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Mitchell L. Stevens: Kingdom of Children □ □

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Introduction

ON FEBRUARY 13, 1983, the *Seattle Times* reported that some local citizens were taking the law into their own hands. Among them were Michael Farris, an Olympia attorney, former executive director of the state's Moral Majority chapter, and his wife, Vicki, parents of three. In 1983, Washington law required that all children attend public or state-approved private schools. Mike, Vicki, and the parents of some five thousand Washington youngsters were risking twenty-five-dollar-a-day fines to teach their kids at home. "Firm Beliefs Foster Defiance of School Laws," the headline read.

Just what were people like the Farris up to, and was it good for their children? The article explained that most home schoolers in the state were "Christian fundamentalists." Their incentive, apparently, was a mix of religious conviction and a suspicion that the public schools were not adequately doing their job. "My first and highest goal for our kids is to love our Lord," Vicki Farris explained. The Farris also had become convinced that conventional classrooms were bad places for their children academically. They cited the work of some educational researchers who claimed that early schooling is detrimental to young children's motor and cognitive development.

The article carried quotes of both Farris, but it represented Vicki as the homeschool teacher. The lead photo featured a close-up of her, poring over a book with seven-year-old Christy at the kitchen table. Vicki described homeschool motherhood as rewarding but taxing, too. "In a way it's fulfilling some of my needs. Sometimes I felt all I was doing was cleaning up spills and washing clothes, so it's been stimulating, but sometimes I'm ready to pull out my hair," Mrs. Farris confessed, "but I still think it's worthwhile."

Meeting the journalist's imperative to paint a balanced picture, the *Times* duly reported some dissenting voices. Reporters used an interview with Joanna Nichols, principal of King's Elementary, a local Christian day school, for the contrary position. After some research Nichols had, according to the newspaper, "concluded that home-schooling is a phenomenon destined to burn out," for a number of reasons. "While the one-to-one teaching ratio at home is great, she says, sometimes teaching needs to be 'carefully geared to meet individual learning needs, and a trained teacher is the best resource for that.'"

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This book is about the men and women who ignored such wisdom, the parents of the estimated one million American children who are now being educated at home. It is about how homeschool advocates have convinced these parents that their children's bodies are too fragile to be squeezed into desks all day, their needs too distinctive to be handed over to strangers, their minds too pliant to be subjected to secular teachers. It is about why ordinary mothers and fathers have felt the conviction to make an extraordinary life choice, and about the organizational scaffolding they have built to support their decision. It is about what made it possible for Michael Farris, a small-town attorney in 1983, to grow a national organization with a multimillion dollar budget and more than sixty thousand members before he and Vicki had finished homeschooling their own children.

Finally, this book is about the many ways in which home schooling is different upon close inspection than it seems at first glance. Initially one may expect home schoolers to be isolated in their homes, inadequately socialized. One of the first lessons home schoolers teach the careful observer is that in fact home schooling is a collective project. Home schoolers have always worked together to surmount the multiple challenges that come with doing things unconventionally. In conversation with one another, they become convinced about the troubles of schools. In support groups, they swap words of wisdom and stories of uncomprehending in-laws. In regional and national associations, they lobby legislatures and education departments to ensure their freedom to homeschool. In magazines and publishing houses, on the Internet, and through small businesses and ministries of every description, home schoolers have built a lively and talkative world of their own, one that supplies parents and children alike with wide possibilities for friendships, political experience, and, sometimes, lucrative careers. Home schooling is, in short, a social movement, with a rich history and an elaborate organizational apparatus.

At first glance some critics see all the Vicki Farris—full-time mothers in what appear to be traditional household roles—and assume that home schooling is a reactionary, antifeminist cause. In fact home schooling bears clear imprints of the liberal feminism that was blossoming when many of today's homeschooling mothers came of age. Like most women, homeschooling mothers take for granted that the idealized domesticity of the 1950s housewife is a thing of the past. Like their more conventional neighbors, homeschooling women face hard choices between paid work and parenting. Where they differ is in how they decide to navigate those choices.

