

# GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN: THE COMPLEXITY OF A SIMPLE LABEL

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*This narrative considers the story of a family bearing the label of "grandparents raising grandchildren." The authors argue that families bearing this label are quite complex with regard to their circumstances, roles of family members, and issues of race, class, and gender. Policy makers, social services providers, and educational institutions must become aware of the numerous complexities these families present in order to provide supports and resources both through child welfare and other social service institutions. Additionally, the circumstances and complexities of these families must be considered within the dominant political discourse over family and family policy.*

An increased amount of attention is currently being paid to grandparents serving as the sole or primary caregivers of their grandchildren in the United States. Although many grandparents have assumed this role throughout history, the American Association of Retired People (AARP) and other groups are reporting the growing numbers of grandparents raising their grandchildren. This situation places the grandparent(s) in the primary role of caregiver, or parent, in opposition to more traditional American notions of the role of the grandparent.

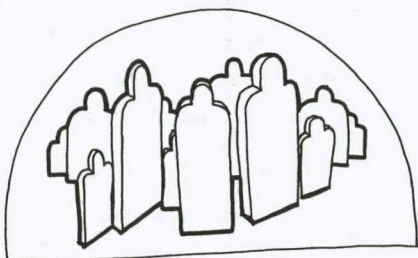
Understanding what it means to be "grandparents raising grandchildren" is important in many respects. First, it sheds light on the many struggles, joys, needs, and strengths of these families. Second, it speaks to the intersection of issues of race, class, and gender in our society. Finally, it deconstructs notions of the traditional American nuclear family, exhibiting the need for our society to accept diverse and varied family forms. Understanding the vast complexities that belie the simplistic label of "grandparents raising their grandchildren" will also help us better conceptualize how many American institutional structures work to oppress and marginalize many people and

groups.

This essay will speak to these issues through a narrative of our family. Technically, our family now fits the label of "grandparents raising their grandchildren." It consists of the maternal grandparents (Carole and Jim), two grandchildren (Devan and Eric), an aunt (Lori), and an uncle and aunt (Jeff and Sara). What we hope this narrative will reveal is a family much more complex than this label, one based upon the work and effort of seven people, one that has undergone many struggles, and one that has benefited from much joy and happiness. It is important, however, for us to note that our story cannot be generalized to all grandparents raising their grandchildren. As we will try to express, we are relatively privileged within the categories of race, class, and gender compared to many families that we know and have encountered. While we feel that our story is valuable, it is just one of many stories of families of all types seeking their way in our society.

## How did we become what we are?

The most common question we hear when asked about our family is why. "What happened?" "Where are the parents?" "I don't mean to be personal, but why are you raising your grandchildren?" Children lose their parents in many ways, including economic circumstances, death, illness, abandonment, and incarceration. In some cases the parents are totally out of the picture, such as death or total abandonment, but in many other cases the parents still play





a role. For many, there is no simple answer to this question of why, a situation that serves to draw a broad array of views from family, friends, and society.

In our case, the "why" is not simple. It is a question that we all struggle with and will continue to struggle with throughout our lives. The "why" has a profound impact on who we are as a family and as individuals. Essentially, our situation can be labeled as abandonment, a nasty divorce between two people struggling, both economically and personally, to raise their children. As a family we decided to provide the children with a home while the situation worked itself out and the parents determined how they would care for the children.

However, the situation never worked itself out. The parents went their separate ways without resolution of any issues except separation. They lived in the area, but neither served as a parent, made plans for serving as a parent, nor showed the desire to serve as a parent. The boys, six and seven at the time, felt rejected, awash in a sea of uncertainty and instability. During this period, Jeff and Lori lived in Washington, D.C., and Carole and Jim lived in Illinois with the boys. At one point, when Jeff was home with Carole and Jim, Eric (6) was in the bathtub, and Carole went in to get him out and ready for bed. Eric would not move.

He pinned himself in the tub. He said he would stay because no one wanted him and he had no home. Carole called Jeff in. Eric still would not move. They left the bathroom, dejected. Jim went in. Eric still would not move because he had nowhere to go. Jim promised him a home, that he would never let him go without a home, and that he would always have a place with us. Finally, Eric got out of the bathtub. At that point, we decided that we needed to provide the stability and certainty of a home and of people to care for them. That is the point at which we decided on legal custody.

