THE *Homeschool* APOSTATES

They were raised to carry the fundamentalist banner forward and redeem America. But now the Joshua Generation is rebelling.

BY KATHRYN JOYCE

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At 10 P.M. on a Sunday night in May, Lauren and John*, a young couple in the Washington, D.C., area, started an emergency 14-hour drive to the state where Lauren grew up in a strict fundamentalist household. Earlier that day, Lauren's younger sister, Jennifer, who had recently graduated from homeschooling high school, had called her in tears: "I need you to get me out of this place." The day, Jennifer said, had started with another fight with her parents, after she declined to sing hymns in church. Her slight speech impediment made her self-conscious about singing in public, but to her parents, her refusal to sing or recite scripture was more evidence that she wasn't saved. It didn't help that she was a vegan animal-rights enthusiast.

**Lauren, John, and Jennifer requested that their real names not be used in this story.*

After the family returned home from church, Jennifer's parents discovered that she had recently been posting about animal rights on Facebook, which they had forbidden. They took away Jennifer's graduation presents and computer, she told Lauren. More disturbing, they said that if she didn't eat meat for dinner she'd wake up to find one of the pets she babied gone.

To most people, it would have sounded like overreaction

Hännah Ettinger, who now blogs about leaving fundamentalism, at 16, just before cutting her hair short against her mother's wishes.

to innocuous forms of teenage rebellion. But Lauren, who'd cut ties with her family the previous year, knew it was more. The sisters grew up, with two brothers, in a family that was almost completely isolated, they say, held captive by their mother's extreme anxiety and explosive anger. "I was basically raised by someone with a mental disorder and told you have to obey her or God's going to send you to hell," Lauren says. "Her anxiety disorder meant that she had to control every little thing, and homeschooling and her religious beliefs gave her the justification for it."

It hadn't started that way. Her parents began homeschooling Lauren when she struggled to learn to read in the first grade. They were Christians, but not devout. Soon, though, the choice to homeschool morphed into rigid fundamentalism. The sisters were forbidden to wear clothes that might "shame" their father or brothers. Disobedience wasn't just bad behavior but a sin against God. Both parents spanked the children with a belt. Her mother, Jennifer says, hit her for small things, like dawdling while trying on clothes.

The family's isolation made it worse. The children couldn't date—that was a given—but they also weren't allowed to develop friendships. Between ages 10 and 12, Lauren says she only got to see friends once a week at Sunday school, increasing to twice a week in her teens when her parents let her participate in mock trial court, a popular activity for Christian homeschoolers. Their parents wanted them naïve and sheltered, Lauren says: "18 going on 12."

Mixed with the control was a lack of academic supervision. Lauren says she didn't have a teacher after she was 11; her parents handed her textbooks at the start of a semester and checked her work a few months later. She graded herself, she says, and rarely wrote papers. Nevertheless, Lauren was offered a full-ride scholarship to Patrick Henry College in Virginia, which was founded in 2000 as a destination for fundamentalist homeschoolers. At first her parents refused to let her matriculate, insisting that she spend another year with the family. During that year, Lauren got her first job, but her parents limited the number of hours she could work.

Even conservative Patrick Henry felt like a bright new reality. While much about the college confirmed the worldview Lauren grew up in, small freedoms like going out for an unplanned coffee came as a revelation. She describes it as "a sudden sense of being able to say yes to things, when your entire life is no."

Family ties began to fray after she met John, a fellow student who'd had a more positive homeschooling experience growing up; he took her swing dancing and taught her how to order at Starbucks, and they fell in love. Her parents tried to break the couple up—at one point even asking the college to expel Lauren or take away her scholarship for disobeying them. Their efforts backfired; soon after her graduation, Lauren married John and entered law school.

For Jennifer, matters grew worse in the six years after Lauren left home. She rarely went out on her own except to walk the dog or attend a co-op class taught by other homeschooling parents. When she would ask to go to a friend's house, she says, her mother would begin to cry; after a while, Jennifer stopped asking. She never had a key to the house. Tensions escalated after she went vegan at 16. Animal-rights activists were communists and terrorists, her parents told her, and the Bible said she should eat meat.

