

Zan Tyler

champion for
educational freedom

By Lori Hatcher



*Opposite: Signing of the SCAIHS bill.
From left to right: Mike Townsend,
Rep. Olin Phillips, Dr. Jim Carper,
John Watson, Sen. Warren Giese,
Rep. David Wright, Sen. John
Courson, John Peters. Seated is
Governor Carroll Campbell.*



Zan Tyler is a little lady.

On the outside, that is. Diminutive and soft-spoken, she doesn't fit the profile of a champion, but like David in the biblical account of Israel's battle with the Philistines, Zan Tyler has slain her share of giants in the name of the Lord.

Homeschooling families in South Carolina trace most of the freedoms they now enjoy to the courage and determination of this little lady.

A native South Carolinian, Tyler grew up in Columbia, attended Richland I and 2 schools, and graduated cum laude from Furman University with a degree in Economics and Business Administration. The daughter of John Peters, a USC School of Law graduate and Sybil Peters, a long-time Richland I and 2 school teacher, Tyler was no stranger to the political process. Elected governor of Palmetto Girls State her senior year at Spring Valley High School, she was able to travel South Carolina with Sen. Strom Thurmond during his 1972 election campaign. As a stay-at-home mother of two in the early '80s, Tyler assumed her days of political involvement were behind her.

Tyler and her husband Joe, then a project manager for Policy Management Systems, were typical conscientious parents. Eagerly involved in their first child's education, they were concerned about Ty's frustrating year of kindergarten in a private school. Tyler remembers a friend suggesting they consider homeschooling. At the time, they didn't know anyone who homeschooled. "It was 1984, and we had never even heard the word

'homeschooling.'" In addition, "it was totally unacceptable, whether it was in the church or in the secular community."

Her friend encouraged her to read the book *Homegrown Kids* by Raymond Moore. That book "gave me the courage and vision to homeschool despite overwhelming obstacles," Tyler says. Little did she know how overwhelming those obstacles would be. Tyler soon learned South Carolina had some of the strictest homeschooling policies in the country.

She began the process of homeschooling by filling out an extensive application with her school district. Her application was promptly denied. When she made an appeal to the state superintendent of education, he said, "You realize I can put you in jail for truancy [if you don't put your son in school,] don't you?"

Tyler replied, "You'll just have to put me in jail, then."

Those words began the Tylers' quest to pursue legislative action to reduce the number of restrictions on parents who chose to educate their children at



Zan Tyler





Top left: Tyler was a featured guest on NBC's Today Show with Katy Couric. Above: The Tyler family gathered together for a family photo at Christmas. Left: Gov. David Beasley awarded Tyler the Order of the Palmetto.

introduce him to Tyler, giving her a natural opportunity to talk with him and ask for his support.

Michelle Steyne, homeschooling mother of four, remembers the early days of homeschooling in South Carolina. In 1986, she and her husband Paul, a general contractor, were one of six families that participated in a class action lawsuit against the State of South Carolina. Her family's application to homeschool had been denied because she didn't have a four-year college degree. "Changing the law was the only way we could homeschool," Steyne explains. Likening Tyler to one of Israel's famous Old Testament heroines she says, "I always looked at Zan as our Deborah. She would go to battle and fight for us."

In 1990, the Tylers founded the South Carolina Association of Independent Homeschools (SCAIHS), a group they hoped would become an independent accountability organization for homeschooling families. Membership in SCAIHS would become an alternative to the requirement that homeschooling parents must be approved by their local school districts. Two years later, after a series of court battles, the South Carolina General Assembly passed legislation naming SCAIHS an official approval agency for homeschooling parents. This was the first time in the nation's history a private organization was named in a state statute and given power equal to local school boards in approving and monitoring homeschool programs.

During the next 15 years, Tyler and her family continued to work with the legislature to enable homeschooled students to compete for two of the state's highest scholarships, the LIFE and the Palmetto Fellows. She was honored as the South Carolina Homemaker of the Year in 1987, and in 1998, South Carolina Gov. David Beasley awarded her the Order of the Palmetto, the highest honor a civilian can receive.

