district that they will be homeschooling, and the district is then to issue an exemption. Each district makes up its own request form — usually available online. Most districts simply ask that parents list their children and agree to teach the subjects required by law, but many get overzealous. For instance, one district’s form required parents to submit ‘a description of each subject to be taught including the scope, major goals and objectives for each; a daily schedule, a description of the textbooks, materials, methods and programs to be used during instruction; and a statement that describes the test/assessments that you will use to evaluate your student’s educational growth.’ The district has no real use for this information, and no homeschooler should be asked to go to all this extra work for no purpose.

“This problem was fixed in the 2005 legislative session by a new senator, Mark Madsen, an attorney, a homeschooler, and a grandson of President Ezra Taft Benson. Senator Madsen wrote a bill specifying exactly what the district could and could not ask on the form. It was a short bill and the Senate had no problems with it. One senator said his children were doing high school at home through BYU online classes; another said his grandchildren are homeschooled. It sailed through without a dissenting vote. When the bill then went to the House, the PTA mounted opposition, but in the end it passed again without a dissenting vote. A few legislators left the chambers and did not vote, but none were willing to go on record in opposition to homeschooling.

## **LDS Home Educator's Association Started**

"The UHEA has done a wonderful job for Utah homeschoolers. In the early years they often received letters from Latter-day Saints outside of Utah asking for help, so in 1990 I started the LDS Home Educators Association. It is our family's contribution, our way of being "anxiously engaged." We have an annual conference, a website ([www.ldshea.org](http://www.ldshea.org)), a small online bookstore, and an email newsletter LDS-HEA Notes."

## **Pioneering Paid Off!**

Joyce has been a true pioneer, plowing new ground and having the courage to stand firm against all opposition because she believed in what she was doing.

Joyce says, "Now I can see the fruits of all this in the creative talents and careers my children have as adults. For instance, our son, Ritchie, a homeschooling father of three little boys, designs machinery for a living and invents things for fun. He occasionally speaks to parents about the need to give children plenty of time to work on creative projects and to tinker around. Ritchie brought to our recent conference a display of the projects he and his boys have completed — such as UFO's, pop-bottle rockets, 'jet packs' to help kids 'fly,' and popsicle-stick airplanes for a masking tape airport. Homeschoolers tend to be very creative people! He has recently released a book, *Every Kid Needs Things That Fly* (available from Amazon or on the LDS Home Educators Assn. website, [www.ldhea.org](http://www.ldhea.org))

Click to Enlarge **Joyce Kinmont's grandson, Matthew, proudly displays his school project, a homemade "jet pack." (No, it's not a working model!)**

Over the years, homeschooling has become well known and most of the controversy has disappeared. In fact the word has become so common that it causes no stir. For instance, in the recent CES broadcast Susan W. Tanner, Young Women General President, told a story in which she casually mentioned a mission president's wife who was homeschooling her children. The story was that she hired a tutor to teach the children Spanish using the Spanish Book of Mormon for the text, and the tutor soon joined the church. (CES Broadcast, Sept 11, 2005, Marriott Center, BYU)

## **Dual Enrollment**

The Kinmonts also became pioneers in what we now call "dual enrollment." She explains, "By the time our oldest daughter reached high school age, she had participated in many productions at our local community theater. It was suggested that she had a talent for singing and we ought to get her voice lessons. The high school vocal teacher gave private lessons, so we took her to him. Then he invited her to come to the school and be in his choir. She did, and no one complained. Then the drama teacher wanted her in his class too. She was the first dual-enrollment student, before the word was coined. Now many homeschooled children attend high school part time, although many prefer other options.

## **The Long Range View**

The year Joyce Kinmont began homeschooling, if she had been able to look ahead and been shown a glimpse of herself thirty years later she would scarcely have been able to believe it! I was watching her graciously conduct and speak to a gathering of more than 300 homeschoolers

— a tiny representation of homeschooling parents. Conservative estimates are that 30,000 parents in Utah alone are now homeschooling, along with uncounted thousands across the country. Many of these homeschoolers Joyce has directly influenced and encouraged.