By the time Jennifer made her call in May, Lauren and John had discussed that she might eventually have to come live with them. Jennifer wasn't often able to phone her older sister, because their parents closely monitored cell use. But Jennifer kept a secret e-mail account, which she used to write to Lauren. After the fight that Sunday, she hid her phone as her parents were confiscating her computer,

PHOTO COURTESY HANNAH ETTINGER; FRAME: ZAKHAROV EVGENLY / FOTOLIA

then sneaked an SOS call. Lauren phoned around their hometown, trying to find family friends to take in Jennifer and her pets. She asked the family pastor to check on her sister. But the friends seemed scared to intervene, and the pastor refused, saying he didn't believe Lauren because she was estranged from her parents. So the couple started driving, switching off through the night, to meet Jennifer after her co-op class the next day. "I wasn't even sure she still had the resolve to go through with it," Lauren says, "but we thought, even if she doesn't want to leave, she still needs to know that her big sister is going to drive 14 hours for her if it gets to that point."

Jennifer was ready, though. The plan was to gather her things while their mother was out shopping and their father was at work. Instead, their mother pulled into the driveway while the sisters were loading Jennifer's dog into the car. As their mother lunged for Jennifer, Lauren says she tried to stop her by grabbing her in a bear hug. Her mother wrestled free, slapped Lauren hard in the face, screaming that she was trying to kidnap Jennifer and destroy the family. She pulled the dog away from the girls so hard that Jennifer feared he would choke. Lauren called the police, and her mother summoned her father home.

"I was so scared I had a hard time breathing," Jennifer says. Her father told police that John had brainwashed Lauren and that Jennifer had "the mind of a 12-year-old" and was too immature to be trusted. Because she was an adult, however, the police allowed her to leave—but only with some clothes and toiletries, which she piled into trash bags as her father trailed her through the house, yelling. The rest of Jennifer's stuff—her computer and her pets—had to be left behind, since she had no proof of ownership to show the officers.

On the long ride back, Lauren and Jennifer were stunned by what they'd done. They tried to think about pragmatics: What now? How would they handle college applications without parental involvement or get Jennifer insured or find her a job? Lauren called extended family members, trying to stay ahead of the story their parents would tell. She and Jennifer didn't want to lose everybody. "I was on the phone for hours," she says, trying to explain to relatives who hadn't witnessed the family's abusive dynamics and had a hard time believing her—especially after years of hearing how Lauren had been corrupted by her husband and turned her back on her family.

"Children in these situations are taught that if you talk badly about your parents, that's a sin, and you're going to hell," Lauren says. "So when they finally get the courage and determination to say something, no one believes them, because they didn't say anything all those years. You end up having to find an entirely new support network of people who actually believe you."

IN WASHINGTON, THAT NEW SUPPORT network immediately kicked in. Through an informal group of young women who broke away from fundamentalist families, Lauren had become friends with Hännah Ettinger, who writes "Wine and Marble," a blog about transitioning out of fundamentalist culture. When Lauren told her the story of Jennifer's rescue, Ettinger posted a brief account. She asked readers to chip in to defray Jennifer's costs of starting over: buying a computer, acquiring normal clothes, applying for community college. Within the first day, the blog's readers donated almost $500. Then a new website, run by another former homeschooler, linked to Ettinger's appeal, and within a few days, close to $11,000 had been donated.

It was a surprise, but it was hardly a fluke. Jennifer's rescue coincided with the emergence of a coalition of young former fundamentalists who are coming out publicly, telling their stories, and challenging the Christian homeschooling movement. The website that linked to Jennifer's story was Homeschoolers Anonymous, launched in March by two homeschool graduates, Ryan Stollar and Nicholas Ducote. Their goal was to show what goes on behind closed doors in some Christian homeschooling families—to share, as one blogger puts it, "the stories we were never allowed to talk about as children."

