

New School

Joan Stolar Smith '73 saw students struggling—and did something about it

Thursday, June 19, 2014

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Joan Stolar Smith '73 never planned to make her mark in education. An accomplished harpsichordist who majored in music at UNH, Smith thought her career path was clear. "My plan was to have a family and then get back to my life," she confesses with a

sheepish laugh. But when her sons arrived, Smith quickly realized that she wanted to stay involved in their lives on a daily basis. "I couldn't imagine giving my 5-year-olds over to someone else's care, so I decided to start homeschooling our boys and just kept going as long as it seemed right, which was all the way through high school."

As Smith's children reached college age, she realized she would miss homeschooling greatly. But while her own experience had been positive, she recognized that many families abandoned the practice as their children entered high school--in some instances because of strained relations between parents and their teens and in others because of concerns about being able to adequately prepare their children for college. She began to consider the number of children she'd encountered failing to thrive in a traditional learning environment that she believed would prosper if allowed to direct their own education. "I wanted to do something valuable in my life and make a difference for others," Smith explains. So in 1999, she founded New Hope Tutorials, a faith-based program in Boxford, Massachusetts, designed to support home-based education.

She started with a core group of 13 students and a dedicated staff, offering homeschooling parents access to experienced tutors and thoughtfully conceived tutorials--not, she notes, "classes" and "teachers." "We were very mindful of the terminology," she says. "At New Hope, we view parents as the primary educators, and our mission is to support and empower them. We treat each child as an individual and every family as unique. We hire tutors with a passion for teaching and a lot of training in their subject area."

Today, New Hope serves nearly 150 students and offers a diverse course catalogue to supplement the instruction provided at home. High school tutorials are offered in 90-minute blocks on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and middle school tutorials take place on Mondays. Parents determine the courses and course load depending on their own knowledge base and the needs of their children. Some enroll their children in tutorials to expose them to new ideas and ways of learning while others join New Hope to enrich their child's social experience.

New Hope's results speak for themselves and students have gone on to such institutions as Purdue, MIT, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Northeastern. But while these achievements are impressive, they're not the milestones that make Smith the proudest. "For me, the best success stories are the children who come to New Hope from a system or setting that wasn't working for them and thrive," she says. "Suddenly they feel safe, accepted, and affirmed and they blossom." Smith has witnessed many parent success stories as well. "I've seen a number of parents who've enrolled their kids at New Hope and felt liberated. They're able to back away from the pressure of being both parent and teacher. Once they're able to share some of the accountability for their child's education, they can enjoy being a parent again."

Smith recently stepped down as New Hope's director, but remains on the board. "I founded the program, but it's much bigger than me. It's thriving and that makes me very happy," she says. For Smith, New Hope is a ministry--one that exists to support parents who are committed to homeschooling their children and instilling Christian values.

"Teaching children to be compassionate and to value others at least as much as they value themselves--these are the most important lessons we can impart."

Originally published by:
UNH Magazine, [Spring 2014 Issue](#)

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UNH MAGAZINE SPRING 2014



University of New Hampshire

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The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).
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