

THE WORLD AT YOUR DOORSTEP



by Samantha Snively

Some of the greatest men and women in American history have been self-educated. The determination and discipline characteristic of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Martin Luther, and many others may have come from the hours they spent learning on their own.

In 1909, the Adventist educator Frederick Griggs, then Secretary of the General Conference Department of Education and later to become president of Emmanuel Missionary College, heard the president of the University of Wisconsin “describe in fervent language the potential of correspondence studies.” He returned to the General Conference Headquarters and convinced the church’s leadership that the Adventist Church needed a correspondence school, “to fill in the gaps that the resident schools could not fill.”¹ Griggs had a vision for making Adventist education available around the world as well as bringing that same

quality education to those unable to attend traditional schools.

In September 1909, a notice appeared in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, proclaiming, “This is not the announcement of a new correspondence school. It is merely the naming” of a collection of correspondence schools scattered throughout the country.² This new school took the name “Fireside Correspondence School,” to suggest not only the home but also the historic figures who educated themselves. “It was around the fireside that Abraham Lincoln laid the foundation for his great and useful career,” read the *Review and Herald* article. “It was there that Whittier...caught the inspiration that ripened into the purest and best literature in defense of righteousness and freedom in a nation’s crisis. It was at his own fireside that Luther forged the weapons of his spiritual warfare.” Following in the footsteps of those giants, the Fireside Correspondence School’s intentions were clear from the

beginning: “to inspire and help both young and old *at home*.”³

At the time of its establishment, many students desired higher education yet found themselves too far from traditional schools to attend. Others could only attend school in the winter, when they were not needed on the farm. As a result, correspondence schools were growing in popularity throughout the nation. The Adventist population, much of which was still rural, was also increasingly concerned with exposing their children to worldly influences in the available public schools. In the Fireside Correspondence School, parents and students found a solution to both these problems—lessons built on Seventh-day Adventist principles yet containing the required curriculum that could be completed at the student’s own pace.

In the first month of its existence, applications from every state poured into the Fireside Correspondence School. Additionally, students from Mexico, the

The Fireside Correspondence School group in Huichou, Guang Dong province, China, c. 1923



West Indies, Europe, South and Central America, Syria and Africa enrolled in the school. Even those in the autumn of their lives were taking correspondence courses—in its first year, the Fireside Correspondence School had students as old as 63.⁴ Within two years, the school offered 11 secondary and nine college courses in subjects from “Physiology and hygiene” to “Pedagogy and school management” to Greek and Latin, in addition to traditional history, literature, mathematics and composition courses.⁵

Determination and the value of hard work were values that the Fireside Correspondence School promoted in its early years: “[A correspondence education] might become the first rung in the ladder of upward progress, for a young person to learn that he can actually accomplish something worthwhile through his own application and perseverance, guided by qualified teachers, even if circumstances have all seemed against any means of self-improvement in the past,” wrote W.E. Howell, the school’s principal, in the *Review and Herald*.⁶ One student’s determination to get an education was so fierce that it made headlines.

At the 1922 General Conference Session, C.C. Lewis told an interesting story: “A young man up in Canada found himself forty miles from a station, and could get no paper on which to prepare his lesson, so he went out into the woods and made use of the cry of Hiawatha—“Give me of thy bark, O birch tree”—and upon this bark, he wrote his lesson and sent it in.”⁷

The *Youth’s Instructor*, the magazine for Seventh-day Adventist youth,

touted correspondence courses as an opportunity to improve oneself and an alternative to idleness, and enthusiastically encouraged its readers to take advantage of this opportunity, for “time taken by the forelock yields rich returns.”⁸ Stories of self-education and success abounded in the *Youth’s Instructor*, such as the story of Ruth Graham.