At first glance, home schooling appears to be the logical purview of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. In fact, one would be hard-

pressed to find a social movement peopled by a wider spectrum of faiths and philosophies. The plurality of home schoolers makes them harder for the rest of us to comprehend. On what could fundamentalists and atheists, Muslims and Mormons, Buddhists and Baptists all agree? I found that despite their varied backgrounds, home schoolers agree that children have enormous potential for distinctive accomplishments and that standardized ways of educating children temper or even squelch this potential. Home schoolers also are wary of state intrusion into family life and generally are skeptical of the ability of bureaucracies and “experts” to meet the task of child rearing. Because these beliefs are rooted in some cherished American cultural traditions, they are compelling to a wide range of people.

The points of shared sentiment have not, however, made it easy for home schoolers to cooperate. Home schooling’s earliest adherents differed not only by faith but also in the histories they inherited. Some of them cut their teeth as activists in the liberal “free school” movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These activists were familiar with the highly democratic organizational forms favored by attendant causes of that era, namely, the New Left student movement and, a bit later, the nascent feminist movement. From the beginning they have imagined a diverse and democratic home-school cause, a big-tent movement with plenty of room for political and philosophical disagreement. Those who became homeschool leaders in the evangelical and fundamentalist world, however, did so with contrary understandings of what a social movement ought to look like. In that world, hierarchical divisions of labor and authority are generally regarded as appropriate, as is the exclusion of those who do not share one’s religious faith. Given such striking differences in what I came to call the organizational sensibility of home schoolers, it is not surprising that they have often disagreed.

This book is about home schooling, but it also about the mechanics of social movements more broadly. I argue that people who build social movements, people like Michael and Vicki Farris, are appropriately thought of as entrepreneurs.¹ They see troubles in their surrounding culture and cannily find ways to define them in novel and compelling ways. They create practical technologies for fixing the trouble. They figure out how to share their vision with amenable audiences. And like all entrepreneurs, they take risks in the interest of the cause. They may forgo stable careers to do the thing they believe in. They may abandon the comfortable ken of a more respectable cause and strike out precariously on their own. Many, with empty pockets and nary a footnote in the history books, lose the gamble. But to the successful go many spoils: the glamour

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and excitement that come from taking risks in the short term; the long-term promise of making history; the intellectual buzz of rethinking what others take for granted; the sublimity of transcending the rules.

Entrepreneurs do not work in vacuums. Just as in business, where particular regulatory environments, fluctuating market conditions, and spotty information require opportunity-takers to be knowledgeable and nimble, in the business of social movements entrepreneurs must do their work in a manner that is sensitive to context. The factors that shape the fate of movement-builders are numerous. Some are structural: the legal organization of a society, for example, which determines the outside costs of doing things unconventionally and provides the rules for voicing official dissent. Some are cultural: the intellectual traditions that shape the heads of potential recruits; the larger culture's stock of legitimate ways of making sense of things; and the organizational sensibilities that characterize people's sense of how they can appropriately be glued together into groups.

The people who laid the foundations for home education in the early 1980s, people like Michael Farris, did so in a legal context that was very favorable to their cause. The United States is distinctive among Western industrialized nations in the extraordinary decentralization of legal rules regarding schooling. Public schooling is governed largely by states and localities in this country, and this kind of legal structure creates lots of wiggle room for educational innovators. One can fight local battles to change the rules or move someplace where the regulatory climate better suits one's pedagogical imagination. And since the question of just who ultimately is responsible for the education of children (parents? the state?) has never been squarely resolved in America, the country has accommodated many alternatives to public schools.

Farris and his peers also have done their work in a particular historical context. Theirs is a post-1960s America, a nation now sensitized profoundly to the fact that state officials and school bureaucrats can abuse their powers, a nation that has grown rather more accustomed than it used to be to groups that do things unconventionally, to people who live their ideals. Many of today's homeschool sages became adults in the 1960s and 1970s. Many participated in the cultural innovation and experimentation of those decades. Even years later, they think of themselves as their own people, a bit outside the mainstream. Notably, I found this sentiment to be as pervasive among conservative Protestants as among other home schoolers. These are people who have self-consciously done their own thing, or the right thing, regardless of what the neighbors or the in-laws might think.²

