

A stack of several books is shown against a textured, light-colored background. The top book is open, with its pages fanned out. A small green object is tucked between the pages of the open book. The text is overlaid on a dark grey rectangular area in the center of the image.

**Mom Homeschools Son
After Public School
Brands Him
"Handicapped", Now She
Runs Her Own School**

**Exclusive Epoch Times Article
<https://theepochtimes.com>**

Mom Homeschools Son After Public School Brands Him 'Handicapped'; Now She Runs Her Own School

A mother whose son was deemed “mentally handicapped” for not thriving under a rigid public [school](#) curriculum took matters into her own hands. She decided to [homeschool](#) him, and after finding a method that helped her son become his best self, she opened her own school to help others.



Barbara with her kids, Damon, 7, Michael, 10 months, Adam, 1, Morgan, 3. Photo taken a few weeks after Hurricane Andrew. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

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Ohio-born Barbara Rivera, 58, has lived in Miami for the past 40 years. She has three sons and one daughter, whom she raised alone: Damon, now 37, Morgan, 35, Adam, 32, and Michael, 31. She unofficially adopted a fifth child, Thor, when a friend received a devastating medical diagnosis and requested Barbara to take her son in.

'School Changed Him'

In 1991, Barbara's eldest, Damon, who was fluent in English and Spanish, was excited to start first grade.

"However, just two weeks into the school year, his teacher told me, 'Damon is mentally handicapped, cannot read, and will require medication to learn,'" Barbara told The Epoch Times. "I was told that he confused the letters 'b, d, p, and q' and the numbers '6 and 9.'

"I was told this confusion of letters and numbers was a sign of a learning/mental disability. I disagreed. I argued that the said numbers and letters look similar and my son was only on his second week of school. The 'diagnosis' seemed unfair and illogical," she added.

But Barbara had faith in her son's ability, believing that with practice, he would eventually get it, and thus was not concerned. However, his teacher pressed for a medical evaluation.

"I let her know that if anyone so much as spoke to my son without my consent, I'd sue," said Barbara. "I was not having Damon evaluated, ever! I was not putting Damon on mind-altering medication, ever!"

Damon, according to his mother, was honest, well-behaved, and one of the calmest children she had ever known. He wanted to grow up to be a policeman and play basketball for the NBA, which Barbara supported wholeheartedly.

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Damon as a child. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

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Barbara felt the claim that her son was handicapped was “a slap in the face to parents of children who actually are disabled,” as he was gifted with speech, sight, and hearing abilities.

Barbara began looking closely at Damon’s public school learning materials. She was shocked to discover that his “phonics” reading pack was not based on actual phonics at all.

“My son was expected to read stories and write answers to questions before he mastered the alphabet and the individual sounds each letter or letter combination represented,” she explained.

She noticed that in his first month of school, Damon’s first-grade homework was a three-hour nightly chore. Instead of playing with his siblings, Damon “sat blank-faced at the table,” staring at work he couldn’t do. Barbara began returning Damon’s assignments to his teacher, unfinished. She’d write: “Damon cannot read this so I had him work on alphabet sounds, or we did a round of flash cards.”

“I was shocked that the only solution offered to me for Damon was an evaluation and medication,” she said. “Tutoring, flash cards, or making letters in Playdoh were not even mentioned. The teacher, principal, and school system firmly believed that my bilingual, well-behaved son was unreachable and unteachable.”

This had a huge impact on Damon.

“[He] learned one thing in first grade: he ‘learned’ he was stupid,” she lamented. “His love for coloring disappeared, as, if he colored out of line, even slightly, he would give up. His love of wearing a cape and zipping around the house disappeared.

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"Once, I asked him to bring me the diaper bag for his baby brother, and he responded, 'I hope I don't mess this up.' School changed him."

Barbara believes she inherited a drive to survive from her Pilgrim ancestor John Howland, "the man who fell off the Mayflower and, by the grace of God, caught a rope and climbed back on." One of five siblings, her father was an artist, another trait that she inherited.

Always a straight-A student in school, Barbara never struggled with her own studies. As a fourth-grader, she learned about the deaf-blind author and advocate Helen Keller, and was forever impacted.

"I could not, for the life of me, believe that after all of her challenges, Helen Keller went on to graduate college with honors," she recalled. "I firmly believed that if Helen Keller could overcome her very real, very horrific challenges, my son could learn, too."

Barbara always knew she wanted a large family whom she would help raise, along with wanting to paint. But when Damon began struggling at school, her priorities became clear; "art took a backseat to saving my son," she said.

She hesitated to homeschool at first. With two toddlers, and due to deliver her fourth baby, she didn't see how she could give Damon the attention he deserved, so she decided to keep Damon in public school for the remainder of first grade.