Ruth, whose parents had recently died, lived with her Aunt Harriet and Uncle James. The family had only enough money to send their two girls to academy,

leaving Ruth and her brother Lawrence to fend for themselves. One night at prayer meeting, she heard a visitor speak of typewriting and stenography classes from Fireside Correspondence School. Ruth thought this might be a way to earn money toward her education, and enrolled in the classes that night. “Send the first lessons right away,” she said, “for I wish to begin study as soon as possible.” However, the visitor said, she would need a typewriter of her own to practice on. Determined to help his sister succeed, her brother promised to find her one.

Lawrence found a typewriter the very next day, and for the next few months, Ruth spent all her spare time practicing. One day, Lawrence mentioned that his boss’s stenographer was ill, and asked Ruth if she was able to fill in for her. This led to a full-time position with Mr. Jenison, her brother’s employer, and a salary she saved for her education. Within a few months, Mr. Jenison had requested she take a course in bookkeeping to oversee the store’s finances.

Her bank account was growing daily, but she still could not afford to attend academy. One day, Lawrence pointed out a four-year academic course in the Fireside catalog. The siblings realized they could gain a high school education by correspondence, and would be ready for college in three years, while still

Griggs had a vision for making Adventist education available around the world as well as bringing that same quality education to those unable to attend traditional schools



Left: Frederick Griggs
Below: An ad for Home Study Institute published in the *Review & Herald* in 1976

able to work and save money for college expenses. “What one digs out for himself is there to stay, and the very plan of home study develops self-expression, independence, self-reliance, and perseverance,” as Ruth and many others like her discovered in the early years of the Fireside Correspondence School.⁹

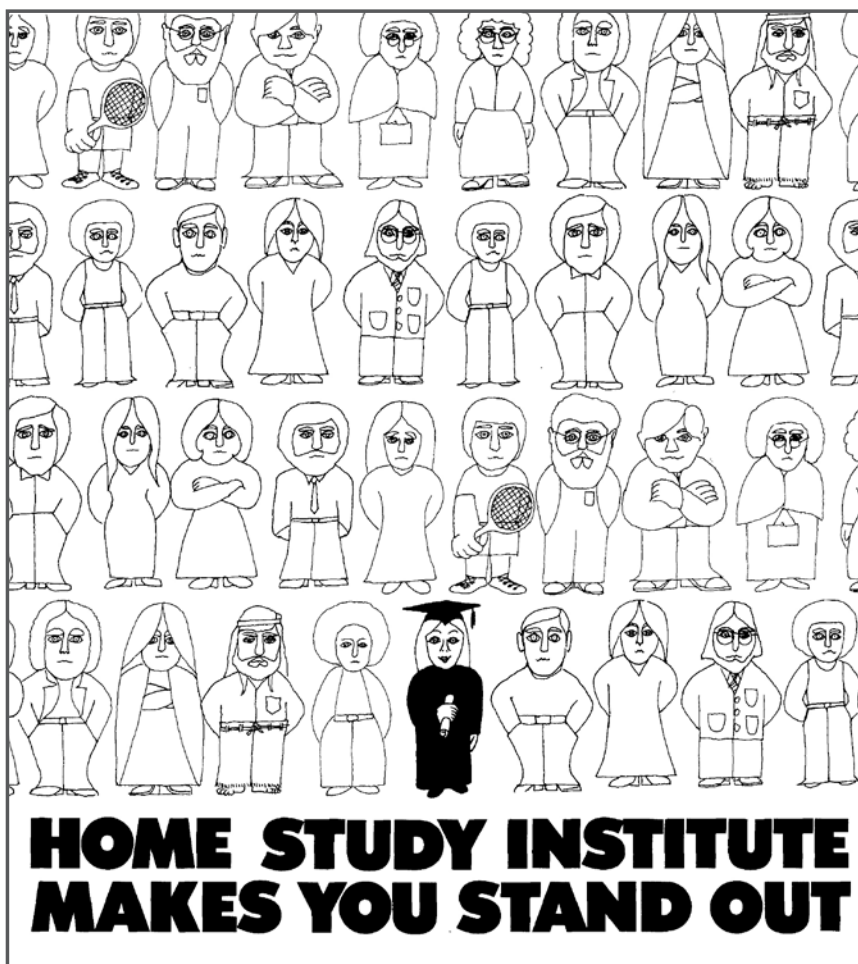
The Fireside Correspondence School continued to grow. By 1930, the school offered courses not only in academic subjects, but also in missionary and witnessing work as well as language instruction. Entire families would often enroll in correspondence courses, such as the Oswald family of Pennsylvania. While their daughter, Marian, was taking three courses from the school, both Mr. and Mrs. Oswald had learned more about the Adventist faith to which they had recently converted by taking Bible courses. “Lincoln found a way, and so did we,” J.C. Oswald wrote.¹⁰

