

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ADVANCES THROUGH SECOND CHANCES: GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

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"Everyone needs to have access both to grandparents and grandchildren in order to be a full human being."

*Margaret Mead, Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years.*

## **Overview of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

The reality of today's grandparent role is far from yesterday's "pleasure without responsibility." These days, more grandparents are assuming major caregiving roles for their grandchildren, either in support of adult children who share a household, or as sole caregivers for their grandchildren. Almost 4 million children were raised in grandparent-households in 1997 (5.5% of children under 18) compared to 2.1 million children in 1970 (3% of children under 18). These increases have resulted from a myriad of social and economic pressures and are the forerunner of powerful and challenging roles for grandparents to come.

This special edition of *Reflections* addresses grandparents who have responded to social and economic pressures to keep families together and provide for the next generation. Economic pressures have contributed to three-generational living. Teenagers who become parents, or adult children who divorce, often seek the protection of grandparents. Social pressures center around parents who have fallen prey to the drug epidemic, which persists unabated in its most serious form. The prison population has tripled since 1980, and the number of women incarcerated for drugs quadrupled over a five-year period during the late 1980's. Over the past decade, there has been a 16% increase in reports of child abuse and neglect along with concurrent decreases in traditional foster families to care for abused children. Mental illness, physical illness including AIDS, and death are other reasons that grandparents raise grandchildren. In all

of these circumstances, grandparents have stepped in to keep families united in spite of the challenges involved. Amongst the challenges are the often unresponsive organizations and institutions that have failed to respond to "nontraditional" families. Personal challenges may result from poverty, family conflict, grief and disappointment over the problems or loss of the adult child, as well as stress of assuming care—sometimes for children with special needs. Parents may be torn between attachment and obligation for their children and personal struggles that may render them unable to parent. Legal complexities and custody battles often leave children without stability or permanency. Inherent in the topic is the breadth of perspectives from several generations and the complexity of difficult social issues. The heart of the topic is the many courageous men and women who are working to keep the family together.

## **My Own Pathway to Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

I caught a second wind and began a second phase to my career, just as many grandparents begin a second round of parenting. The shift started in 1992. This year signaled a converging of grief over the death of my father and, just months later, the conflagration of riots in Los Angeles resulting from the initial Rodney King court decision. As the city burned, I sought some sign of rebirth. I looked for a renewed academic focus, one that would embrace some of the thorny urban issues confronting Los Angeles.

Earlier in my career, I had focused on caregiving of older people, particularly care provided by the adult children and spouses of Alzheimer's victims. I subsequently shifted to a broader view of family relationships: marriage and divorce in older couples. A colleague suggested grandparents raising grandchildren as a new arena. This was a perfect fit, which retained a focus on caregiving and family relationships but shifted to older people as caregivers instead of as care receivers. The topic involved many complex and difficult urban problems and could officially be viewed as "gerontology."

This was "grandparents to the rescue," incorporating a view of middle and older adulthood as a time of strength, attempting heroic challenges, and continuing development in spite of hardship. It included commitment to the family group and to giving children the best possible chances in life. Therefore, it required grandparents to reach deeply into themselves to find the strength to achieve for someone and something beyond themselves—in spite of grief and loss. Grandparents pinch hit for a generation that might have been expected to become the "sandwich" generation in 10-20 years. But instead of a "sandwich," it's a "skipped generation," with an "absent parent." The parent is absent from the household but not absent from the imagination or wishes of grandparent and grandchild. The convergence of personal grief and my need for renewal launched a winning and productive second focus to my career and gave me a new chance to conduct research that could have important policy and practice implications.

My second chance materialized in a National Institute on Aging grant to study over 1000 grandmothers raising grandchildren in Los Angeles. This large, three-year project is now in its final year: data collection is completed and analysis is underway. The pathway of winning and working on this award has been energizing and exhausting, with forays into new school and child welfare communities and retreats to the support of a loyal and gifted staff. I have

collaborated on the grant with Merrill Silverstein, Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, and data has been collected by the Survey Research Center, Institute of Social Science Research, University of California, Los Angeles. These affiliations have provided guidance and been my lifeboat through the swift academic waters. Didi Scorzo, my project coordinator, has been loyal and "fearless," a compatriot in breaking new ground. She coordinated the search for grandmothers through grandchildren attending over 200 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Javier Contreras, as Graduate Assistant, has masterfully crafted a data management system, enabling the production of a fine and accurate data set.

As we enter the final analysis phase, I am grateful for the understanding and encouragement of these wonderful staff members; for a personal sense of renewal, joy, and creativity in my career; and for a refresher course by UCLA and USC researchers. My own journey has brought me deep satisfaction, a unity of mission, and a focus I haven't known before in my work. Thus the possibility of a special edition for *Reflections* on grandparents raising grandchildren offered the opportunity to create a family album of grandparents and professionals, united in desire for the common welfare of family members in this growing family type.

