



## **Jen Garrison Stuber: How Homeschooling Caught Us By Surprise**

### **Jen Garrison Stuber 0:10**

Good afternoon, I'm Jen Garrison Stuber, the advocacy chair with the Washington Homeschool Organization. And I get to do the thing I love most today and talk about homeschooling. What you may not know, I would say what most people don't know is that many, if not most of us, didn't intend to homeschool. We came to homeschooling because something happened in our lives that forced us into homeschooling. And there's a whole variety of different reasons for many of you, it may be our, our pandemic, of course, but for many of us, even through the years that homeschooling's been legal across our country, which has been since the mid 80s, when homeschooling laws was finally legalized homeschooling and in many states, the 80s and into the 90s, a lot of us came to homeschooling for a number of different reasons. Oh, here's Alicia Garrison Stuber at her school in Raleigh, North Carolina. We, as many people were, weren't always homeschoolers. It wasn't even on our radar. I was a college professor, my husband was a computer professional and traveled, worked lots of hours. So we didn't even think about homeschooling. Our daughter attended the school for K4, for K5, for first grade, and she started second grade there. And in October of second grade, a number of things happened all at the same time. The teacher we expected to have a second grade left the school and a couple teachers from the kindergarten who never taught second grade before came up to do that. They immediately put her in the lower level reading group, and this was my kid who liked reading Harry Potter for fun at home. But they put her in it because her handwriting was atrocious, which was absolutely true, but her reading was fine. Then they started taking her, the this was the year that you learned cursive, and so they started taking her out of the cursive instruction and down the hall to remediate her print. And I said, Look, guys, I totally understand that she needs to remediate her print. But you've had her for K4, K5, first grade. And now she's coming home with cursive homework, and she's crying because she wasn't there for the instruction. And I have assured her that I absolutely could help her with this. I have multiple degrees in the subject of English. I said, Honey, I absolutely can help you learn how to do cursive, and she said, "No, you can't help me. You're not my teacher." I was like, well, that's probably gonna change. And in not one of my finer parenting moments, I put all of her stuff in that big orange backpack you see on her back, I put their stuff in the desk and I left a note on the front desk. As we left the school, I explained that we were not returning to the school for the remainder of the year. In retrospect, because my child had friends at the school and because she really liked the school, I would have been much better for if I had pulled myself together and and baked some cupcakes and gone in and



had a, "Oh Alicia, we're so sad to see you go" party or if I couldn't do that myself, to enlist a friend to do that. She says she's not been harmed by the episode. Why do I always feel a twinge of shame and guilt, in having not made the transition to homeschooling a little bit easier on my child?

Here we are, we've moved to Washington. Alicia's about eight years old at this point in time. And we always knew this kid was a little bit weird; she didn't ever crawl, she just scooted from point A to point B. Hopping, skipping, jumping, all of these gross motor skills and fine motor skill markers. If you squinted and pretended that she was two years younger, she was about on, right on on schedule. Um, but otherwise, we're like, it's just kind of what's going on here. My husband said, you know, my parents told me for a battery of tests with a neuropsychologist when I was about her age, I think we ought to do the same. And so we did. And then the neuropsychologist came back with several findings. She said, "Your daughter has ADHD, and I think you ought to medicate her for that." Now, I said, All right, I'll take it under consideration. This, of course, has been some years ago, and there were no longitudinal studies on the use of these medications long term in children and their growing bodies. So it's something actually that we opted not to do, figuring that we could actually change the environment to suit the child instead of needing to change the child to suit the environment. They said she's got dyslexia and we said, yeah, we actually know we actually knew that. It's very similar to the type her father has, and she had like he had self-compensated prior to our findings in that area. And then the third thing they said is she's got a clinically significant difference between the hemispheres of her brain, and what we're talking about is about 40 IQ points between the two sides of her head. In a cruel twist of nature. she happens to be a lefty and it's her right side of her brain that is the lower functioning.

So one of the things we started when we first started homeschooling I said like, it's already ruled out there, baby. Anything you can do with your right hand, it's just gonna make your life so much easier. I'm not gonna force you to become a righty. But let's take a look and see, because it is your power hand and it's the power side of your brain that's running it, so let's see what you can do. So it's interesting, as an adult now, she draws and she writes with her left hand, she actually uses scissors with both and I bought her the lefty scissors because you have to get the blades changed as well as the as the handle for that. Chopsticks she uses with her right hand, a fork, if you're sitting down with to dinner with her, goes back and forth between her two hands throughout the entire meal. So it's just been very interesting to see how ambidextrous she is, because she's naturally a lefty, but because she's got this this power hand.