### **First Annual Conference of LDS Group**

Joyce continues, “In 1992 we held our first annual conference of the LDS Home Educator's Association. Reed Benson, son of President Ezra Taft Benson, was the keynote speaker. Brother Gerald Lund also spoke. (He was the #2 man in CES at that time and had not yet become a famous author.) Our initial purpose was simply to gather an audience so we could put some great speakers on tape and make the tapes available for homeschoolers outside of Utah. However, we soon found that being together with like-minded people made for such a wonderful day that people would come from long distances to join us.

“In 1981 at BYU Brother Benson had written the first in the nation, doctoral dissertation on homeschool where he was a popular teacher of the Book of Mormon. The dissertation included his report on his family's first year of homeschooling. He and his wife, May, homeschooled their nine children for many years.

“In 1994 his father, President Ezra Taft Benson, passed away on the Monday right before our conference. I assumed Reed wouldn't come, but in he walked, the spiritual giant he always is. At that time only General Authorities spoke at the funerals of prophets, so Reed presented his tribute to his father to our gathering of homeschoolers. It seemed fitting, and we were richly blessed. In 2001 Reed was ill. He had been hospitalized with pneumonia. Again, his attendance seemed doubtful. But he came, and in spite of his weakness he delivered another rapid-fire, pull-no-punches address. Brother Benson always kept our movement on track, never hesitating to tell me when I needed to make a course correction. Although he is now in fragile health and no longer speaks at our conferences, he is always interested in how the homeschoolers are doing.

California homeschooler Michele Everett said, “For many years, Brother Benson has been a mainstay in the movement, speaking at homeschool conferences in many states, providing inspiration and encouragement to thousands. Brother Benson has appeared nearly every year at the LDS Home Education Association's annual conference in Utah. He and his wife are beloved among LDS homeschoolers everywhere.”

### **Focus on 2005 LDS Home Educators Conference**

The fourteenth annual conference of Joyce's Utah Home Educator's Association was held 10 September 2005, in the Grand Ballroom at the Salt Palace. Sister Barbara Smith, Former General President of the Relief Society, was the keynote speaker. She voiced many important ideas, such as “When you think about homeschooling you need to know that your children will soon be adults and that they too will have a great work that they must do. They will be some of the main contributors. The education you provide — partly through environment and example — will facilitate the genuine development of spiritual strength, moral armor, divine insight, and knowledge that will enable them to be in very deed the forerunners of our imminently returning Jesus Christ.”

Sister Smith continued, “Over the long stretch, if you continue to receive such superb instruction and you inculcate that knowledge and wisdom into your class instruction you will develop children who will love you, who will want to follow you, and who will learn to seek and search for truth and for knowledge themselves. They will be interested in things past, things present, things future.

They will desire to learn from good associates and from the very best teachers wherever they can find them. They will want to learn all of the vital information that is available to them. They will be struck with the wonders of the world. They will seek out the amazing knowledge in every field that God has made so rapidly available to us. And they will seek out a personal relationship with Him who is the source of all truth, an essential relationship for a firm foundation. All of this is possible for you and for your home-school educated children.”

She gave examples of parents she had known who used unique teaching methods — a family who held story problem competitions in the car; a father who insisted that his children bring something new they had learned to the dinner table, thus [encouraging them to spend time in] the library; a parent who often asked the children to describe such things as "the colors in the landscape" to give them experience with language; a family who marched around the house singing the songs of Zion from which they learned doctrine; a doctor who adopted his "houseboy" and brought him home from Korea. The boy hadn't learned to read and write, so the high school would not accept him. His new father simply homeschooled him, and that boy is now a church leader.

Paul Mero, President of Sutherland Institute, and a homeschooler for the past eighteen years, spoke of the pain of separation from family. He suggested that the veil between this life and our former one might have been put there partly to help us deal with "the pain we feel in being separated from our heavenly family." He said, "Homeschoolers are exercising the right and privilege *not* to separate from family. Keeping your children with you is how it's meant to be. This is the pathway of greatest progress for your family: staying together.”