Only 20 years after its formation, the Fireside Correspondence School had grown from 200 students to 3,000 enrollees spread across the globe. The Fireside offices sent their lessons to more than 50 countries, from Iceland to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to Peru. There was a Far Eastern Division, and newly formed Australasian and South American divisions.¹¹ In Europe and in America, the home study method was being hailed as “one of the outstanding developments of the twentieth century,” according to President Theodore Roosevelt.¹²

The leaders of the Fireside Correspondence School changed the name to the Home Study Institute at the 1930 General Conference Session, as a way to not only broaden the school’s reach but to more plainly describe the institution’s mission. “It was the policy from the beginning,” wrote M.E. Olsen, current principal, “that our denominational Correspondence School should carry on educational work of the same quality as our best resident schools and colleges. The Fireside Correspondence School started out with the intention of doing the extension work, not of one college, but of all the colleges and academies of the denomination.”¹³

Until the age of computers, the Home Study Institute remained a humble organization. In the late 1940s it was

located in an old house across the street from the General Conference. Betty Gray began working part-time at the Home Study Institute around 1947 as a college student. An office worker, she typed mailing labels and envelopes, filed, and sometimes helped assemble the lessons for the packages. Once the lessons were printed at the *Review & Herald*, the entire process of sending out and receiving lessons was hand-done by a small office staff, including tying the lesson packages up with string. Much of the staff was composed of students at Washington Missionary College (later to become Columbia Union College/Washington Adventist University). Young men, especially, worked in the mailroom making up packages to be sent “clear across the world,” says Gray. She



recalls that the majority of the lessons were mailed internationally, to children of missionaries finishing up their high school degrees. Gray felt that it was a nice, comfortable, close-knit group of workers and emphasizes. "All the work was very humble and hand-done, of course, on old manual typewriters."¹⁴

Although it never stopped growing, the Home Study Institute began another period of rapid expansion in the 1960s. As the reach and enthusiasm of foreign missions grew and missionaries from students to entire families left for the field, the Home Study Institute went along with them. Operating branches sprung up in South America at River Plate College in Argentina; in Korea at Korean Union College, and in Indonesia.¹⁵ Many of these early Home Study courses were created

to train ministers or Bible workers. The branch in Indonesia conducted a Parent and Home Education class that attracted about 200 women, including the wives of government officials.

In 1976, the State of Maryland granted the Home Study Institute recognition. At the time, it was the only correspondence school in the state to attain that status.¹⁶ Eight years later, the fully accredited Home Study Institute had changed its name to Home Study International in 1983 and was beginning to offer college classes in partnership with Columbia Union College. (The two later signed a merger agreement in 1993 for the college degree program.) The majority of Home Study students were still in the elementary and high school grades, but quite often high schoolers would take college classes in

preparation for university.