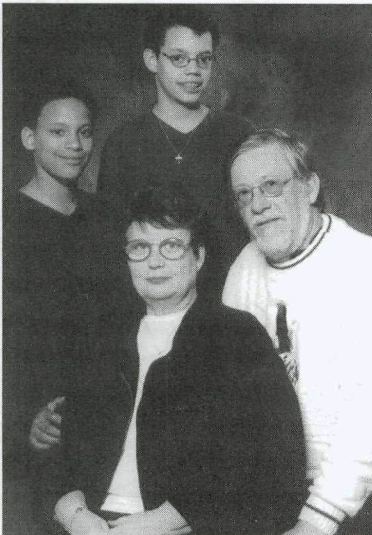
The decision to obtain legal custody was premised on a much broader array of factors than this incident. The boys had spent a large

portion of their lives living with their maternal relatives, Carole, Jim, Jeff, and Lori, both with and without their parents, forming substantial bonds with each family member. Connection with their father's family was limited. For a variety of reasons, it was uncertain whether either parent could or would provide sole care. Arrangements were discussed whereby the boys would live with their grandparents, but one or both parents would still provide substantial care. These negotiations never came to fruition and neither parent assumed this role. Relationships with all parties became tense and violence erupted between the parents. All parties played a role in this tension. It was a time of extreme confusion and uncertainty for everyone, and we cannot recall an exact pattern of events. The one certainty that emerged throughout this period was that the boys were going to live with their grandparents. This certainty drove the decision that night to provide the stability that the boys expressed they needed.

### Loss

The detail described above is difficult for us to process. We all have dealt with our emotions in different ways, being dragged down at certain points and rebounding every time. As we write, it is apparent that our decision was the right one. Both parents have left the scene for the most part. The father sees the boys for a few hours once every month or two. He provides financial support and has developed a stable life situation, but has developed other relationships that consume his remaining time and resources. The mother has left the scene almost entirely, with a phone call or short visit every six months to a year. While the parents are gone for the most part, their sporadic interaction prevents a period of grieving and full acceptance of the loss we all feel.

Consequently, the sense of loss is difficult to convey. For the boys, this loss has been expressed in distinctly different ways. Devan, now 13 and in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, has kept things inside. Early on in the process, he seemed to leave us for long periods, revert-





ing to the only safe place he really knew, himself. Over the course of time he has practiced this strategy less and less, but it still occurs frequently. He has felt responsibility for what happened and for what he feels. He talks about having to hide under his bed when his parents fought to avoid the troubles he felt he caused. Although we have tried many strategies to bring him out, including counseling and attempting to create safe havens in our home and lives, his journey toward dealing with the essential loss of his mother and father is largely his own journey. His acceptance of his new home and caregivers is testimony to his own inner strength and personality, slowly emerging as he gains confidence and attempts to express his feelings. Through this process it is apparent that he stills hurts and aches for his parents' acceptance, feelings that will always be with him and shape his life.

Eric, now 11 and in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, expresses his emotions outwardly. Anger is the primary form of expression, although its frequency has diminished over time. Early on, he struck out at people and things. During his first Christmas in our custody, when his mother visited more frequently, he became out of control when sitting in the living room with his mother on Christmas Eve, throwing a poinsettia on the floor and spilling its contents. A series of punches and screaming followed as Jeff tried to dissuade him from more damage. It took the efforts of both grandparents to calm him fully, at which point he reverted to his sweet and charismatic self. Similar to Devan's learning to not keep his feelings bottled up, Eric has learned to control his anger, largely through his own efforts at coming to grips with his situation. While the family was an early object of his anger, he now talks openly about what makes him angry and sad. This often occurs when one member of the family leaves his immediate presence. Jeff and Sara live in Michigan and Lori lives an hour away from his home. He has come to grips with their comings and goings, but still expresses a great amount of concern when they are away. When one of his grandparents is away from home, he often cannot sleep. When his

grandfather attends meetings that extend past his bedtime, he stays awake with his grandmother, waiting for the garage door to open. Grandpa has taken to carrying a cellular phone with him so that he can communicate with Eric that he is safe and will be home.

In essence, both boys are learning to accept their situation, their feelings, and their loss. It is a long battle, with peaks and valleys, and will be with them forever. They cannot point to one or two concrete reasons why they feel as they do but must try to piece together many incidents. This is further complicated by caregivers who feel similar confusion and feelings of loss and experience their own peaks and valleys. While Eric and Devan have lost their parents, Jim and Carole have essentially lost a daughter, and Jeff and Lori have lost a sister. This loss has affected us all individually, bringing us down at certain points in our lives and requiring a great deal of strength and support to regain our stride. However, it has also brought us together, as the common feeling of loss goes unspoken, yet not unnoticed. It has also brought us closer to the boys because we can share and understand many of their feelings and struggles throughout this journey.

Through this sense of loss we have come together as a family. We know what we are and what we mean to each other, but we don't always know how we got here. We must answer the questions of why and how posed in the beginning of this section with a smile and a quick answer. It is because this is the way that it is.

