

UNSCHOOLING IN THE WORLD

by Sandra Dodd

Kinder and More Compassionate

Rippy Dusseldorp Saran lives in the Netherlands, in Leiden, with her husband, Graham, their son Gianluca (born in 2004) and daughter Gisele (2006). Their family started unschooling in 2008. In 2010, they started Leiden Home Learners, an unschooling friendly homeschool group. Now there are a couple of other 'Home Learners' groups around the Netherlands initiated by different homeschooling parents.

Sandra: *Rippy, you're the mom of the most international family I know. You were born and grew up in western Canada, with parents who were born and grew up in northern India. You and your husband, Graham, met while working in Australia, and you moved with him to his home country, the Netherlands, where your children were born.*

Rippy: Yes, we are quite the international family. Graham and I met on an airport shuttle bus in Perth in 1999. Both of us had Australian working holiday visas and for both of us it was our second trip to that beautiful country. We discovered we had a lot in common—we both loved to travel and learn about other cultures, people, languages and traditions. We

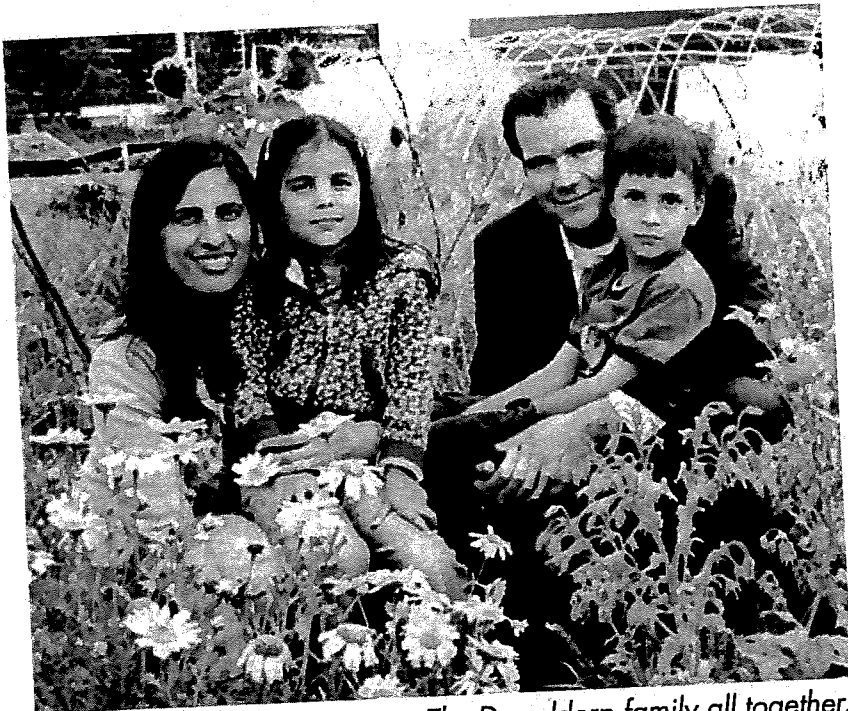
both had not yet visited South America or Antarctica, but had traveled to the other continents. We had studied similar things at university, we cared about similar social issues and we were both thinking of working for the United Nations. I was looking into a UN position in Ghana and Graham was looking into a post-doctorate program in Japan. But then we fell in love and decided we wanted to be together as much as possible. It was a bit tricky in the beginning, but we've only been apart for a handful of weeks in all these years. He's my best friend. We decided to give up on some of our dreams, but only because we came up with newer, better dreams together.

We have two fun and funny children—Gianluca and Gisele. I decided to stop working once Gianluca was born and I spend my days with the children playing, learning, having adventures and discovering the world. Graham works as a Senior Policy Advisor and Peer Coach at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and as a coach with our company, Maple Tree.

Sandra: *Home education isn't as easy to understand, sometimes, in European countries, as it is in North America.*



Photo by Sandra Dodd



The Dusseldorp family all together.

Photo taken by a stranger.

Rippy: I think homeschooling in Canada would be easier. Most people have heard about it and there is a much larger homeschooling population in that country. Things would have probably been easier.

But unschooling in the Netherlands has been great for our family. We have official exemption from the school obligation law. All children in the Netherlands are required to attend school. Basically, the only way you can get exemption is if your children have never been to school and if all the schools within a reasonable distance do not fit your life philosophy. Our city government granted our exemption without any issues, but some of our friends have not been so fortunate. Homeschooling is very rare in the Netherlands. I just saw in the newspaper that for the 2011-12 school year there were 429 homeschooled children in the Netherlands out of a school age population of over 2 million children.