Diana Green was honored as the National Home Study Council's Graduate of the Year in 1985. She learned to read hiding under a bed in Amman, Jordan, during "Black September" in 1970. Green spent much of her childhood in the Middle East, and moved frequently. After her father was transferred to Kenya, Green relied on correspondence courses for her high school education, and spent one year studying at Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen in Austria. She went on to attend Southern Adventist University (then Southern College). "I've never regretted taking two years of high school by correspondence," she said. "College is much more rewarding because now I really can appreciate my teachers and classmates."¹⁷

A conversation with **Alayne Thorpe**, interim president of Griggs University

Ask Alayne Thorpe to tell you stories about Griggs University/International Academy, and her stories span the globe. She bounces from MBA programs in Vietnam to degree-completion programs in Cameroon to vocational training in the United States. Quite a few of her stories have a similar theme: Griggs University was involved in a lot of "firsts." Much of its work in the last three decades has been to establish degree programs "in places where there was no educational solution," says Thorpe.

One such place was South Africa in the early 1990s. In the homeland of Transkaai, where Bethel College was located, many pastors were unable to continue their education. The newly created Griggs University division provided high school completion services and its undergraduate religion degree to over 100 pastors in five years. The pastors were able to obtain the education they needed to further their ministry and also receive a much-needed pay raise. Years later, one pastor asked Thorpe, "Why aren't you offering a PhD? If you did, we would take it!"

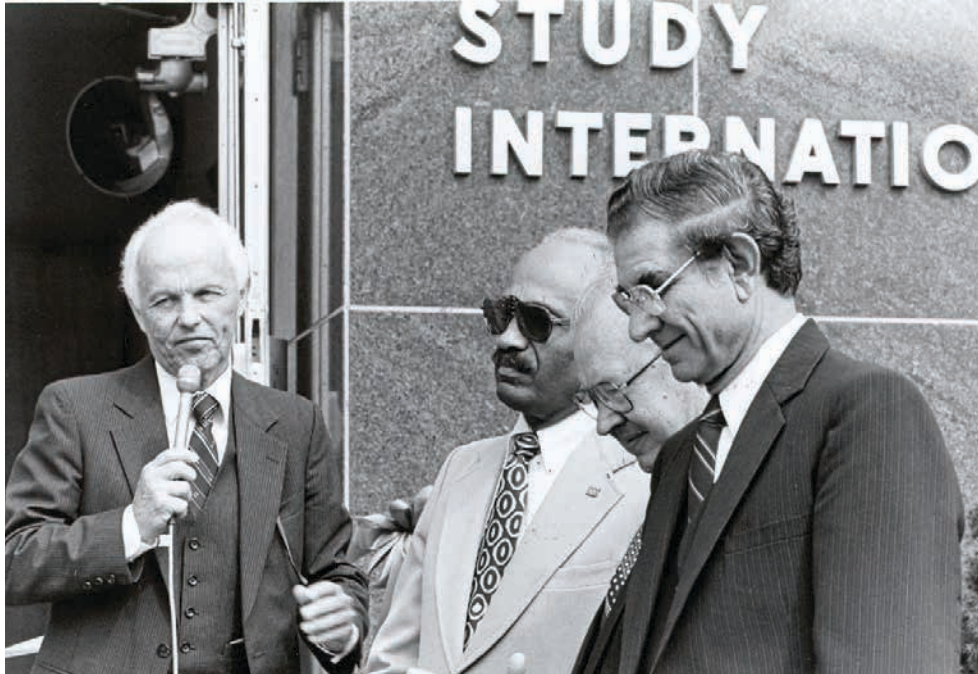
Part of Griggs' mission from the start was to provide education to all who were unable to attain it. In the United States, this meant students who could not complete a high school degree. Griggs partnered with the government program JobCorps to install these students in vocational training and apprenticeships. Thorpe remembers several Sudanese "Lost Boys" relocated into vocational jobs in three Southern states. Through Griggs and JobCorps, they now hold high school degrees. "Some have gone back to Sudan, some have gone on to college, and some remain here," says Thorpe.

In Vietnam, Griggs has developed a Master of Business Administration program. Many of its graduates have gone on to work in high-ranking positions in the banking industry and the Vietnamese government. One graduate told her, "You don't realize what an impact Griggs has made on the leadership of Vietnam." Thorpe adds, "And the Adventist Church through Griggs."