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"Looking back, this is one of the worst decisions I have ever made," she reflected. "He was not happy. He was not learning. He was being told on a daily basis he could not learn. I feel like I left my son in a burning building. Shortly after my youngest was born, I was looking around my tiny apartment, and on the verge of tears ... I realized I could raise my responsibility, take my creativity beyond a paintbrush, and could 'create' a structured, organized school in my home."

And that is just what I did," she added



H.E.L.P. Miami high school graduate and artist posing with students in front of a Christmas mural they painted on school windows. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

At the end of first grade, Barbara decided that Damon would not be returning to school in the fall. She wanted to homeschool him, her 4-year-old daughter, and even extended her services beyond the home to make it available to friends, only accepting children for kindergarten and second grade.

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Journey of Homeschooling

Homeschooling, she said, gives a parent complete control over the information their child receives, and allows the child to pursue their individual interests. Structuring lessons around set waking and bedtimes, chores, bathing, and reading, Barbara crafted the perfect schedule.

Her idea of “classes” is dynamic.

“My success as a home-schooler can be credited to the book Learning How to Learn which is based on the educational discoveries by L. Ron Hubbard. The LHTL emphasizes the importance of knowing definitions of words and being to actually use or apply the materials being studied. I incorporated this method into my daily lessons,” she explained. “For example, when learning about fractions, after students can define the word ‘fraction,’ I’d have them bake a cake, measuring ingredients on their own, or cut small paper pizzas in halves, quarters, and so on.”



Easter egg hunt for 400 foster children cosponsored by H.E.L.P. Miami and the Udonis Haslem Foundation. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

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While Barbara's other children thrived in homeschooling, Damon took longer to convince; broken by the school system, it took him two years to cultivate belief in himself and his abilities.

Barbara began investing in Legos. Damon, she said, would sit for hours trying to put them together. He enjoyed this as he could also see the progress he was making in building a castle or putting together a car.

"His organizational skills increased as he sought ways to separate the pieces into groups," Barbara said.

"His attention span increased as did his communication. He was having wins building things. From there, he began having wins with academics."

Soon Barbara was teaching 15 children besides her own, and there were dozens more also wanting her to take them on.



Barbara with Damon. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

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A Private School

Buoyed by her homeschooling success, Barbara opened her nonprofit private school, Hollywood Education & Literacy Project (H.E.L.P. Miami), in 1996, to empower students to become “competent, independent learners with sound educational skills (without the use of labels and drugs) so that they can master their academics and succeed in life.”

Barbara modeled her school after a tutoring program that originated in Hollywood, California.

A parent of a 10-year-old girl, who was told by experts she needed medication for learning delays, gave Barbara \$125,000 to move into a commercial location in a local strip mall.

Barbara said: “After just six weeks of homeschooling, her daughter went up three grade levels—confirmed by standardized tests—and could, for the first time in her life, read.”



Small groups give children ample attention. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

In the 26 years since Barbara’s school opened, the educator has received many positive testimonies from parents and past students.

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Monica, a former student, said: "My teachers seemed to think that because I was born hearing-impaired, I somehow could not really be helped ... [H.E.L.P. Miami] helped me tremendously, and I still use the study methods I learned. I am now in my second year of college studying to be a speech therapist. I look forward to a long career helping others."



[A lesson on dissection in science class. \(Courtesy of Barbara Rivera\)](#)

In another testimony, a parent, Sandra Acedevo, shared that her son, Fabian, disliked going to school, as he was told that he was always daydreaming, and his mind was wandering. Teachers also suggested that he had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). His mother thus agreed to have him be a part of research and ADD medication. However, just in the nick of time, she researched online and found H.E.L.P Miami, and contacted Barbara.

Sandra said: "[Barbara] looked at my son and said, 'So, Fabian, they tell me you failed sixth grade?' 'Yeah,' he answered, with his chin down. 'Well, I don't think you failed; I think *they* failed' ... I tried to hold my tears as I witnessed my son learn the biggest lesson of his life: 'I'm not a failure.'"

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"My children know they can do anything," Barbara told The Epoch Times. "This sounds small, and maybe it is, but what an attitude to have! My goal in raising my children was to create intelligent, responsible, independent adults. I wanted children who contributed to the family and who considered their family a blessing ... this country is built upon the family unit."

Today, Barbara's son Damon is the vice president of the creative advertising and production agency Syslo Ventures. Morgan, a teacher, helps her mother run H.E.L.P Miami. Thor is a technician at a publishing company, Adam is in the security field, and Michael works in consulting.