Although Tyler's season as a homeschooling parent ended in 2005 with her youngest daughter Lizzy's graduation, she remains active and involved in the support of homeschooling families. As the director of Apologia Press, she is a popular national and international speaker. "I think I have more of a passion for homeschooling now than when I was homeschooling," she states.

home. Some of the most restrictive legislation they would encounter involved limiting the right to homeschool to only those parents who held four-year college degrees and who would use only state-approved curriculum. The legislation would prohibit families from using any type of faith-based educational material. The Tyler family would spend the next eight years fighting for the rights of South Carolina homeschoolers in the legislature, the judicial system, and in the court of public opinion.

In the days before the Internet and cell phones, Tyler would often have to pack up her children, two boys and an infant daughter, to drive to the statehouse just to find out when a meeting was scheduled. She has pictures of news crews cradling Lizzy, her diapered daughter, while she spoke out on matters of policy and legislation. "I never felt like it was me lobbying, and I was leaving my kids behind. They were with me, and it was our family mission. Even my father got involved and became one of homeschooling's most strategic lobbyists."

Often it was her sons who were the greatest advocates for homeschooling. "I remember one time when I was trying especially hard to connect with one certain senator. I really needed his support, but didn't know how I could get to him," Tyler remembers. "We were walking up the stairs of the statehouse, and I looked up to see Ty, my oldest and very gregarious son, having a conversation with the very senator I needed to speak to."

"Have you met my mom?" Ty asked the senator, and proceeded to

"I look at our post-modern world. I look at the demise of the family and the severed relationships between parents and children, and (I) see what a hope homeschooling can be in the midst of that. "Joe and I wanted our children to know God above all else," she explains. "The discipling value of being able to speak the truth of God's Word into all aspects of their lives—including academic subjects—continually drew us to homeschooling."

Homeschooling works well academically," says Tyler "because it employs a tutorial method of teaching. Homeschooling's value and beauty lies in the freedom parents have to create a tailored educational program for each student that takes into account strengths and weaknesses, personal goals, gifts, and learning styles." She emphasizes that the flexibility of homeschooling allows plenty of time for relationships, discipleship, conversation, reflection, service opportunities, church involvement, travel and field trips, mission trips, internships, civic involvement, sports, fine arts, and more.

A staunch supporter of parent-directed education, Tyler is quick to acknowledge that there is no perfect educational choice. "No school is perfect, no teacher is perfect. No parent is perfect. There are gaps in every child's education. If we give our kids the tools to learn, and they know who they are – that they are image-bearers of God – (if) they know what their gifts are, and they have a sense of what their calling is, then (we've) helped equip them to be soldiers for Christ." Tyler believes well-educated young people can bring a Christian worldview to whatever field they choose.

She has watched her own children take their places in venues as different as they are. Ty works in medical device sales. He and his wife Tammy are the parents of two daughters. Her second son, John, is an attorney. He and his wife Christine have chosen to home educate their two sons. Lizzy lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and works as a producer for an NBC affiliate.

One of her greatest blessings, Tyler says, is when her children offer to pray for her. "As we're talking, and they sense that something's wrong, they'll often say to me, 'Well, let's pray about that now.' It brings me back to the time when they were little, and I would say the same thing to them. And now they're saying it to me. It's a gift." **ROC**



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More than two million students were homeschooled in the United States in 2010, according to Dr. Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute. Approximately 20,000 of them live in South Carolina. Most experts agree that homeschooling is increasing in popularity at an extremely high rate; many estimates place the growth rate between 7 and 15 percent per year ("Reaching the Homeschool Market" by Mark Lardas in Tdmonthly magazine, October 2003).

For more information on homeschooling:
The South Carolina Home Educators Association
<http://www.schomeeducatorsassociation.org/>
The South Carolina Association of Independent Home Schools (SCAHS) <http://www.scaihs.org>
The Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling by Debra Bell

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