Now, Griggs has affiliates in countries across the globe, and partners with both

Adventist and non-Adventist organizations, as well as independent ministries. Many of Griggs' non-SDA affiliates are business and language schools in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan, although Griggs has partnered with three different colleges in the United Arab Emirates, as well as the Center for Education Technology and Career Development in Vietnam mentioned above. Griggs also offers programs through Adventist colleges, universities, and elementary and secondary schools worldwide, from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire to the Russian Federation to Saudi Arabia and many more.

Griggs' move to Andrews not only situates it in the most diverse Adventist educational community, but provides the added resources the rapidly growing institution needs. "There is so much more that is possible now. One of the things Griggs has had trouble with in the past is lack of resources," says Thorpe, "but now the General Conference is giving us that. Now, the future is limitless and the possibilities are endless."



Above: The 1984 rededication of the HSI building in Takoma Park, Md. **L-R:** Delbert Holbrook, HSI president; Takoma Park city manager; Charles Hirsch; Neal C. Wilson **Below:** Many courses are now electronically enhanced



By the mid-1980s, Home Study International had become one of the preeminent correspondence schools in the world, so that “at a world congress of correspondence educators from 75 countries, everyone,” even the delegation from the Soviet Union, “was acquainted with Home Study International,” wrote

then-president Delmer Holbrook. Home study was no longer just for students who lived too far from or could not afford traditional schools. Missionaries to members of the military used correspondence courses to continue their education.

Youth evangelist José Rojas chose to homeschool his children as a way to grow closer as a family. “[Homeschooling] demonstrates the commitment a family should make to education,” he said. The language barrier was also a concern of the Rojas family when choosing a school—the children speak English during “school” and switch back to Spanish when not in school. “My kids are not sheltered,” said Rojas. “Jesus said you need to be in the world, but not of the world. HSI is a way...to give them the tools to protect themselves from the world.”¹⁸

In 1991, Home Study International announced the creation of a new collegiate division: Griggs University. Although it offered only two degrees at first, an Associate of Arts in Personal Ministries and a Bachelor of Arts in Religion and Theological Studies, it quickly grew to become the largest

division of the correspondence school. In 2010, Griggs University had approximately 2,900 students, and the International Academy an additional 1,200 students.

Just one year after celebrating its 100th anniversary, Griggs University and Griggs International Academy were acquired by Andrews University. This summer, it will take up residence on the campus of Andrews University, having expanded its horizons significantly since the first 62 students opened their lessons by the fireside. “In this rapidly changing world, this partnership will allow us not only to expand our offerings,” says Alayne Thorpe, interim president of Griggs and Dean of the School of Distance Education, “but to place our future plans on firmer ground as we continue to meet our students’ educational needs.”

As an early *Fireside Correspondence School Bulletin* stated: “HSI is the rival of no other school. It aids and supplements them all. It fills in the chinks between them...its field is the world.”¹⁹ ■

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1 *Review and Herald*, March 29, 1984, page 14.

2 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 23, 1909, page 19.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 30, 1909, page 20.

5 *Youth's Instructor*, October 10, 1911, Vol. LIX, No. 41, page 2.

6 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 30, 1909, page 20.

7 *General Conference Bulletin*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1922, o. 301.

8 *Youth's Instructor*, December 5, 1911, Vol. LIX No. 49, page 16.

9 *Youth's Instructor*, November 12, 1929, page 3. Story taken from the *Youth's Instructor*, March 3, 1931.

10 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 6, 1930, pages 24–25.

11 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 8, 1930, pages 137–139.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Personal interview, June 1, 2011.

15 *Review and Herald*, July 6, 1967, page 20; May 9, 1968, page 21; April 3, 1969, page 17.

16 *HSI World*, Winter 1999, page 1.

17 *Review and Herald*, January 10, 1985, page 18.

18 *HSI World*, January/February 1997, pages 1 and 4.

19 *Review and Herald*, March 29, 1984, page 18.