

CC History

Classical Conversations[®], which now serves more than 104,000 students, began 20 years ago with one homeschooling mom's desire to give her oldest son a good education.

Leigh Bortins was a brand-new mom in 1984, an aerospace engineer, recently graduated from the University of Michigan. She had the drive and the degree to become very successful, and she and her husband, Rob, both accepted lucrative positions with Boeing in Seattle. But the young couple decided they wanted something more than corporate daycare for their young son. As soon as her initial contract was up, Leigh resigned from Boeing to stay home and care for her son.

Not only did she want to care for her son herself, but she decided she wanted to educate him herself, as well. While Robert Jr. was still a toddler, Leigh began researching homeschooling, even though homeschooling was still considered illegal in some parts of the U.S. She read books, attended conferences and studied classical education.

She discovered that there weren't many educational materials out there for the homeschooling parent and almost nothing based on the classical model of education. Leigh decided she could produce a better curriculum for her sons, so she did.

The growing Bortins family moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1989 when Rob accepted a job with USAir. Then she began homeschooling in earnest.

Robert had plenty of homeschooling friends through elementary school, but as they got older, one by one their parents put them into public or private schools because their parents didn't think they were competent to teach young adults. In the fall of 1997, at Rob's encouragement, Leigh began teaching a once-a-week, classical-model program in Rhetoric in her home with 11 students. This was the beginning of Classical Conversations' Challenge I program.

Just two years later, Leigh, along with some friends, began the Foundations program for 4-12-year-olds to give them a solid grounding in the Grammar

level of classical education, by helping them memorize facts and definitions and the order and sequence of those facts.

With the help of friends and family, Leigh developed a business plan for her fledgling business and entered it in the annual Piedmont Entrepreneurial Network's new business competition. To her surprise, Classical Conversations won, and Leigh received expert business training, mentoring and startup capital. In 2001 Classical Conversations incorporated.

Never one to rest on her laurels, Leigh realized she needed a program to bridge the Grammar stage of the Foundations program and the Rhetoric stage of the Challenge program. The Dialectic stage was missing, so Leigh and her circle of faithful friends began the Essentials program to bridge the gap in 2004. Essentials helps late elementary-age students develop the language arts and writing skills they need to communicate effectively through junior high, high school, and beyond.

"If little Leigh Bortins can get a thousand kids in this program doing it part-time, what would happen if we really focused on this?" she asked herself in 2004. Her question would be answered in dramatic fashion over the next decade.

As Classical Conversations began to expand outside the central North Carolina area, Leigh developed the idea of local communities led by directors and tutors for the three programs: Foundations, Essentials and Challenge programs. The contract workers received extensive training and resources to better offer the CC programs in their local communities.

With the number of CC students growing by 70-80 percent a year based solely on word-of-mouth promotion, Classical Conversations had outgrown Leigh's home, and she opened CC's first headquarters building in West End, North Carolina, in 2006 to serve nearly 3,000 students.

Classical Conversations celebrated its 10th anniversary in September 2007 at the Great Wolf Lodge in Concord, North Carolina. Michael Farris, founder of the Home School Legal Defense Association and Patrick Henry College and a friend of CC, was the guest speaker.

By 2008, Classical Conversations had 9,500 students and over 400 directors in 30 states. And in 2011, just three years later, Classical Conversations had over 38,000 students with communities in 45 states and a few foreign countries.

The next few years went by like a blur as CC continued to grow rapidly. Leigh began hosting a weekly radio show in 2008 about homeschooling and classical education and created a new company, Classical Conversations MultiMedia to produce CC curriculum and textbooks. This new addition created demand for greater warehouse and distribution space, so CC built a new headquarters and warehouse building in West End in 2010, and yet another warehouse in 2013.

In 2012 Leigh stepped away from the leadership of the program she had created 15 years earlier, but it was Classical Conversations' very first student, her oldest son, Robert, who became the new CEO.

Today, more than 104,000 students from over 40,000 families participate in CC programs in almost 2,500 communities. These CC communities are led by over 15,000 contracted directors and tutors and are located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and 15 foreign countries.

In addition to constantly revising and enriching its curriculum, CC has also added additional services for homeschooling families, including an online bookstore, practicum training for parents, standardized testing services, test prep classes, an academic transcript service, academic counseling services, college credit through the CC⁺ program, and national academic competitions in memorization and math.

Not surprisingly, CC corporate outgrew its facilities once again and has now moved to a far larger campus a few miles up the road in Southern Pines, North Carolina.

“Our stretch goal is 1 percent of all students by 2021, which would be about 580,000 students,” Robert said. “In order to have enough leaders to reach this goal, we will need to hire and train about 50,000 tutors, directors and other leaders. It is scary, honestly. We set goals to reach, but, ultimately, if we continue to strive to meet our mission of helping ‘families pursue classical, Christian education by learning to know God and to make Him known,’ the rest will come.”