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As of October, Homeschoolers Anonymous had published nearly 200 personal accounts and attracted more than 600,000 page views. For those outside the homeschooling movement, and for many inside it, the stories are revelatory and often shocking. The milder ones detail the haphazard education received from parents who, with little state oversight, prioritize obedience and religious training over learning. Some focus on women living under strict patriarchal regimes. Others chronicle appalling abuse that lasted for years.

Growing up in California and Oregon, Stollar wasn't abused, but he met many other homeschoolers who were. His parents led state homeschooling associations and started a debate club in San Jose. The emphasis on debate in fundamentalist homeschooling was the brainchild of Michael Farris, the founder of Patrick Henry College,

and his daughter Christy Shipe. Farris believed debate competitions would create a new generation of culture warriors with the skills to "engage the culture for Christ." "You teach the kids what to think, you keep them isolated from everyone else, you give them the right answers, and you keep them pure," Stollar explains. "And now you train them how to argue and speak publicly, so they can go out to do what they're supposed to do"—spread the faith and promote God's patriarchy.

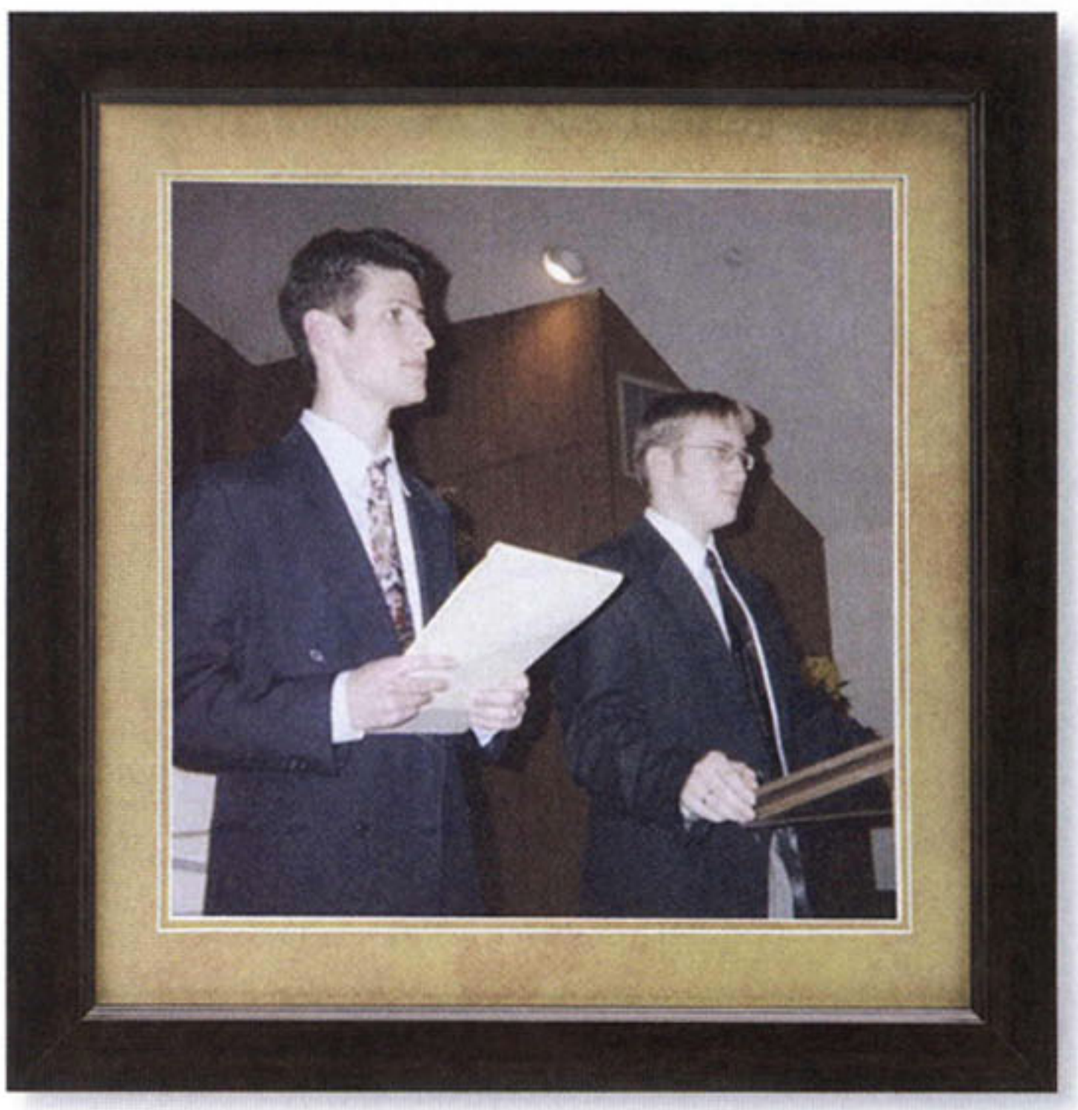
As a teenager, Stollar toured the national homeschool debate circuit with a group called Communicators for Christ, sharpening his rhetorical skills and giving speech tutorials. Along the way, he found himself increasingly disturbed by what he saw. He met families that follow the concept of "Quiverfull," wherein women are submissive to men and forgo contraception to have as many children as God gives them. He encountered entire communities where women wore only denim jumpers for modesty's sake, where parents burned their daughters' birth certificates to keep them at home, where teenagers practiced "betrothal," a kind of arranged marriage. He met homeschooling kids who dealt with the stress by cutting themselves, drinking, or developing eating disorders—the very terrors their parents had fled the public schools to avoid. "Even as a conservative Christian homeschooler," Stollar says, "I was constantly experiencing culture shock."