Joyce comments, “Paul Mero's remarks left a deep impact on the audience and gave us much to think about. I contemplated how the world pushes for early separation, almost from birth, and tries to tell us that this separation is actually good for children. Homeschoolers think of their children as precious plants and only put them out of the hothouse in the best weather conditions they can find and when the plants are properly matured.”

George Q. Cannon's great-grandson, Grant Cannon, held the audience spellbound with his vision of Utah becoming The Educational City on a Hill — not through the public school system, but through the efforts of parents who teach correct principles and true doctrine at home. Grant, whose children left private school for homeschooling 2 ½ years ago, said that from getting ready in the morning until the end of homework made a 12-hour day when his children went out of the home for school. "I like academic excellence; it's an important thing. But I want our children to have a childhood." He said they found that in homeschooling they could accomplish more in less time. Their oldest child soon skipped three years ahead in grammar.

Grant's mother, Pauline Cannon, who is also the mother of U.S. Senator Chris Cannon, was coaxed to the microphone for a few words. She said, "We didn't have homeschool then, but we had supper!" As for homeschooling now, she said, "Just do it!"

President Ezra Taft Benson's family was represented once again by his grandson, Utah State Senator Mark Madsen, who talked about the new homeschooling legislation he sponsored in the last legislative session. Senator Madsen and Representative Ben Ferry are both homeschoolers. Senator Ferry is married to a granddaughter of President Benson.

Other generational families participated as well. Joan Yarrington, a long-time homeschooler and a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, introduced her daughter, Mary Best Harris, who sang the opening song, for which she had composed the music. Mary Beth's younger siblings were homeschooled, and she now homeschools her own children. Joan said homeschooling

strengthens the parent/child relationship. "There is a closeness and peace that permeates our home; school seemed to get in the way of our relationship."

I had been invited to be a speaker at the conference, and I spoke of my Education Series for Meridian Magazine and how this research has made me a solid advocate of responsible religious-based homeschooling. I introduced my daughter-in-law Heidi Hanks, who spoke of volunteering in her son's kindergarten class before she began homeschooling. "The children were so needy. They would sit on my lap and hug and kiss me. My own son sat in a corner, bored."

She told of hearing a noise at the back door, that prompted her to check on her four little boys who were outside playing. When she opened the door mud fell off the top of it. The children told her they were trying to transform their home into adobe — which they had recently talked about in their homeschool. She said, "The Heidi of 2 ½ years ago would have yelled at them, but I just said, 'have fun playing for a few more minutes; then I'll come out and squirt you with the hose to get all the mud off.'"

Joyce said, "If Paul Mero was not the one who tugged most on parental heartstrings, it was certainly Heidi when she said, "Putting my son in kindergarten was the hardest thing I ever did. Taking him out to teach him at home felt so good." (My heartstrings were also touched by Janeen Brady's music sung by her granddaughters and Joyce Kinmont's daughters and granddaughter.)

To round out the conference, LuJean Livingston taught parents to teach all subjects from a gospel foundation by first searching the scriptures and the prophets, then measuring what the world teaches against that truth. Richard Skousen, a grandson of Dr. W. Cleon Skousen, told us about Joseph Smith's life and education.

Brother Jack Monnett, a former Institute Director, historian, author, and a homeschool dad, was the concluding speaker. Brother Monnett is the author of *Revealed Educational Principles and the Public Schools* — the story of the attempts of Church leaders to maintain a religious education in early Utah and the Saints' refusal to obey counsel. He urged the audience to work now on bringing their families together and not to wait for a more opportune time. He reminded the audience of President Packer's warning to the educators at BYU:

In many places it is literally not safe physically for youngsters to go to school. And in many schools — and it's becoming almost generally true — it is spiritually unsafe to attend public schools. Look back over the history of education to the turn of the century and the beginning of the educational philosophies — pragmatism and humanism were the early ones, and they branched out into a number of other philosophies which have led us now unto a circumstance where our schools are producing the problems that we face. (David O. McKay Symposium, BYU, October 9, 1996)