The Netherlands has really interesting activities, programs and places to visit for children. It's nice to go to these places on days when they are not busy. The country is really small with great public transport and we spend a lot of our time exploring new places and visiting old favourites. Graham changed his work contract to have Fridays off and we often go on family trips on this day.

One thing we noticed in our first year of homeschooling was that the children didn't have that many friends to play with during school hours. We started Leiden Home Learners, a weekly home learning group, so the children would have the chance to meet other homeschooling children regularly. Now they know quite a few children well and often have dates around the country to visit them in their homes, at the beach or somewhere else fun and fabulous for children to hang out and play. We try to stay in Leiden on Wednesdays (when elementary children are free in the afternoons) and on weekends because on these

days they can play with friends in the neighbourhood who usually go to school.

The homeschooling community has changed quite a bit in the last 3.5 years since we started. There were fewer meet-ups before, but now sometimes there are three different options to meet within the same day. It's wonderful to have so many options!

If the homeschooling law changes here and makes unschooling too difficult, I imagine we'll move to Canada so we can unschool the children in peace. We would still visit the Netherlands frequently for holidays.



Photo by Graham Dusseldorp

Rippy and the children out for a bike ride together.

Sandra: *The homeschooling conferences you organized in June 2012 and 2013 were fun for me as a speaker and seemed to be enjoyed by your attendees.*

Rippy: I received lots of positive feedback from unschoolers and people curious about unschooling. Many parents found the ideas inspiring and some of them have shared with me that they have become sweeter with their children and it helped them to be better parents. Parents have also told me they love connecting to the other unschoolers around the country and making new friends. This year we had participants from Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Luxemburg and Spain. It was great for parents and children to meet other unschoolers in different European countries.

Sandra: *I imagine your Canadian and Indian connections are big advantages for unschooling.*

Rippy: There are lots of advantages! A big one is that we are free to spend all our time with family and friends when they visit us. My mom usually comes every year for about three months and stays with us most of the time. The children learn lots about our Sikh faith from her, practice speaking Punjabi, hear stories about India, learn how to make different Indian foods and so much more. They love when their Nanima visits! My youngest brother also visits quite regularly and joins the children in all their regular activities. They have different aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends that visit and they would miss out on time with them if they were going to school. I was very close to my cousins when I was growing up and very much part of a big, extended family. I love that they have a chance to be close with their cousins and have a chance to develop close friendships within their extended family,

even though we live in a different continent.

When we go to Canada, we also visit for several weeks and the

children are able

to really get a feeling of what it is like to grow up in Canada. Last time we visited we were there for three months. They love Canada and it's so nice that we're not restricted by school holidays.

Sandra: *You wrote about your Sikh faith on the Always Learning discussion list. Can you tell us a bit about that?*

Rippy: I was responding to something Pam Sorooshian wrote on the list about not knowing of anywhere else outside of a therapeutic relationship where you can get the kind of direct, critical and honest feedback that Always Learning gives. [*"Always Learning" is a Yahoo group*



Photo by Rippy Dusseldorp

Daughter Gisele is seven years old.

founded in 2001 for in-depth discussion of radical unschooling. —ed.]

I grew up going to 'sangat'—small fellowships in the Sikh faith where, in part, people learn about living with kindness and integrity. Sikhism believes that we are all on a path to reunite with the source (God) and for this to happen, you need to become kinder and more compassionate. I was frequently reminded that 'thoughts become words, words become actions, actions become habits, habits become your character and your character becomes your destiny.' For me, Always Learning feels like my fellowship.

This interview was completed while Joyce Fetteroll and I were staying with Rippy at her home in Leiden. I've seen her children in and out with their friends and their dad, showing me their favorite toys and games and interacting with their parents in sweet, loving ways. Rippy and Graham are gentle and kind with one another, too, which creates a warm environment for their children and for guests as well. Rippy lives what she writes, and I'm glad to share a glimpse of her life with you.

To read more by Rippy Dusseldorp Saran, visit her blog, seekingnectar.blogspot.nl, or go to SandraDodd.com/rippy.

Sandra Dodd and her husband, Keith, have three grown and always-unschooled children, the youngest of whom is still at home. Sandra writes about learning every day, and over the past few months has spoken to unschoolers in Minnesota, Portugal, Scotland, the Netherlands and England.

Photo by Graham Dusseldorp



Gianluca is now nine years old.