A decade later, Stollar, who lives in Los Angeles, was still hearing the stories from his peers. The ex-debaters and homeschoolers were now grappling with the fallout from their childhoods: depression, mental illness, substance abuse. "I was starting to see these patterns emerging," he says, "and we all felt that they came from the same places." Homeschoolers Anonymous was inspired by a woman who fled her Quiverfull parents and published an essay online, appealing for financial aid so she could go to college and then establish a safe house for refugees like herself. When her appeal went viral, Stollar and his friends decided to create an outlet for more such stories. Around 40 homeschooling alumni planned the site together on a secret Facebook group.

The timing was propitious. For several years, mothers and daughters who had escaped from Quiverfull families had blogged about their experiences and organized to help others get out on sites like No Longer Quivering. "Survivor" blogs written by former fundamentalists were also proliferating online. The bloggers doubtless inspired one another, but an additional factor was at work: Children from the first great wave of Christian homeschooling, in the 1980s and 1990s, were coming of age, and many were questioning the way they were raised.

Homeschooling leaders had dubbed them the "Joshua Generation." Just as Joshua completed Moses's mission by slaughtering the inhabitants of the Promised Land, "GenJ" would carry the fundamentalist banner forward and redeem America as a Christian nation. But now, instead, the children were revolting.

HOMESCHOOLING DIDN'T BEGIN as a fundamentalist movement. In the 1960s, liberal author and educator John Holt advocated a child-directed form of learning that became "unschooling"—homeschooling without a fixed curriculum. The concept was picked up in the 1970s by education researcher Raymond Moore, a Seventh-Day Adventist, who argued that schooling children too early—before fourth grade—was developmentally harmful. Moore's message came at a time when many conservative Christians were looking for alternatives to public schools.



Traveling the national homeschool debate circuit, Ryan Stollar (right) says, taught him to "look at different sides of an issue." Here, at 16, he debates a family friend.

Moore's work reached a massive audience when Focus on the Family founder and Christian parenting icon James Dobson invited him onto his radio show for the first time in 1982. Dobson would become the most persuasive champion of homeschooling, encouraging followers to withdraw their children from public schools to escape a "godless and immoral curriculum." For conservative Christian parents, endorsements didn't come any stronger than that.

