



## *Restoring Two Generations of Education*

by Leigh Bortins

There once was a cage in a zoo that held four gorillas. In the middle of the cage was a box the gorillas could climb on. Every morning beautifully fresh bananas were hung from a rope that the gorillas could access by climbing the box.

The first gorilla climbed the box. As soon as he was on top, fire hoses came out of the walls and painfully pummeled the creatures. A few minutes later, another gorilla climbed the box, and the same thing happened. The pain was not worth getting the bananas.

After a few days the gorillas mostly figured out that they shouldn't get on the box. If one of the gorillas forgot and started even looking at the bananas, the other gorillas would gang up and beat on him. Eventually, the poor beasts never approached the box or looked at the bananas.

For decades, like the gorillas, excellent teachers who know how to teach have been slowly beaten down by a system that demands they socialize instead of educate children. Students leave school without knowing how to learn or teach, and when they become parents, they are equally unable to give these skills to their children.

### Modeling Mastery

The key to a classical education is modeling. Nothing is expected of the student but to repeat the same thing a million times in a million ways until they are capable of always using that skill or information in any setting and in a way that commands the respect of others. Unfortunately, most students don't really know what they are to master, how to master it, or why they are to master it. Because today's parents were never given the tools of learning, they cannot model them for their children.

Over my twenty-plus years as an active learner, I've realized that I just don't know that much, and I want to know a lot more. I could have been self-satisfied and impressed with my aerospace engineering degree



and made a decent income. The world said I was educated. It lied.

When I decided to home school my boys, I began to prepare myself to teach. I wanted to help them avoid the mistakes I had made. I did everything you can think of to be a good teacher. What I didn't know was that the only thing for which I was preparing was a repeat of the poor education I had received.

I love my boys, and I wanted the best for them, but my "gorillas" taught me lessons that were disconnected from a heritage when American schools were effective. Eventually I realized that my boys' situation, purpose, and personality would dictate how they served the Lord. My job was — and is — to equip them with the tools of learning, but first I had to equip myself.

### Teaching Parents to Teach

For many parents, the secret gift of home-centered education is that we finally receive the education we never had. In *Classical Conversations*, we are reclaiming two generations at once. Parents come to classes and our free Parent Practicums to learn about classical education and they leave with the sense that they can be powerful because I ask two questions.

- 1) Why do you let the state dictate your standards of education? and
- 2) Why would you send your children to the same school system that prepared you to NOT be able to teach Algebra or foreign languages to a child?

As parents wrestle with the answers to these questions, they begin to feel the desire to become what C. S. Lewis called “men with chests,” people whose hearts now attach their brains to their bodies and allow them to become whole. When a person learns to think, fear of the unknown dissipates. Parents replace their former fear of raising children who won’t be able to earn good wages (slavery) with the vision that their students can become adults who learn to master any topic at any time.

## Lifelong Learning

The families in our programs are dedicated learners, signified by their involvement and willingness to give up adult careers and passions to relearn with their children. Imagine what happens when a husband and wife committed to life-long learning discover how to learn anything. Not only do they begin to restore the educational years that were lost to them, but they teach their children to never lose them in the first place.

I was sharing with a headmaster of a classical school, who attended one of my Parent Practicums, that I was bewildered by the exponential growth that Classical Conversations is experiencing. He said, “It’s growing because when people learn to think, they like to do so with other people, so they search out one another.”

That’s the classical model. When you have an idea (the grammar floating in your brain), you like to talk about it and compare it with other thinkers’ ideas. In the process, you repeat the idea over a period of time and create new synapses that can reach the data more quickly. And once you’ve worked through the details with a friend or two, you can more confidently teach the concept to others.

An elementary school guidance counselor asked me what I do for a living. I didn’t know her profession at the time, and I told her I lead hundred of parents through three-day Parent Practicums in Latin and logic and science and other subjects.

When I was finished, she said, “No you don’t,” as if I had just lied to her. Then she said, “I’m a guidance counselor at the elementary school and we can’t get

parents to come for an evening meeting. You can’t possibly get them to come for three days.”

And yet, they do come, and they study subjects like trigonometry and Latin, and most importantly, they become equipped to revolutionize education.

Here are a few comments from an event I held in Houston, TX:

“I arrived terrified and empty, but I leave with knowledge and inspiration.”

“I struggled with feelings of inadequacy, and now I have a confidence level like never before...”

“I feel like running through the streets shouting ‘Eureka!’”

“Know that I will be one to return the knowledge and share with others.”

Who knew that this aerospace engineer would one day be a writer on culture and education? I don’t have a teaching degree. I am just a sinner who falls short of the glory of God, but I know that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and so our family is recovering the lost tools of learning two generations at a time.

*Leigh Bortins is a nationally acclaimed educator, perhaps best known for her ability to demystify the fundamental tools of learning. As a teacher, author and commentator, Leigh is credited with helping to launch the “home-centered learning” education movement. Leigh is the founder and CEO of Classical Conversations Inc., an organization that models the home-centered learning approach to empower learners of all ages.*

