

## Our South African Homeschool

Shirley Erwee

My husband's cell phone rings. Seeing my name appear on the screen, he rejects the call and comes running from his study to the far-off spare room where he left me just minutes before. "The head is out," I tell him as he enters the en suite bathroom, and with the next contraction he catches our newborn baby. Within seconds the other four children appear at the door to see their new sister and to fetch and carry towels and the necessary supplies.

Then the older ones helped bathe her. They dressed her as a team before snuggling up around me on the bed while she nursed for the first time. This experience was probably the highlight of our event-filled year in 2007.

The next highlight was an educational trip with me and a homeschooling friend and her six children along the scenic Garden Route of South African's southern coast, then later a midwinter family break to a hot springs resort. Other good memories are the Sunday walks at the beach, successful science experiments, bike riding, and a weekend playing LAN games with dad and friends.

If you just looked at our photos, you might think our life is just a bed of roses and that we are something we aren't. We *are* a big, happy family, and it is our conviction that homeschooling is the best way to educate our children. But like every family, we have also had some challenges!

Nineteen ninety-four was a significant year in the history of South Africa—a new democracy was born. It was also the year homeschooling became legal in our country.

In mid-1997 we started homeschooling my 5-year-old stepdaughter, Meghan, who had just come to live with us. I first read a magazine article about this new homeschooling option, which led me to research homeschooling on the Internet. Had it not been for that, it would have taken some other miracle for us to start on this journey, as homeschooling was virtually unheard of!

The more I read, the more convicted I was that this was the best way to educate children and that it was the Lord's plan for our family. For every question or doubt I had, someone had the answer, and I was sold out! My husband, Riaan, too, was willing to give it a chance as the school system had failed him.

When I look back now, I realize how strong our convictions must have been to start doing something that seemed so radical to everyone we knew. Even now, I think most of our friends think we are a bit different—you see, not only do we now have more children than all of them, but we both work from home, we homeschool, and we also homebirth alone— yes, unassisted!

Not only do our peers think we are extreme, but a past minister of education was quoted thus: “Homeschoolers should not attempt to impose their loony, paranoid, and perverse ideas on the nation.”

The educational climate has not been sunshine and roses, and for many years, homeschooling was a lonely road. Homeschooling E-groups have been a lifeline for me. Even today, although we have a local support group, my E-buddies are my greatest source of support.

In 2002 I started creating unit studies about South Africa as, until then, everything we had used was American, and Meghan needed to learn about our nation and its heritage. Then I heard via email that another homeschooling mom was also creating a South African program. When she and I decided to work together, what is now our South African homeschool curriculum business, Footprints on Our Land, was born.

Since then my partner, Wendy, and I have forged a strong friendship via email and Skype. She and I have made it our mission to encourage homeschoolers via our E-groups, websites, and E-newsletters.

Besides feeling alone pushing against the educational tide, it was also difficult having a blended family for nine years. In 2006 after a few tumultuous years, Riaan let Meghan go and live with her mother again. The friction wasn't pleasant during that season, but we grew in wisdom and experience.

We now homeschool our five other children, Lucy (9), Jonathan (7), Kayleigh (5), Riaan (2), and baby Samantha (7 months)! While I concentrate mainly on the book-learning, Riaan brings the balance by emphasizing practical life skills. One of his goals is to raise our children not just to know how to earn a living but also to make their money work for them! Our 9-year-old is learning fast, with her own little retail nut business!

When we see the fruit of our homeschooling in our growing family, we know that for us, in spite of the challenges we have faced, this is the better way. We are often told how well our children engage in a conversation with adults, how polite they are, and how confidently they express themselves. Our two oldest children participate in sports teams, and in the afternoons the neighborhood kids hang out around our house like bees at a honey pot.

We just love the flexibility that homeschooling allows us and the opportunities it affords for us to be together and for our children not to be conformed to or compared with an “average” like in the school system. We love the fact that we don't have to get stuck in the morning traffic; instead, we get “stuck” cuddling up in bed!

We consider it a privilege to be the primary influences in our children's lives. It is so rewarding to see them developing deep thoughts about our faith, good sibling relationships, a love of learning, and a passion for reading.

Finally, we love the fact that we can learn new things along with our children— we are all in this school of life together. One of the greatest benefits of homeschooling that we have discovered is that homeschool is not just about academics, it's about character-building—in the lives of both the parents and the children! This line I once read sums it up best: While we are building character in our children, God is building character in us!

---

### **Biographical Information**

Copyright, 2009. All rights reserved by author below. Content provided by [The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine, LLC](#).

*Shirley Erwee homeschools her children in South Africa.*