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Damon is the vice president of the creative advertising and production agency, Syslo Ventures.
(Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

The Bigger Picture

Several years ago Barbara began a massive research project aimed at discovering the failures to effectively teach reading, writing, and math. She discovered some alarming statistics.

She explained: "In 1910, 99 percent of American children were literate. To be fair, this statistic probably did not include minorities, or women, [but] it is still a good statistic in terms of how effective the public school system was in teaching reading, writing, and math.

"By the mid 1930s, the successful Hay Wingo 'Reading with Phonics' textbook was basically laughed out of existence, as the 'experts' found it too simplistic. In its place, whole-word methods were taught ... reading was no longer being taught correctly; math and language were equally 'altered.'"

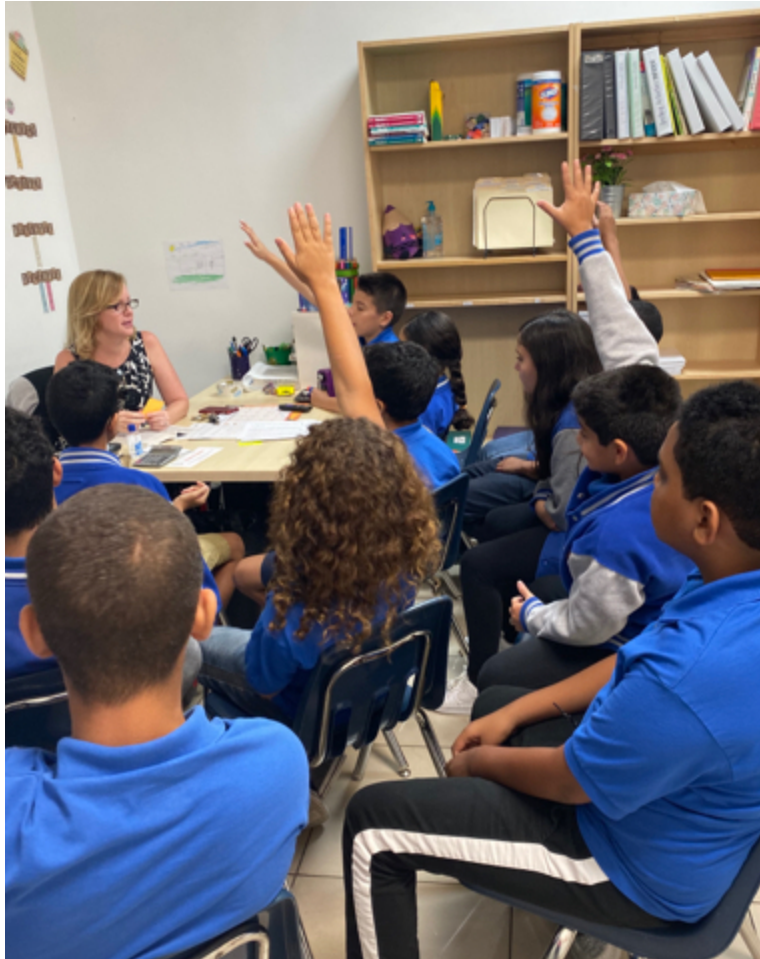
Barbara personally purchased over 300 workbooks and textbooks spanning the late 1800s to the early 1900s, in reading, handwriting, language, English, science, phonics, geography, social studies, health, and manners for Kindergarten through eighth-grade students.

"These books are drastically different from modern textbooks," said Barbara.

She learned that one of the biggest differences between the past and the present is that students in the past were educated to become fast-thinking, intelligent, refined adults.

"Students were expected to master one skill before going on to the next, and teachers were encouraged to keep the student winning by incorporating play and games into each lesson ... today, students are only instructed to pass a test ... actual learning, actual thinking, are no longer the goal," she said.

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Barbara teaching the kids in her school. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

Barbara is currently looking for a new location for her school and hopes to produce her own complete curriculum packages based on her most successful source texts from the early 1900s.

She firmly believes that by returning to the teaching materials of the past, America could return to a 99 percent literacy rate. This “multimillion-dollar project” needs to be done, she insists.

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"I want to create complete lesson plans and materials for Kindergarten through eighth grade, free from political agendas and psychological influences," she explained. "These lessons will be user-friendly and able to adapt to religious or non-religious settings; phonics will be phonics, math will be math, and every other subject formatted so that the student can read, understand, and apply."



Barbara's daughter, Morgan, works with a student. (Courtesy of Barbara Rivera)

She explained that the average eighth-grade graduate from the early 1900s surpassed today's college graduate in terms of ability to read, write, and calculate math. She is determined to create this again.

"I did this with my children, I can do it with yours," she said.

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