

A P.U.S. HOME-SCHOOLROOM

by OLIVE NORTON

After teaching my daughter, Sarah, for twelve and a half years in our P.U.S. home-schoolroom, she has now left the schoolroom, at the age of sixteen and a half years, with G.C.E. O level in seven subjects.

So many times during all these years I have been asked, 'How do you do it? How do you find the time?', and I honestly think the answer is that time is what you make it.

[p 254]

Firstly, I could never have done it without the magnificent guidance and advice from the Director of the Parents Union School, whose answers to any doubts or problems were sent by return of post and whose painstaking, individual interest encouraged us to better work at just the very moment when we needed confidence. Sarah and I are indeed grateful to her.

Let me make it quite clear that I had never taught scholastic subjects before and was educated in South Africa, where the system differs. I am a qualified ballet teacher and soloist dancer from the Royal Ballet Company and the de Basil Russian Ballet, so that this was a new field to me; but I love teaching and love children and am prepared to take infinite pains to see that the child has really understood the lesson.

The mother-daughter relationship is one that, I think, probably causes many parents to give up the idea of teaching their own children. I tried very hard to be the teacher in the schoolroom and the mother at other times. For example, if some work had not given satisfaction and had vexed me and, as a result, Sarah wanted to express her apologies by demonstrating affection in class, I explained that a pupil in a class of thirty could not get up and put her arms round the teacher's neck. I was always presenting to her the picture of a class of thirty children (this is where my theatre experience probably helped) and she must imagine how lessons would be conducted amongst this number, especially when it concerned oral and aural work.

My son, who is three years younger than his sister, joined the schoolroom also at four and a half years old; then, in different parts of the world, we found other companions, but there were never more than four children in the schoolroom together, each at a different stage, but doing some things together such as Action Songs, Bible, Shakespeare, Music Appreciation and Art. This gave the family-school atmosphere and we were very happy.

When my husband retired from the Naval Service, we came home to settle in England. My son, then nine and a half years old, went to Desmoor, the P.N.E.U. Preparatory School for boys, in Surrey.

We felt it a great mistake to upset Sarah at the age of twelve years by sending her to boarding school and, after giving the matter deep consideration, we decided to continue our

home-schoolroom. She was delighted and soon adjusted herself to being the only pupil. Companionship was found in Girl Guide activities and riding; and at week-ends she had friends in the district, who went to day-school.

Other teaching influences were now introduced by taking Drama and Singing lessons and Piano lessons at an Academy in the nearest town. Her father now took on the Mathematics, which were beyond me!
[p 255]

Without doubt, the P.U.S. is an excellent method, which broadens the child's mind with the unusual inclusions in its programmes of work of Music Appreciation, a different painter to be studied each term, Citizenship, and Shakespeare from an early age. My children adored *Julius Ceasar* [sic], which was read aloud to them when they were seven years old. At this age, *Pilgrim's Progress* was also a great success.

On the adverse side, I think that between the ages of twelve and fourteen the time given to each subject could be a little longer. We kept as strictly as we could to the set time-table, but many days we found we had been longer at certain subjects and the last lesson of the day gradually got squeezed out.

The telling back method is splendid. It is a tremendous help to those who are shy or lacking in confidence. The results from these children, in a short time, is astounding.

Now to the final years. The G.C.E. was formidable because I had never taken Matriculation or G.C.E. myself, and in fact had to learn some of the subjects with Sarah. I think one need never be ashamed of learning with a child. It gives a fresh approach and a more sympathetic understanding of the difficulties, and also a shared excitement.

We found we needed to give an hour to each subject, and had to eliminate other subjects that were not being taken for O levels, with the exception of Music Appreciation.

During these last two years, Sarah's day started with going a mile in the car with her father. He then put her down and she had to walk back with her dog to her home-schoolroom. Always punctual, her time-table was from 9–11.15; break; 12–1.15; lunch; 2.30–4; free time; 6.30–8. The last period was for prep. On Wednesday afternoons she did only Art and her Singing lesson. Saturday mornings were given to a Maths lesson and the week-end prep. We kept the same term dates as her brother's prep school, so that we were all on holiday together.

At a certain stage, the Director of the Parents Union School sent Sarah's G.C.E. Mock Exams on to a Special Examiner, who gave the most critical remarks on the work, down to the smallest detail. This indeed gave us a sound picture of the exact and very high standard expected, and helped us on the right path yet again. I think the past P.U.S. Examiner, who has recently retired, was sometimes a little too lenient. I know the young need encouragement but, with the G.C.E. before them all, they must have no illusions about their work, and the help we gained from the Mock Tests' *exacting* criticism was invaluable.

[p 256]

Let me finally add that Sarah always maintained a great respect for her home-schoolroom and although I was very strict, we had a great deal of fun as well. Her eagerness to report the completion of the term's work made her look forward to the exams at the end of term.

During this last term, when Sarah's work and mine was at its highest pressure, I still had to do all the cooking for a household of five, besides having my parents visiting us for three months, from South Africa, after an absence of ten years. Also some of my Ballet pupils, whom I teach every Saturday morning, excelled themselves, so I had to take them to auditions at the Rambert Ballet School and Legat School and then obtain Grants, so that they might enter one or other of these schools. We also led a very social life at week-ends, and I had a large correspondence dealing with a Golden Jubilee which I was organising, from the London end, for my first Ballet mistress in Cape Town. So, let no parent tell me that it cannot be done—it can.

Lastly, we owe great thanks to the Librarian at the P.N.E.U. Office, who has become a great friend, though we have never met. She has suggested lovely books for both my children to read in their leisure hours and has given Sarah a treasure-trove of happiness through the choice of books she has had from the Library.

I shall always be happy to answer any questions from parents, if I can be of any help, as this was all an experiment for us and, wisely guided by the Director of the P.U.S., we have achieved our goal.

I know I shall be asked, 'Wasn't Sarah lonely?' or 'Has she found it difficult to make friends?' The answer is NO. Her life was too full of interests; she always had plenty to do, in and out of school hours; and in our naval life, with constant moves to different countries, my children had to learn to make new friends and be sociable.

This term, Sarah has entered into her new life, with no trepidation. There are fifty boys and girls in her class, beginning their four-year course at a large Art School. She seems exhilarated with the work and the new world, and has already made many friends.