So at this point in time, we're like, Okay, I think we're probably in this homeschooling thing for the long haul. And if that is the case, we should probably think, where do we want to end up at the end of this. And so we set forth and we wrote them down: four graduation requirements that we had for when this little munchkin might eventually graduate from homeschooling. The graduation requirements we had formed: the first one was the ability to read and write well. My husband and I are both college educated. I was an English professor at the time that we began homeschooling. And I said, this is fundamental to a good education, that you have the ability to read well and to write well, to express yourself in the written language. Our second graduation requirement was the ability to think critically and to conduct research, especially in a library. I always thought that was an important thing to be coming out of high school with. The third was a reasonable passing score on the SAT or the ACT to facilitate entry into college or to a university. And we weren't sure this was the direction she might go or not, but we wanted to make sure that we didn't close any doors just because we had chosen to homeschool her. And our fourth one is one that's peculiar just to us, and it's not one that I expect anyone else to have. It's a small house built to completion.

I should set the context for you. I happen to live in eastern Washington, I live on 124 forested acres above Newman Lake. This is the view from my house. So the fact that she could build a small house was not daunted by living in suburban or an urban setting, having to deal with the different rules and regulations that might apply in a more urban area. I should also say that as a family, we've built several structures, including 45 foot diameter five eighths geodesic dome with two stories on it. This was actually a kit that my husband's parents bought in the 70s. They never put it together and it moldered in a barn on the Mason Dixon until 2009 when we brought it out to Spokane and erected it. We went together, the three of us, to Strawbale Building School. It's exactly what it sounds like, you learn how to build buildings out of straw bales. It's a little bit like, like using giant fluffy bricks, and then you cob over that. Not to be a complete homeschool cliché, but I live off-grid in the mountains. And because we're off grid, we need a place for our batteries and our inverters. And there's actually a generator as well in this in this power shed.

So we kind of set out with these four kind of high lofty ideals, the ability to read and write well, the ability to think critically and conduct research, a reasonably decent SAT or ACT score, and then a small house built to completion. Round about Middle School, though, and they're all kind of weird at that age. But round about Middle School, we suddenly had a realization that she might not go to college. And this was kind of a really big deal to us. And I think we went through kind of a grieving process. We're both third generation college students in our family. I went to the same college as my grandmother. And so I think we both had at least in the in our subconscious, if not in our conscious, the thought



that our child would go to college, and we had started saving money to that end back when she was when she was born. And we went through a bit of a grieving process thinking about it. But we also thought so strongly that it might not be in her future. Again, some of these differences in her brain, and the ADHD, and the dyslexia. We thought at this point, she's probably going to launch late, but we're like, hey, we like her. And if she's around till she's 20 or 22 and it takes us longer to finish up the homeschooling, that's no big deal. And but we actually thought so strongly that this might happen. We stopped putting money in her 529 plan and started investing it elsewhere. A 529 plan is a savings plan specifically for higher education, and we started saving it elsewhere. And in case she wanted to at the time she was really into songwriting, and she was taking guitar, and piano, and voice, wanted to be the next Taylor Swift and she was writing an album herself. And so we thought maybe she'll buy a van and some equipment and she'll go around and do performances at coffee shop and shops and that sort of thing.

And then, all the sudden, at 16, she turned around and said, "I want to go do Running Start." If you're not familiar with this, Running Start is a tuition funding program for high school juniors and seniors in the state of Washington to attend any of our community colleges and four of our four year schools, with the state paying their tuition for those two years, up to full time, full time status for the two years. I was like, "Ah, you know, you haven't been in a classroom since you were in second grade, like you didn't even finish second grade, you're a second grade dropout." And we had been doing some very hippy stuff, we worked on stuff until we mastered it, we didn't give ourselves, like we didn't do a whole bunch of grading. It's not the kind of, we did a lot of hands-on, experiential learning, and not a lot of really formal sort of schooling that you'll find in a college setting. And I'm like, "The other thing about college is that's your permanent record." And so I said, "You know what? If you like, let's go down to the school, and let's take the placement test. You have to place in a college level English and college level math, and let's see if you're even ready for this.