Over the next two decades, homeschooling boomed. Today, perhaps as many as two million children are homeschooled. (An accurate count is difficult to conduct, because many homeschoolers are not required to register with their states.) Homeschooling families come from varied backgrounds—there are secular liberals as well as Christians,

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along with an increasing number of Muslims and African Americans—but researchers estimate that between two-thirds and three-fourths are fundamentalists.

Among Moore and Dobson's listeners during that landmark broadcast was a pair of young lawyers, Michael Farris and Michael Smith, who the following year would found the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). With Moore's imprimatur and Dobson's backing, Farris and Smith started out defending homeschooling families at a time when the practice was effectively illegal in 30 states. As Christians withdrew their children from public school, often without requesting permission, truancy charges resulted. The HSLDA used them as test cases, challenging school districts and state laws in court while lobbying state legislators to establish a legal right to homeschool. By 1993, just ten years after the association's founding, homeschooling was legal in all 50 states.

What many lawmakers and parents failed to recognize were the extremist roots of fundamentalist homeschooling. The movement's other patriarch was R.J. Rushdoony, founder of the radical theology of Christian Reconstructionism, which aims to turn the United States into an Old Testament theocracy, complete with stonings for children who strike their parents. Rushdoony, who argued that democracy was "heresy" and Southern slavery was "benevolent," was too extreme for most conservative Christians, but he inspired a generation of religious-right leaders including Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson. He also provided expert testimony in early cases brought by the HSLDA. Rushdoony saw homeschooling as not just providing the biblical model for education but also a way to bleed the secular state dry.

Fundamentalist parents believed they had a recipe for raising kids who would never rebel and would faithfully perpetuate their parents' values into future generations.

With support from national leaders, Christian homeschoolers established state-level groups across the country and took over the infrastructure of the movement. Today, when parents indicate an interest in homeschooling, they find themselves on the mailing lists of fundamentalist catalogs. When they go to state homeschooling conventions to browse curriculum options, they hear keynote speeches about biblical gender roles and creationism and find that textbooks are sold alongside ideological manifestos on modest dressing, proper Christian "courtship," and the concept of "stay-at-home daughters" who forsake college to remain with their families until marriage.

HSLDA is now one of the most powerful Christian-right groups in the country, with nearly 85,000 dues-paying members who send annual checks of $120. The group publicizes a steady stream of stories about persecuted homeschoolers and distributes tip sheets about what to do if social workers come knocking. Thanks to the group's lawsuits and lobbying, though, that doesn't happen often. Homeschooling now exists in a virtual legal void; parents have near-total authority over what their children learn and how they are disciplined. Not only are parents in 26 states not required to have their children tested but in 11 states, they don't have to inform local schools when they're withdrawing them. The states that require testing and registration often offer religious exemptions.

The emphasis on discipline has given rise to a cottage industry promoting harsh parenting techniques as godly. Books like *To Train Up a Child* by Michael and Debi Pearl promise that parents can snuff out rebellious behavior with a spanking regimen that starts when infants are a few months old. The Pearls claim to have sold nearly 700,000 copies of their book, most through bulk orders from church and homeschooling groups. The combination of those disciplinary techniques with unregulated homeschooling has spawned a growing number of horror stories now being circulated by the ex-homeschoolers—including that of Calista Springer, a 16-year-old in Michigan who died in a house fire while tied to her bed after her parents removed her from public school, or Hana Williams, an Ethiopian adoptee whose Washington state parents were convicted in September of killing her with starvation and abuse in a Pearl-style system. Materials from HSLDA were found in the home of Williams's parents.

Homeschooling leaders argue that child abuse is no more prevalent in homeschooling families than in those that enroll their kids in public school, and they push back against even modest attempts at oversight. In 2013, HSLDA lobbied against a proposed Pennsylvania bill that would have required a short period of oversight for parents who decide to homeschool and already have substantiated abuse claims against them—in essence defending the right of abusive parents to homeschool without supervision. The group is currently challenging state laws that allow anonymous tips to Child Protective Services to be grounds for investigating parents. In June, the HSLDA–authored Parental Rights Amendment was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives with 64 co-sponsors. The amendment would enshrine in the Constitution parents' "fundamental right" to direct their child's upbringing however they see fit, free of state interference.