### Overview of this *Reflections* Edition

This edition of *Reflections* attempts to bring together many voices of grandparents and professionals. The journal is divided into two sections. The first section of the journal represents the voices of grandparents themselves and of their family members. We see, in the striking eulogy by Lynn Evans, that the parents are never truly absent from the hearts and minds of other family members in custodial grandparent families. Men and women lost to drugs may be struggling, as Lynn Evans' daughter, caught and unable to get out. I have often referred to the "missing parent," a term which hides some anger at the middle generation for not

fulfilling their parenting responsibility. This narrative makes it clear that the parent generation has been victim to poor drug policies, too little available rehabilitation, and too frequent and punitive incarcerations for minor drug offenses. Particularly poignant in this narrative is the power of the grandchild to evoke memories of the lost parent.

In contrast, the narrative by Shook and Shook focuses clearly on life without the parent and the reconstitution of the family with remaining members. They demonstrate that "family" is not limited to grandparent or any other parenting unit but also often includes aunts and uncles. This "family" was able to pull together at the crisis times to support two grandchildren. It is less typical for white families to include aunts and uncles in such an active role: African American families more often involve some parenting by many participants. Role flexibility is also a theme in the narrative by Mary Harris-Robinson. This narrative is a tribute and eulogy for a parenting grandmother as told by her granddaughter. Mary Harris-Robinson also paints a portrait of life in the rural south. Striking is the role flexibility of family members in this African American family in response to Mary's ear infection and her grandmother's illness.

Grandparent short narratives portray a variety of other themes. Lydia Slawson emphasizes that the mastery gained in caregiving can be used for a successful career dedicated to helping others deal with similar circumstances and advocating for changes in the child welfare system. LaVonne Bottoms speaks of the ingenuity needed to raise special needs children, and Mildred Page emphasizes the joy of the grandchild. Ben and Angie Colclasure emphasize overcoming tragedy. The perspectives of both husband and wife and their shifts in role, are shared by Duane and Alberta Kriesel. The narrative by Merrill Mushroom also demonstrates the advocacy role that many grandparents assume and the possible marriage of work career and caregiving career.

The second section of this *Reflections* edition presents the voices of professionals in

many roles: administration, practice, research, and education. As seen in the previous section, professional roles are often shaped by personal experience. Rolanda Pyle's dedication and appreciation for her grandmother shaped her career choice as Director of the Grandparent Resource Center in New York. As she notes in her narrative, children often don't understand the enormity of the costs—and grandparents may not fully see the benefits and rewards from their efforts in their lives. Both Rolanda Pyle and Mary Harris-Robinson lost their grandmothers early, testimony to the age gap and the tendency of custodial grandparents to turn last to their own health needs.

While conducting research appears to be a step back from the immediate lives of grandparent subjects, several narratives demonstrate ways researchers have been influenced by their topic. Lee Miller and Jonathan Marx supplement the experience of conducting research on national samples with this qualitative portrayal of a grandparent-headed family. This family also illustrates the emotional repercussions when grandchild siblings have different legal arrangements. Nadine Bean, Eurette McAllister, and Lynn Hudgins conduct ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with grandparents from different cultural groups. The strength of cultural traditions and roles and the attachment of grandparents are felt through the words of their subjects. In his narrative on policy research, Richard Caputo shares an intellectual journey in policy-related research and struggles with the most effective approach to advocacy for a researcher. His research brings to the professional community solid facts and knowledge, which generate useful recommendations for policy. As Caputo points out, custodial grandparents are involved in private acts that promote the public good and their efforts deserve public support.

With a focus on practice, therapists Beth Bordeau and Megan L. Dolbin struggle to adapt to the constant transitions that one grandparent headed family experienced during family therapy. This narrative shows

up close some of the difficult attachment issues that grandparent families may face. This is a family with a history of abuse and violence: authors describe their struggle to find effective interventions in the chaos of the changing family.

Amongst the several programs presented, Leslie Covey demonstrates the rewards and challenges of building support groups and the natural growth of self-advocacy among the grandparents in her group. Teresa Jones provides a view of a university-based program, which started as policy analysis, shifted to a needs assessment, and evolved into an innovative "Speak-Out" in which grandparents were helped to be their own policy advocates. Grandparents presented their circumstances and opinions to agency representatives and policy makers, using the power of personal experience. Another university-based project is described by Diane Holliman, Martha Giddings, and Susan Closson. In this case, collaboration is the theme and program efforts resulted in important learning, from grandparents and from other staff, about true collaboration. Finally, Phyllis Pelt describes her experiences as a school nurse working with grandparents. While the school system typically looks to parents, Phyllis Pelt no longer assumes that there are parental caregivers. She found sensitive methods of helping families and children cope with sometimes wrenching violence.

It is my hope that the many professional and nonprofessional voices in this special edition demonstrate our mutual interdependence. Grandparents have become their own advocates with professional encouragement. Professionals have gained a sense of meaning from the courage of the caregivers they study and serve. A wise grandmother, Jessie McClelland, who worked on my research, has often reminded me of the interdependence of age stages inherent in the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Older people are a portrait of aging, which young people will look to as they age, as well as a repository of past history. Young people are in charge of the future and are the product of the teaching, love, and dedication

given them by previous generations. Insights into this special bond are represented here through the views of professionals, grandparents and grandchildren raised by grandparents. These are stories of rejoicing, renewal, invention, struggle, stress, and grief all at once. We need a large and united outpouring of many voices to advance public awareness, and to develop programs, research, and supportive policies for grandparents raising grandchildren.

## References

- Mead, M. (1972). *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*. New York: William Morrow.

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