But homeschool advocates are not homogeneous. They come from different sectors of American society and have pursued their cause in contextually specific ways. Michael Farris has made his career in the organizationally robust world of conservative Protestant America, a world composed of thousands of local congregations and a vast constellation of businesses, ministries, and national advocacy groups. This is a place rich with opportunity for entrepreneurs of all sorts, a place in which someone with a big idea and a willingness to work hard can, with God's grace and with help from his brethren, build an impressive piece of the kingdom. Other homeschool leaders have gone about things very differently. Rather than speaking to a large population that shares some powerful beliefs about community and authority, they have purveyed their cause to anyone who cares to listen. Rather than the explicitly Christian social movement Farris and his colleagues have created, other home schoolers have built a decidedly ecumenical home education. They have done so according to the rules and with the resources of "alternative" America—that fragile organizational network left after the ebb of liberal causes of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the world of alternative schools, progressive not-for-profits, food co-ops, and the occasional surviving commune that carry on the egalitarian ethos of the student movements and the counterculture. It is a small world now, short on cash, physical plants, and new blood, but still a hotly idealistic and quietly optimistic place. These home schoolers have met a rather different fate than conservative Protestants. Both groups have managed to create lively, talkative, durable causes, but one version of home education is larger and wealthier and more handily directs the national conversation on home schooling. This book addresses why homeschool history played out this way.

In the early 1990s, when I did the bulk of my homework for what follows, home education as a national cause was very much under construction. As I watched support groups, telephone trees, and national advocacy organizations get built, I saw that home schoolers often differed in what Elisabeth Clemens has called the "how" of organization: the characteristic ways in which they divide tasks, distribute authority, and define themselves as collective actors.³ The difference proved decisive. When I finished my research in 1999, there were essentially two homeschool movements, one "Christian" and the other "inclusive." This book is about how that happened.

Despite their contentiousness, in the end what I found most remarkable about home schoolers was the big item on which they agreed. Time and again, parents told me that their children's self-development was worthy of

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virtually any sacrifice. Careers were suspended, incomes cut, houses left uncleaned or unfixed, adult social lives curtailed dramatically, and, sometimes, marriages strained, all in the interest of giving more to the kids. In doing their utmost for their children, home schoolers are much like all good parents, of course. Nevertheless, I found in home schoolers' extraordinary commitment a larger lesson about the meaning of childhood in our culture.

Homeschool parents will tell you that their kids are precocious and unpredictable. That they are uncomfortable in confining classrooms and rigid bureaucracies. That they don't like people behind big desks telling them what to do. That they learn best when they are given open spaces, breathing room. Can we hardly disagree? This talk, after all, is harmonious with the great American story, a story about freedom and possibility and skepticism of established authority. But there is something more there, too, something implicit about who we are not just as Americans but as moderns. At the heart of home schoolers' elaborate conversation about children is a faith that deep inside each of us is an essential, inviolable self, a little person distinctive from all others and, on the basis of that distinctiveness, worthy of extraordinarily specific care. Home schoolers remind us of how vivid that faith can be, and of how much it costs to put it in practice.

In what follows I have tried to do two things at once: to provide a studied account of a novel education movement, and to write an analytic essay about the relationship between cultural context and a social movement's form and message. In attempting to be a storyteller and an analyst simultaneously, I have almost certainly written a book that is both less lovely a narrative and less systematic an essay than it otherwise might have been. But such is the lot of a sociologist, and a discipline, simultaneously given to abstraction and specificity. My hope is that I have struck at least a few notes of harmony between these different scholarly tones.

Finally, I should offer a word on the structure of my effort here. I have tried to write a book that is informative to several kinds of readers. Sociologists, and others who are interested in the theoretical foundations of my analysis, will find in the footnotes some citations and commentary intended especially for them. Readers who are less concerned about the scholarly conversation that informs my thinking might decide to read the notes more lightly.

Here is an outline of what follows. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the homeschool world and describes the nature and limitations of my inquiry. Chapter 2 examines classics of homeschooling literature and a sam-

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ple of homeschool curricula, providing a sense of home schoolers' varied pedagogical approaches. It also listens to parents talk about the hows and whys of home schooling and begins to sketch the relationship between homeschool pedagogy and home schoolers' broader worldviews. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at mothers. Here I assess the scope of the work home schooling requires and the very different ways in which mothers make sense of that work. Leaving households, chapter 4 describes how home schoolers have worked to assemble themselves into a national constituency and examines the subtle ways in which different organizational sensibilities have had lasting consequences for the shape of the movement. Chapter 5 addresses how home schoolers go about their politics. It recounts a watershed event on Capitol Hill that both betrayed and solidified home schoolers' organizational divisions, and it proffers an explanation for why such leaders as Michael Farris have had such success in their endeavors. Finally, chapter 6 considers what home schoolers teach us about the nature of American childhood.