TO THE PARENTS AND THE movement that brought them up, the ex-homeschoolers know they must seem not just disappointing but unfathomable. Their parents believed they had a recipe for raising kids who would never rebel and would faithfully perpetuate their parents' values into future generations. But the ex-homeschoolers say that it was being trained as world-changers that led them to question what they were taught—and ultimately led them to leave.

"I grew up hearing that we were the Joshua Generation," says Rachel Coleman, a 26-year-old leader in the ex-homeschooler movement. "We were the shock troops, the best trained and equipped, the ones who were to make a difference in the fight—a fight between God and Satan for the soul of America." Coleman, who co-founded the watchdog site Homeschooling's Invisible Children, is writing a doctoral dissertation at Indiana University about children and the rise of the Christian right in the 1970s and 1980s. Her parents, she says, told her and her 11 siblings that they hadn't become missionaries themselves because "they're raising up the 12 of us to go be pastors, missionaries, and politicians. They're changing the world through these kids."

When he addresses incoming students at Patrick Henry, Michael Farris likes to dream aloud of the day when the president of the United States and the Oscar winner for best picture are homeschooling graduates who roomed together at the college. That would be a sign that fundamentalist homeschooling was, in the movement's lingo, "winning the culture." Youth civics ministries like TeenPact, which hosts training camps for homeschoolers to mingle with lobbyists and write sample legislation, encourage homeschoolers to "change America for Christ." HSLDA's youth-activism group, Generation Joshua, works on voter-registration drives, lobbies at state legislatures, and door-knocks for conservative candidates. As Farris told *The New York Times*, "If we put enough kids in the farm system, some may get to the major leagues."

For Ryan Stollar and many other ex-homeschoolers, debate club changed everything. The lessons in critical thinking, he says, undermined Farris's dream of creating thousands of eloquent new advocates for the homeschooling cause. "You can't do debate unless you teach people how to look at different sides of an issue, to research all the different arguments that could be made for and against something," Stollar says. "And so all of a sudden, debate as a way to create culture-war soldiers backfires. They go into this being well trained, they start questioning something neutral like energy policy, but it doesn't stop there. They start questioning everything."

Many women leaders in the ex-homeschool movement had fewer opportunities than men to join debate clubs or political groups like Generation Joshua. They developed their organizing skills in a different way, by finding power in the competence they gained as "junior moms" to large families. "All of these girls who are the oldest of eight, nine, ten children—we are organizational geniuses," Coleman says. "We know how to get things done. We know how to influence people. Put any of us in a room with other people for 45 minutes, and they're all working for us. That's just what we do."

Like other homeschooling daughters, Coleman assumed outsize responsibility as a teenager not only for household chores but for teaching and disciplining her younger siblings. Her initially mainstream evangelical parents moved

Rachel Coleman, at 15, holds her family's ninth child. "All of these girls who are the oldest of eight, nine, ten children—we are organizational geniuses," she says.

right as they homeschooled, adopting ideas like young-earth creationism and patriarchal rights. They made it clear that Coleman, like their other daughters, was to stay under her father's authority until she married a man of whom he approved. Her parents became activists, too, joining the steering committee of their local homeschooling group. Coleman's mother was charged with sending out the "welcome packet" to new homeschooling families, suggesting reading materials and movement magazines. When other mothers came to watch her homeschool, she'd give them a copy of *To Train Up a Child*.

