

Learning by the Seat of Your Soul

Editor's Pick. Written by Allen and Laura Ellis.

After dark on a summer evening, an 8-year-old boy named Allen and his mother sat on the blacktop driveway, which was still warm from the day's sun, drawing with chalk. But they weren't drawing daisies and rainbows and other normal-type pictures—they were doing geometry. Why? Because Allen wanted to know how the odometer on his bicycle worked. Why so late at night? Well, when better to learn than right after the question is asked?

Allen remembers the night as having an exciting quality to it—like being allowed to stay awake to ring in the New Year—and he felt like they were up until midnight measuring the bicycle tires, calculating r^2 and discussing the Pythagorean Theorem. In reality it was probably much less than that, but time warps when you're engaged with something, and even geometry can be exciting to an 8-year-old when it's applied to real life.

Our childhood was filled with such time-warped moments; so much so that it was the norm instead of the exception. You see, my younger brother Allen and I didn't go to school. Our classrooms were chalk on the driveway, the local riding stable, Girl Scouts, museums, beaches, Europe, Australia, caves, libraries, mountains, homemade movies, stage productions, cooking in the kitchen, managing family finances... We were (and are) unschoolers.

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