

HOMESCHOOL CO-OP CELEBRATES 20 YEARS



ELISABETH AND KATHERINE
DELLAROVA AND STEPHANIE
FARRELL // “I’m very fond of pop-
corn,” said administrator Mary Capal-
do, “and the beginning of the LEARN

day reminds me of popcorn.” She described the administration office at LEARN (Liberty Education and Resource Network), a Christian homeschool cooperative currently serving about 170 families, which meets once a week at Faith OPC in Pole Tavern (Elmer), New Jersey. In the administration office, the photocopier is constantly running, and people are coming in and out with attendance sheets, questions about class changes, and requests for extra help in a classroom. It gets very noisy, at least for the first two hours. When she’s not answering questions, Capaldo tries to plan classes, teachers, and rooms for the next semester.

How did a co-op of about fifteen homeschooling families in the mid-1990s turn into what it is today—five hundred people of all ages, from all over New Jersey, meeting in a church building? They’re all there for a common purpose—to enrich homeschool education and support other homeschoolers.

LEARN meets on Thursdays for two ten-week semesters, one in the fall and one in the spring. Four hours of classes, with twenty-five classes per hour, are offered for children in four age groups: 3–5, 6–9, 9–12, and 12–18. Parents sign up their children for classes at LEARN’s website,

www.njlearn.org. Parents who aren’t teaching a class are assigned to classrooms as helpers. Teachers charge a small fee for their classes, but it goes entirely to the cost of supplies and textbooks. All of LEARN’s teachers and helpers are parent volunteers.

LEARN was founded by two homeschool moms, Bethann Detwiler and Lori Carbonetta. They wanted to create a support network and a place for homeschoolers to get together and study subjects that parents didn’t feel qualified to teach, or to take an extra-curricular class in a classroom setting. They realized that other homeschoolers felt the same way. Detwiler had experience with cooperatives, so she researched and wrote the beginnings of what are now the LEARN bylaws. They set up meetings with Faith OPC’s then pastor, David Cummings. The group launched LEARN in the fall of 1996.

Some of the original classes are still offered today, and some of the early families are still attending. Susan Hartman is a mother to four sons and a longtime LEARN teacher. In her twenty years of teaching, she has taught a variety of classes, but she is known for teaching Shakespeare.

“To me, teaching is a ministry,” Hartman explained. In college she ma-

jored in English education with the intent to become a Christian schoolteacher. “But God laid it on my heart to homeschool,” she said. Homeschooling was the perfect opportunity to teach her own children in a Christian environment, and when she joined LEARN, it opened a door for her to teach more students in a classroom setting while still being able to express her faith.

In some cases, the co-op is ministering to the second generation. Katie McDaniel’s mother attended LEARN with two of her sisters. Now Katie, wife of Pastor Steve McDaniel of Providence OPC in Mantua, is at LEARN with her four children. “This is my fourth year, my first time teaching. I enjoy the chance for my kids to be in a classroom setting, to be with other kids their age. They get to do art projects and science experiments we don’t get to do at home,” said McDaniel. “I really appreciate that it’s a ministry of the church. I feel comfortable with who’s running it.”

There’s a lot of behind-the-scenes work that keeps LEARN running smoothly. Picture this: It’s Thursday afternoon at LEARN on week 8 of the semester, and it’s far from uneventful. There’s paint on the floor. The toilets are overflowing. A woman is waiting in the administration office with a question

about church doctrine. Someone has to go to the bank and make a deposit. Making his way from room to room, LEARN's facility director and board chairman addresses each issue with confidence and speed. "At LEARN, my motto is 'wing it.' Sometimes we need to make decisions fast," said Joe Cerone. Joe and his wife, Jennie, and their children have been involved with LEARN since it began. They began attending Faith OPC in 1999. Cerone has served as chairman and as a go-between for the church and the LEARN ministry since 2011, and he's been on the board since 2000.

He said some of the challenges that LEARN has faced over the years are recruiting teachers, helpers, and cleaners; changing rooms in the church into classrooms, then converting them back on Thursday evenings; transitioning from "a paper-driven administration to a computerized system"; and establishing communication between the different ministries that use the church.



Some of the LEARN students

The LEARN board, which has six members, meets every quarter to discuss finances, approve new teachers, address facility or website concerns, or make changes to the LEARN bylaws. Pastor Richard Ellis of Faith OPC is also on the board. "We're so grateful that Pastor Ellis is so pro-homeschooling," said Capaldo, the head administrator. "What many people don't realize is that LEARN is really a ministry of the church. We're governed by the church."

The website is easy to use, and only costs seven dollars each school year per family. It also makes it easier for new families to find LEARN.

Capaldo stressed that it doesn't take just a board and an administration staff to run the co-op. "It takes everyone to run something this big." Cerone agreed: "There are no prima donnas here at LEARN." He explained that everyone, from helpers to teachers to administrators, works hard without complaint.

"For students, my prayer has always been for them to develop a love for learning, to achieve their academic potential, and to grow in their relationship with Jesus," said Detwiler. During her time at LEARN, Milne has noticed that it isn't just homeschooling that unites them. "It's all centered around the lordship of Christ. That's the true common bond we all have. God has blessed this ministry." She added that the close friendships she's made through LEARN have encouraged her in her family's homeschooling journey. "I would never have been able to continue homeschooling my kids for fifteen years without LEARN. It's not just a homeschool co-op. It's our family." □

Twins Elisabeth (at left in photo) and Katherine DellaRova are students in Stephanie Farrell's newsletter class at LEARN.

Covenant Classical Academy

A small group of homeschool families, eight in all this semester, meets on Fridays at New Hope OPC in Bridgeton, New Jersey, for a seven-hour day at a co-op built on classical Christian education. Tracey Taylor, Pastor Claude Taylor's wife, oversees the co-op. She taught at LEARN because of her ties to Faith OPC. "I never thought I would homeschool my kids. I was really impressed with the homeschool kids. I met an intern at Faith Church who did Classical Conversations. I was completely captivated. It sold me on homeschooling. You can't do Classical Conversations by yourself."

Different from LEARN, Classical Conversations is a core curriculum, not enrichment. "It is very structured, and it needs a group to work." Taylor enlisted a friend to help her. They started the co-op with five OPC families.

Though families have come and gone, the Friday co-op is an intimate one. "It has always been small. That was deliberate from the beginning," said Taylor. "We didn't believe we could handle a large group." One of the benefits of CCA is that "whole families are studying the same material. We coordinate history, science, music, and art."