Like most homeschoolers, Coleman believed that her family was an anomaly. But in 2009—after she'd gone to college, married, and broken away—she came across No Longer Quivering. The site was aimed at Quiverfull mothers, but it had already sparked a number of "daughter

PHOTO COURTESY RACHEL COLEMAN; FRAME: HOMYDESIGN / FOTOLIA

blogs." For Coleman, it was the first time she'd seen people critically discussing the kind of culture in which she'd grown up. "You were never allowed to say anything negative about homeschooling," she says. "You were never allowed to speak really, truly honestly, and even if you did, your own sphere of what you've seen is so limited that you can't speak outside of that." Soon Coleman was connecting with other Quiverfull exiles and working to

After she left her isolated New Orleans family, Heather Doney, who co-founded Homeschooling's Invisible Children with Coleman, realized that "mainstream America is not my culture."

inspire young women to, as she puts it, "pick freedom."

Thanks largely to sites like No Longer Quivering and Homeschoolers Anonymous, a critical mass of homeschoolers and Quiverfull daughters now know that their families aren't unique and that they aren't alone in questioning the certainties with which they were raised. But when they take the next step and reject those certainties, they leave behind an all-encompassing culture: not only their families and their faith but the black-and-white moral code that guided all their choices. "When you're raised in this lifestyle," says Elizabeth Esther, author of a forthcoming memoir about leaving fundamentalism, *Girl at the End of the World*, "everything from politics and religion to your tone of voice, the clothing you wear, even how you open and shut doors—everything is based on doing it in a manner that was pleasing to God.

"I had never really lived in the real world. I didn't understand how Americans thought. All my language was religious language. I didn't know how to interact with people without trying to convert them. I had a lot of really discouraging experiences where I realized that you could leave fundamentalism, but at the end of the day fundamentalism was still inside of me."

Nothing easily fills the void. Esther found pop culture vapid and alienating and atheism bleak, a common experience for former fundamentalists. But when she tried going to different evangelical churches, she suffered panic attacks; it was too familiar and seemed to confirm her greatest fear: "I truly believed that leaving my family was tantamount to leaving God." Esther ultimately found a home in Catholicism, which to her was appealingly mysterious and impersonal, a more comfortable way to practice her faith. But she still struggles with the perplexing transition from her family to the mainstream.

The closest parallel to transitioning from strict fundamentalist families to mainstream society may be an immigrant experience: acclimating to a new country with inexplicable customs and an unfamiliar language. "Mainstream American culture is not my culture," says Heather Doney, who co-founded Homeschooling's Invisible Children with Coleman. Doney, who grew up in an impoverished Quiverfull family in New Orleans, felt for years that she was living "between worlds," never sure if her words or behavior were appropriate for her old life or her new one. She didn't understand what topics of discussion were considered off-limits or when staring at someone might be disconcerting. She couldn't make small talk, wore "oddly mismatched clothes," and was lost amid pop-culture references to the Muppets or *The Breakfast Club*. When college friends talked about oral sex, she thought they meant French-kissing.

More than a decade later, Doney still finds herself resorting to a standard joke—"Sorry, I live under a rock"—when people are taken aback by her. "It's a lot easier to say that," she says, "than to explain that I was raised hearing that you'd be allowing demonic influences into your house if you watched *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. I feel like an expat from a subculture that I can never go home to, living in one that is still not fully mine."

In the past, those who left Quiverfull and homeschooling families had to look for help through an informal grapevine of survivors. Now the young rebels are using their organizing skills to build a full-scale online network. They share stories and connect on sites like Homeschoolers Anonymous and No Longer Quivering. They strategize about how to combat the homeschooling establishment on the Protect Homeschooled Children Working Group; offer practical and moral support through the Quiverfull Sorority of Survivors; and collect data on abuse cases at Homeschooling's Invisible Children. Through a group provisionally called Ruthslist, they're organizing safe houses and compiling a "Quiverfull daughter escape guide."

PHOTO COURTESY HEATHER DONEY; FRAME: PAXI / FOTOLIA

They're finding a new sense of purpose to replace the one they were once assigned by their parents, always motivated—sometimes haunted—by the thought of the siblings left back home and the old friends who are "still in."