#### What Joyce and Homeschooling Are All About

Many parents have come to believe that the most important thing they can do for their children is educate them at home. If parents are loving and conscientious, the Lord blesses them in their home-school efforts. Heidi Hanks, who has five children under seven, yet has done a superb job at homeschooling, testified that angels are there to help and strengthen her. Some might argue that she can't possibly do their schooling justice while dividing her time among five children. But public school teachers are dividing their time among many more — and lack the emotional investment that any good parent has. The amazing resources available from libraries, Church distribution, homeschool catalogs, along with educational TV and video programs can more than

make up for any parent's lack of worldly credentials. Parents learn along with their children, learning can be centered on gospel truths, children can become lovers of the scriptures in their tender years, and family love grows daily in the nurturing atmosphere of a loving home.

Joyce Kinmont concludes, "Darla is right. Thirty years ago I could never have envisioned the challenges and blessings that awaited our family. My husband and I were fortunate to come into the church "innocent and unlearned" so the Lord could bend and twist us. We are now reaping a rich family harvest; our children and their children are great blessings to us.

"As I have endeavored to help other homeschoolers I have spent many hours on the typewriter, the computer, and the telephone. I have learned a lot, written a lot, talked a lot, and met many people. I have come to believe that homeschoolers are the most wonderful people in the kingdom. I have loved being an instrument in the hands of the Lord to help families.

"In our recent stake conference our Stake President said we are losing 50% of our youth. I don't believe Latter-day Saints can continue to send their children to schools that teach false doctrines and not put them in spiritual danger. I don't believe our children can be gone from our watchcare for seven or eight hours a day without consequences. I don't think we can do what we have to do to meet the challenges of our times in the left-over, tired hours at the end of the day. The bar has been raised. More is expected. The enemy is closer, more sophisticated, more dangerous than ever. We can't be flabby, careless, incompetent soldiers. We have latter-day warriors to protect, to train, to lead.

"When Alvin R. Dyer was in the First Presidency in 1969, he taught that learning in the Millennium would be through the family. We can almost watch the kingdom of God rising up in these last days. What an exciting time to live!

"Although my contribution to the homeschool movement is often overrated, I will accept the title of pioneer. I walked across my plains, often in clouds of dust. Frankly, I didn't always do a very good job of it, so I know the angels are there helping. Today's young parents fly by jet and if they'll pay close attention to the GPS (global positioning system) they can know exactly where they're going. They are so far ahead of me. If only I could help them understand how important today's investment in their children will be ten and twenty and fifty years from now. We all need to worry less about algebra and more about the love of learning, lifelong learning, learning to better serve. We need to worry less about socialization and more about how children feel about the Savior. We need to really and truly give our best efforts to the family. That means giving time — large quantities of it; time we have prepared for by filling our own souls with truth. We need to pull our families together instead of forcing them to separate.

"The things we have done in our home have been simple. Homeschool does not look like a classroom. It looks like a family reading together — just doing lots more of it, and from the best books. It looks like a family working, playing, serving together — and having enough time to do lots of it, with purpose. It looks like parents really and truly giving their best efforts to the family, letting go of some other things that are important to them.

"Life is a school, and we didn't come here without assignments. We have things to do. We are enrolled in some lab classes. If we give those labs to someone else we will return without having done what we were sent forth to do. There are still more battles to be fought. Satan certainly doesn't want homeschoolers to have clear sailing. As fast as he figures out ways to stop us, we have to figure out ways to move ahead. Consequently, I'm not putting my sword down yet."

Obviously, Joyce has not only been a pioneer, but a valiant warrior in a cause she believes in deeply. My hat is off to her, and to all homeschoolers who have the courage to plow new ground, sow seeds of truth and commitment, and reap harvests the value of which cannot be estimated. What is the worth of our children's souls?

(Recordings of the LDS Home Educators conference are available on CD or DVD through [www.ldshea.org](http://www.ldshea.org).)

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