



Remarks by Jenina Mella at the General Session of WPA's 30th Annual Home Education Conference on May 4, 2013. [The Conference theme was *Homeschooling With Confidence*.] Published in *WPA Newsletter #116*, June 2013, p. 12.

It feels a bit surreal to be standing here on this stage...I attended my very first WPA Conference in 1997 when my son Luke was 3 years old. Although it's so cliché to say, it seems to me like the years between then and now have passed like a snap of my fingers. I had some trouble getting myself to write these remarks. Considering what to say and writing these words has brought up bittersweet feelings for me—we are in a transition part of our learning journey as a family...What words could I possibly use to discuss a topic which is both so complex and so simple, but which undoubtedly underpins each and every one of our lives as homeschoolers and as people? And how in the world would I find words to explain....

When I entered this assembly the first time to listen to that year's graduates, I came at the insistence of some newly-introduced-to-me veteran homeschool parents from our Madison support group. "You'll understand so much more about homeschooling if you go the graduation," my friend advised me. "Oh, and don't forget to take some tissues," she added as an afterthought. Being a bit of a know-it-all, skeptical type, I thought this last bit sounded like hyperbole, so I ignored it and failed to bring along a packet of tissues.

I arrived at that first-for-me conference, on my own that year, on a sort of fact finding mission. It was critical, I felt at the time, to not freak out my husband any more than I had already managed to by broaching the topic of homeschooling as an educational option for Luke. See, this discussion about homeschooling had worried him (although he was desperately trying not to show his panic), as it went against our prior bargain about how we would manage our family. In the original plan, I was to stay home full time until Luke was five and was enrolled in kindergarten. We had been a perfectly satisfied DINK couple (double income, no kids) before Luke entered our lives, so we looked forward with anticipation to the time when Luke would go to school, and I could return to full time work. So, despite his misgivings, my husband encouraged me in attending that first conference. "Just for information," he said.

I knew right when I arrived in Steven's Point that year, that I had entered a world which felt strange, but so magnetic to me: I saw around me so many smiling children, happy in the company of their families, and was warmly welcomed by everyone I met that day. I caught bits of the interesting conversations taking place all around me. Everyone seemed so joyful and happy to be reuniting with old friends, and eager to generously share all they knew with someone who was just beginning this journey.

It was while listening to that first set of graduation remarks in which I sat weeping openly (and profusely into the back of my shawl) in the last row of that room where I knew almost no one, that I knew that Luke would be standing on this stage, making his own graduation remarks to all of you someday. That was the day when my confidence in homeschooling was formed—and it was born whole. I could perfectly imagine our family standing here just so clearly. I felt it in my gut that I had found the absolutely correct path for all of us—there was such love in the room that day (as there is now), and I felt, rather than heard or saw, these parents' commitment and genuine solicitude for their children's well-being. In my mind and heart, the decision that Luke would be raised close to us and without conventional school was made, even if my husband didn't know it at the time...

Because I am the kind of person who thinks with their gut, it's sometimes difficult for me to understand the basis for my own decisions until they are actually made... Mostly, I do the thing, and then search for the rational arguments which support my action. So, it's difficult for me to tease out with complete clarity what I know about confidence... I just seem to know clearly when I am and when I'm not confident. So these remarks got me thinking about the question:

Where does confidence come from?

There seem to be many of us in our homeschool community who doubt ourselves and our ability to be successful as homeschoolers—I know this because I've often been part of conversations with people in our community who to seem to struggle with lingering and recurring doubts about our ability to raise healthy, happy, and accomplished kids who can get along in this world. I am always saddened by this, primarily because when we worry we lose a little more of our precious life, which could be devoted to a more productive and joyful activity. In my experience, misdirected concerns erode confidence rather than bolster it.

For what it's worth, here's what I think I've learned about the subject of confidence from my years of being a homeschooling parent:

- 1. Confidence is a process—not a destination.** Neither can you get confidence instantly or lose it forever. It changes with our attitudes, moods, and experiences. Because it's open-ended, it gives us hope that we still have the chance to change future outcomes. When you're not feeling confident, act like you are until you do (within reason, of course). Confidence, by its nature, is always shifting to find a new balance based on new information and experiences. Finding role models for yourself will help you to do this by fueling your imagination about what is possible.
- 2. Confidence requires trust.** It's the sense that not all factors in life lie in our direct control, and that's alright.
- 3. Confidence is something which can be learned and reinforced by conscious choices,** i.e., choosing to stay away from people who will actively seek to undermine you will help you create a safe space where your family can thrive without being intruded upon.

4. **Confidence comes from practice—it's our habits which form our outcomes.** Knowing yourself is the key to this...It helps you to refine your choices.
5. **Confidence is a loop between you and your children, fed by sharing significant experiences—all the love and learning is reflected back between you infinitely.**
6. **Confidence helps you to see your children as they really are—not through the expectations of others.**
7. **Confidence requires courage.** That means that you will feel fear before you feel the resolution in your mind. It's a practice which repeats....

When I regard you all, hearing your excited voices, and seeing the smiles and excitement your children have at being in an event this large full of other kids whose experiences mirror their own, I am immediately filled with a feeling of confidence and inspiration—my heart is full and I feel that anything I can imagine is possible. It's one of the reasons our family continues to support WPA and why we make a point of volunteering for the conference when we're asked—it's here that I first began to understand the creative power which is released into the world from simply believing in ourselves and our children. And, to understand that we each hold that power within ourselves.

Your presence at an event like this represents what is possible when a small group of committed people believe in and support families and children in charting their own paths in learning, even though that road can sometimes feel lonely and unsure. The mere act of coming together bolsters all of us and creates a confidence which spreads in all of us. Thanks to all of you for creating this vibrant community which helps us dare to believe enough to trust in our own instincts.

Thank you! ❖