Unschoolers depicts trials, tribulations, joys of homeschooling

Two parents publish a book unique in the homeschooling canon

In the United States millions of people homeschool their children and numbers are growing around the world, yet homeschooling remains a hotly debated and little understood practice. In their new book ***Unschoolers*** (**March 30, 2017**), homeschooling parents **Sophia Sayigh** and **Milva McDonald** offer answers to the perennial question "*What do homeschoolers do all day?"*

"People always ask, 'What is a typical day like?'," says Sayigh. "And of course there isn't a typical day—there are as many different days as there are families, so we had the idea to write through the eyes of a variety of homeschooling families. And it morphed into something richer, because the families also interact with each other over a series of days."

The collection of vignettes about members of a fictional homeschooling support group, Home Learning Together, introduces readers to families opting out of the education system. Solid as a rock Teresa, outspoken Pina, and busybody Carmen grease the wheels and put out fires, all the while welcoming newbies into the fold. Jewel practices yoga but can't get herself to unwind, Priscilla yearns for a solution to her son's struggles in school, Alice gives her dog and her kids free rein. Meanwhile, children play, teens percolate and the group gears up for their biggest gathering of the year, the June potluck.

The connected stories offer illuminating examples of self-directed and child-led learning, and bring to life the human dynamics that arise when a diverse bunch of people come together on an unconventional path. While the book depicts children learning to read and digging into math and other subjects, it transcends the practical aspects covered by most books about homeschooling.

"Over the years we've presented workshops, conferences, articles, and other resources related to homeschooling," says McDonald. "While those things are helpful and important, they inevitably leave a lot out. Fiction and story convey a broader, more human understanding, so we decided to take that approach. Not to mention that we're both tired of the lack of representation in books!"

The title references unschooling, a term coined by late education guru John Holt. "Holt is a mentor for legions of homeschoolers," says McDonald. "There's always debate about what 'unschooling' means, but Holt just used it to mean not going to school. It can also mean eschewing a school mindset, as many of the families in *Unschoolers* do, but no matter how you slice it, unschooling and homeschooling are inextricably connected."

While *Unschoolers* presents various depictions of the homeschooling lifestyle, it is influenced by the personal experiences of Sayigh and McDonald. "It chronicles the way we homeschooled," says Sayigh, "and looking back, it appears that it was a unique time in the history of homeschooling. It was accepted as legal in all 50 states, but it was so far off the grid that we really had to create opportunities for our kids by ourselves. Today we see families choosing to homeschool, and being immediately marketed to—as well as almost too many opportunities to join online groups. What can be lost is the do-it-yourself part. We're hoping the book will show that the kind of empowering organizing and community building that we did is still possible. You just have to put the effort in, it has to be a priority, and sometimes it's a slog. But there's no doubt in my mind that it's worth it."

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