IN MAY, TWO MONTHS AFTER the launch of Homeschoolers Anonymous, the ex-homeschoolers declared their first social-media war. Homeschool alumni converged on the Facebook page of the Home School Legal Defense Association, challenging what they see as the group's record of defending abusive parents, covering up evidence of abuse, and lobbying for laws that remove state oversight of children's education and well-being. A lengthy back-and-forth ensued as homeschool parents clashed with homeschool graduates. The debate has begun to shake the foundations of fundamentalist homeschooling.

Some homeschooling leaders have reacted just as the ex-homeschoolers expected—by suggesting that parents further tighten the reins. Kevin Swanson of the Christian Home Educators of Colorado warned listeners of his podcast, *Generations with Vision*, about "apostate homeschoolers" who were organizing online. Swanson, who helped bring debate clubs to Colorado, said he'd seen a "significant majority" of debate alumni turn out wrong, becoming "prima donnas" and "big shots." "I'm not saying it's wrong to do speech/debate," Swanson told his listeners, "but I will say that some of the speech/debate can encourage sort of this proud, arrogant approach and an autonomous approach to philosophy—that truth is relative."

For the ex-homeschoolers, defensive reactions are better than no reaction. They were surprised, however, when for the first time, the HSLDA felt forced to respond. In July, the organization posted a new page about homeschooling and abuse on its website, complete with instructions on how to report suspected child abuse. It was an imperfect set of guidelines, suggesting observers address behaviors with parents before reporting them. But it was a sign of how seriously the homeschooling establishment is taking the upstart challenge. Another sign: In October, HSLDA President Michael Smith contacted Rachel Coleman to request a meeting to discuss the ex-homeschoolers' concerns.

Darren Jones, a staff attorney for HSLDA, declined a telephone interview for this story but responded by e-mail. The stories of abuse shared on Homeschoolers Anonymous dismay and sicken him, Jones wrote, but need to be seen in a broader perspective. "Some of the grievances I am reading now against homeschooling seem to be merely differences of philosophy in child-rearing," he wrote, "similar to the reactions that young adults in the 1960s had against their 'square' and too-conservative parents. But I don't say that to discount actual abuse. I have read some of the stories of abuse and neglect from homeschool graduates. These people really suffered, and their stories turn my stomach. I have nothing but sympathy for them—and anger toward those who abused them."

Still, Jones expressed the HSLDA's long-held position that abuse cases are too rare to warrant new regulation. "Although abuse does exist in the homeschooling community," he wrote, "we believe that statistics show that it is much less prevalent than in society at large. This is one of the reasons that we have always opposed, and continue to oppose, expansion of monitoring of homeschoolers."

Willie Deutsch, a Patrick Henry graduate who worked on HSLDA's Parental Rights Amendment campaign, says the leadership is far more worried about the resistance than Jones acknowledges. "When you're focused on protecting the right to homeschool," he says, "it takes a while for it to get on their radar, but I think it's getting on." There's a growing sense among HSLDA staffers, he says, that "if people don't wake up to the problem and continue to double down and defend the movement, we could be in for a lot of trouble down the road. It will be a general black eye."

When they reject the certainties they were raised with, they leave behind an all-encompassing world: not only families and faith but the moral code that guided all their choices.

As their movement spreads, the ex-homeschoolers are developing a reform agenda. Members are teaming on state-by-state research assessments of homeschooling policy, drafting policy papers, and grading the states on how well they protect homeschooled children. Participants jump in with their own expertise: Coleman's academic research, Lauren's legal skills, Doney's and Ryan Stollar's writing and editing skills. The ultimate goal is to build a lobbying counterforce to the HSLDA, challenging its message of parental rights and religious freedom with a voice that has long been absent from discussions of homeschooling: that of children.

When she was growing up, Elizabeth Esther remembers wondering, "Does anyone know what's happening to us, does anyone care?" The question, she says, filled her with a tremendous loneliness that she can sense in the other exiles she's met—and in those who haven't made it out. "I know there are young women and men who, even if they can't tell me, are depending on us to tell the stories, until they get free." ◘