So she went down and she placed in, and I said, "Okay, great. Well, what would you like to take?" I thought maybe she'd take a class, maybe two. She had an entire list of classes that she wanted to take that quarter, and you could take up to 15 credits, and I said, "Okay, you know, it seems that you're ready and it seems that you've got an idea of what you want and I am not going to stand in your way. But if you do poorly, then we'll dial back and kind of regroup and see where we are from there.

So here she is, baby's first day of school, getting in the car. She was rolling her eyes at me when I took this photo, saying "Are you kidding? Like this is not really my first day of school," and I said, "Well, close enough because it's been a very long time since you had a



first day of school and I've taken a picture." And so she she headed off to community college. She graduated from high school. Here's the Washington Homeschool Organization's graduation in eastern Washington and the graduation ceremony. And she did tremendously well in community college. She went for six quarters, she went full time, she was on the President's honor roll. And she graduated high school as an 18 year old college Junior, in addition to graduating from high school. She went on and went to university and went to Evergreen State University to study computer science. And then she was accepted into a rather elite program for video game production at Southern Methodist University's Guild Hall program down in Plano, Texas. And I think one of the things that happens when you homeschool is, is you get really concerned like, "If I choose this thing for my child, how much am I going to mess up their lives? Are they gonna end up homeless or jobless or friendless, or somehow how less than than their peers that that have gone to public school or private school? And you know, I'm agreeing to do something destructive to their future?"

But no, that's not at all what happened. She met the love of her life while she was at graduate school. She married. She graduated from the from the Guild Hall program, with an award-winning game that you can actually get, you can download off of Steam called Rome. There she is. And in case you're wondering, she did finish that tiny house that she was building.

And so what I want to say to you about homeschooling is that so many of us came to it not not because we wanted to homeschool and it wasn't wasn't something that we wanted to do, but it was something that the circumstances of our lives or the circumstances of our children's lives kind of pushed us into. And and the great beauty of homeschooling is that you can have a completely individualized education for your child. One of the things that we were talking about today, when I was at lunch with her was that when she went other places with other homeschoolers, they would, if something didn't know something, they would say, "Oh, well, would you like me to teach you?" or "Could you teach me?" and they would ask each other this question because they didn't think of teaching as this thing that happens in a school building with someone who's gone to a teacher training program, but rather something that someone who knows something you don't know can help you then learn to know. So she had taken her lockpicks with her to camp one year, and it was a homeschooling camp, and and the other homeschoolers that "Oh, can you teach me how to pick locks?" and "Where did you learn to pick locks?" and things of that nature. And I think that's the, the great beauty of homeschooling as well, is that part of what we're doing, and I fear many of us do it quite on accident, is we're teaching our children how to learn and how to go out and find things and how to be fearless in that exploration, and they they are then able to go out and accomplish these great things in their in their lives, because they're not afraid. She told me a story, when she was in college, that her professor had said, "Okay,



now go home and just algebra it." And she said, "I don't know what that means." And so after class, she said, "May I come to your office hours? I have some questions I'd like to ask" and the professor said, "Sure. Come on down with me." And so she went, and she said, "I don't understand when you say, you know, 'Go forth and algebra this.' What do you mean by that?" And the professor explained and worked through a couple of problems with her. And she said, "Great, I understand it now," and ended up doing just fine on the class.

She's fearless at looking at Google. Um, same thing happened when she went to university, there was a test that she needed to do to see if she was maybe ready for a course to stay she wanted to take and I said, "Well, take the test, and then go sit down with a professor." And she said, "I agree, I'll do that." And I was looking through the test. I was like, "I, I don't know the math here at the end of this test," like, so I called her and I said, "Did you know the math?" and it was something called discrete math. I still don't know what this math is, again, English major here. And she said, "Oh, no," she said, "but I just googled it. And then I worked through a few problems. And you know, and then I got a feel for how it was done. And then I" and I thought, "I have never thought to Google how to do math." That's just never even clicked in my mind. I went to public school and a lot of it and it just, even though I managed to teach her to do such things, um, it's just not something that comes naturally to me.

So, but I think that's the great the great joy of homeschooling, is you get to learn alongside your kids, you get to tailor their education to them, and you get to do your own explorations at the same time. So if you'd like to click on the link at the bottom of the screen, and join us for a facebook live feed, we'll be talking some more there. I would love to chat with you about questions that you have and things you would like to know. And so yeah, I will meet you over there to chat.

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