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Dad gets gift of learning for Father's Day Daughters are given projects that challenge them to grow

YUVAL SHAVIT Special to The Journal

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ITHACA -- This Father's Day, one dad will be getting an unusual gift: the opportunity to give his children summer homework.



KATE SCHLEE/Journal Staff

For the fourth year in a row, Karl Johnson will gather his daughters and tell them what long-term project they are to complete by around Labor Day.

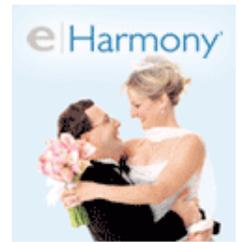
"Father's Day, for me, previously kind of lacked... it wasn't clear what it was all about," Johnson said.

So he decided to turn the day around and use it as a chance to enrich his family. Now, he said, the holiday is "every bit as anticipated as Christmas."

Past projects have included learning to predict thunderstorms, recognizing species of birds and butterflies and memorizing a hundred African-American songs by title and genre.

Johnson said the tasks are meant to be seemingly impossible. The idea, he explained, is to make his children tackle something they

Holding resources from past summer projects on the weather, butterflies, African-American music and American artists, Elizabeth, Christine and Meg, left to right, stand with their father Karl Johnson and their younger sister Sarah Thursday evening in the backyard of their home in Ithaca. Karl Johnson creates summer-long challenges for his daughters that he assigns on Father's Day.



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don't think they can do -- and then revel in having done it.

"Having fun isn't the primary goal. The primary goal is to challenge them."

Still, Johnson's daughters all seem to enjoy the assignments. In fact, only one daughter could remember not liking a project.

Two years ago, Johnson told Meg, now 10, to memorize 20 American paintings from a book he gave her.

"She toted this book everywhere for a week, and she was done in two weeks," he said.

So why didn't Meg enjoy it?

"It was too easy," she said.

Johnson, who works at Cornell Outdoor Education, said he got the idea at a talk COE hosted with outdoor education pioneer Josh Miner.

Miner told of a story in which he was driving home and told his daughters to get out of the car. "Find your own way home," Johnson recalled Miner saying.

Johnson thought it was cruel at first, but soon he realized Miner's point.

"He wanted to challenge them," Johnson said.

And that got him thinking: "I do all this stuff at work ... what does all this have to do with the way in which I raise my children?"

Meg's paintings aside, Johnson strives to think up hard projects. Last year, he gave his daughter Elizabeth, who is now 8, a task that can be daunting even for professionals: Learn how to predict a thunderstorm.

He taught her what makes a storm tick and had her keep a log of temperature, barometric pressure, cloud cover and precipitation three times a day.

"One day," Johnson recalled, "she called me at work in August and said, 'there's going to be a thunderstorm.'"

Later that day, while she was at the pool, the thunderstorm rolled in as predicted.

"Everyone was complaining, and my daughter was jumping up and down with joy," Johnson said.

Although the focus is on the children, the whole family gets involved in the projects. The children all know each others' projects and learn from one another, and Johnson said he and his wife Julie learn a lot, too.

Take, for instance, the task that Christine, now 6, had last year.

"I had to get 10 cocoons and grow them into butterflies," Christine explained. She also had to learn to identify several species of butterflies by studying them from a book.

As she showed off her book a year later and flipped to a random page, the family all gathered around, trying to remember if the butterfly pictured was an American Lady or Painted Lady.

Julie, who home schools the children, said her husband came up with the idea himself, but she completely supports it.

"I think it's a really neat way for him to interact with their lives and take interest in what they're learning," she said. "Historically, dads haven't been as involved in their children's lives as they are now."

Still, it is perhaps a bit non-traditional that the father in the family is the only person giving things out on Father's Day. So last year, near the end of the summer, Meg got an idea.

"I had nothing to do one night, and my challenge was done, so I thought of one for dad," she said.

His task: Write a book or movie review and get it published. It was a difficult task, Johnson recalled, but he said that it wouldn't be fair for him to give his daughters hard tasks but not accept them himself.

Last January, he published a review of the move "Fight Club" in Gilbert Magazine.

Although the tasks are usually kept secret until Father's Day, Johnson agreed this year to spill the beans a day early.

The family's youngest daughter Sarah, 3, will get her first task ever this year: memorize a few short poems.

Christine will have to learn 50 folk songs -- ranging from prison songs to Bob Dylan -- by title.

Elizabeth will have to learn "the tricks of a clown," including juggling, balloon animal making and riding a unicycle.

And Meg, the eldest, will have to make a home video.

The family's youngest member, David, 2, will still have to wait a little before he's initiated in the family tradition.

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