

# Educating Lightstation Children

Story and Photographs by Eric W. Manchester

**Fewer than two dozen children now reside on British Columbia's lightstations, ranging in age from two years to late teens. Many have computers, but few have a link to the outside world. Consequently, most are educated in a homegrown fashion. That they get an education at all – much less a good one – is a testament to the commitment and ingenuity of their parents.**

"It's damned hard work – the hardest I've ever done," said Audrey Nair, "It was challenging to simultaneously teach four different grades, care for a pre-schooler and nurse a baby."

Audrey and spouse Paul Hollyoak educated six children, from kindergarten to grade nine, during their years on remote lightstations. A benefit of teaching different ages and grades together, around the kitchen table, is that the children became familiar with the higher-grade work, before it was their turn. Consequently, their youngest child, Kezia, began writing at age three. At their last posting – Dryad Point Lightstation – Nair enrolled their children in a regular school and ferried them 20 minutes each way in her small boat. "It's the closest we got to civilization. They were so fascinated, they didn't pay attention too well during the first year."

Most lightstation parents have no prior teaching experience, complicated by a lack of mentors to whom they can turn for advice. In addition, they face obstacles at the most basic level of delivering education. According to Steve Allison, principal keeper at Egg Island Lightstation, "We get mail about once a month, so it's a long wait for results – by then we've completed several more assignments. It's stressful to make the outgoing mail run." Steve and Colleen Allison began home teaching with an additional hurdle when they adopted their daughter from China. "The first thing we had to do was teach her English." Today, nine-year-old Amy is one grade ahead of her peers, and plans to be a paleontologist.

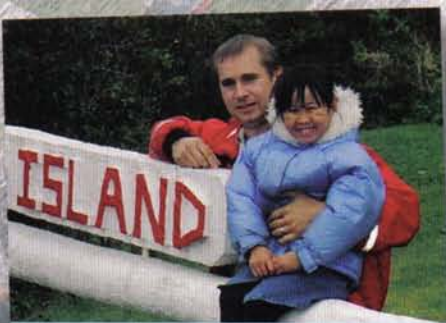
Although lightstation families share a common seclusion, the parents' approaches to educating offspring are as diverse as

the weather they report. Most children are taught by their parents who try to make the best use of meager on-station resources, minimal off-station support, and to pace the instruction to each child's aptitudes and interests.

Home scholarship usually comprises a blend of correspondence program with self-developed curriculum – sometimes alternating to accommodate needs in different grades.

"Correspondence courses suit people near towns," said Nair. "It was a huge challenge to make them relevant to our small world. They were so limiting that we created our own."

*Audrey Nair brings five of her six children to school by boat from Dryad Point Lightstation to Shearwater.*



"The first thing we had to do was teach her English," Steve Allison said of Amy, their adopted daughter from China. Today, Amy is one grade ahead of her peers and plans to be a paleontologist.



Steve Allison works on a spelling test with 9-year-old daughter Amy at Egg Island Lightstation.



School is "IN" at Egg Island Lightstation with Steve and Amy Allison.



Dryad Point Lightstation.

"Lightstation families are really on their own," according to Mina Carr, distance education teacher, "We often gave them the year's material up front. It was nearly impossible to help because we couldn't phone them, and it was very difficult to visit." With no library nearby, students' research material came from the sky. "Our helicopters hauled copious amounts of books," said Glenna Evans, Canadian Coast Guard lightstation operations supervisor.

Living in an environment devoid of distractions and time-wasters that commonly challenge urban life, lightstation children seem to make better educational use of their time – and tend to be voracious readers. According to Carr, "Their work is really complete – lots of detail in drawing and writing. Artwork is amazing – seldom depicting 'Disney' characters. Without commercial influences, they have a different view of the world, and, a perspective on life that city folks can't get." When the fledglings leave their rookeries, some attend college or university, attesting to the quality of their sequestered learning. A few have won university scholarships.

An isolated lightstation seems an ideal setting in which to impart knowledge, but the business of lightkeeping often interrupts teaching efforts. Chatter on the station's radio, scheduled weather reports, parents' working shifts and horrific weather frequently disrupt the home-based classroom. The arrival of a helicopter or ship results in chaos of fresh mail to read, new conversations and frenzied slinging of outgoing packages aboard the craft before its too-soon departure.

For some families, the ebb and flood of lightstation life results in a relaxed schooling regimen with no tangible schedule. Others attempt to maintain a five-day per week routine – with 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. classes. Often, learning is a seven-day per week activity, without the usual summer or spring breaks.

"This is way better than going to school," according to 15-year-old Tamara Martin and 13-year-old brother Tori. About their first four years of home-learning on a lightstation, "There are fewer distractions – we can work at our own speed." Their parents, Calvin and Lorraine, report vast improvement in their offspring's marks since leaving civi-

lization for Carmanah Point Lightstation, "They're getting 'A's now instead of 'C's."

However, educators are concerned about the effects of isolated life. Studies show that socialization is not a problem for children schooled at home. They are usually socialized in other ways through community activities.

### For Sherry, the end of home schooling is bittersweet. "It brought the family closer together. I'm going to miss it."

But lightstations don't offer those other opportunities. Some lightstation parents send their children to live with relatives to attend regular schools at higher grades. "They must be exposed to other kids," said Nair, "Socializing is important because they must function in the real world later."

While many children know only life on the lights, others have experienced formal classrooms before moving to their outposts. After five years on lightstations, Will and Sherry Rose moved the family home to the mainland, where their three children attend regular school.

Although it's a new experience for his younger siblings, shy 14-year-old Nicolas hopes to regain something, "I lost all my friends when we moved to Egg Island, but I didn't really feel lonely until I was 12. Being in crowds again will be a big adjustment." For Sherry, the end of home schooling is bittersweet, "It brought the family closer together. I'm going to miss it." 🗼

Audrey Nair doing schoolwork with her youngest child, pre-schooler Kezia, at their kitchen table in the lightkeeper's residence at Dryad Point Lightstation.