### **Race, Class, and Gender**

One of the most obvious consequences to society of grandparents raising grandchildren is the financial ramification. The costs of raising children are high and the financial capabilities of grandparents are often less than when they were parents. Although an extremely valid and vital concern, it is also quite complex when one considers the tremendous variation in the age of these caregivers, their financial status, and community and family networks. In our case, we



feel relatively privileged economically. Jim and Carole, one coming from a working-class family and the other from a middle-class family, both were teachers. Jim, taking advantage of a plan in Illinois to retire older teachers who had worked their way up the economic ladder, retired prior to gaining custody of the boys to begin a second career in golf course management. Carole still teaches 5<sup>th</sup> grade, a few years from retirement in a society that still speaks to women caring for their young children but does not provide them with credit while away from the workplace.

Jim was working at a golf course and Carole was teaching when they began caring for the boys. They soon realized, however, that given the emotional state of the boys and seriousness of the situation, Jim would have to quit his job and become a full-time caregiver. With Carole's salary, Jim's retirement, and child support from the parents, they felt the family could manage financially. This has been borne out for the most part, although Jim has recently gone back to work part time. The father continues to pay some support, but the mother has neglected to pay. This support does not go far in raising the boys, but the family has managed in these financial arrangements.

Living in a town with inexpensive housing, Jim, Carole and the boys were able to move into a new home two years ago that is nearly twice as big as their old home. Both boys now have their own bedrooms, and the house has a large yard and a garage. Although maintaining custody of the boys has impacted Jim and Carole's financial resources, and is a cause of concern when they think about college, savings, and their ability to enjoy a comfortable retirement, they feel blessed with enough resources to provide a nice and stable home and to provide the boys and themselves with various material and cultural necessities. In this respect, our family is privileged given the financial situations of many grandparents raising their grandchildren with fewer resources.

Another privilege the family experiences is Jim staying home as the primary caregiver

for the boys. When people use the label "grandparents" raising grandchildren, it is our experience that they are primarily talking about *grandmothers* raising grandchildren. In discussions with other grandparents raising their grandchildren, it is evident that women maintain the primary caregiving responsibility, similar to child rearing in many nuclear families. In the case of our family, however, the term "grandparents" truly fits. Both Jim and Carole spend significant amounts of time involved in the lives of the boys, with Jim maintaining more of the household responsibilities. Even with both grandparents, as well as help from Lori and Jeff, the job of raising two children is difficult. Without the involvement of both grandparents, the struggle would be so much greater. Consequently, the impact of traditional gender roles is largely negated and the label of "grandparents" raising grandchildren is appropriate.

Race is another issue that impacts our family. Jim, Carole, Lori, and Jeff are white, while Devan and Eric are bi-racial (part African American and part white). In a larger family context that is not tolerant of diversity, we have been forced to remove ourselves from a family network. Although many family members are not racially intolerant and are supportive, the overall context has forced us to look inward for our support. Additionally, because we operate in primarily white social groups and social structures, we experience negative reactions as a multi-racial family. However, the truth remains that we are still considered to be a white family and still benefit from this status in society. As the boys grow and experience being "black" in America, race will play an increasingly important role in our family situation. One element of this impact is our difficulty in providing a perspective on being African American to Eric and Devan. Our ability to understand and be sensitive to racial issues will be important in the overall success of our family.

### **My "parents" are different**

One of Jim and Carole's struggles, and one of the struggles that they have observed among other grandparents raising their



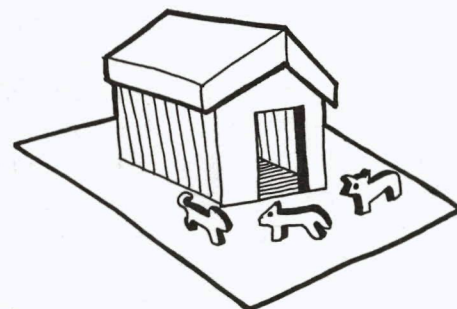
grandchildren, is that they are different from many of today's parents. They look different, are from a different generation, were raised under different conditions, and have already raised children. Many of today's parents are their children's age. The grandchildren notice this, too. They must deal with fitting in, although their "parents" may not totally fit in with their friends' parents. For the most part, teachers and other social service programs do not take into account that "parents" come in many different varieties. As a teacher, and as a grandparent raising her grandchildren, Carole experiences these differences in various roles. She sees her own struggles with another set of childcare responsibilities, sees the struggles of her boys, and sees how other grandparents and their grandchildren are impacted in her school and other settings.

For families like ours, struggling inside themselves to negotiate through the many issues that brought them to their present position and dealing with added financial, familial, and social instability, fitting into the normal course of social relations, such as school, are added dilemmas. The uncertainty of our present position is further compounded when we do not seem to fit into the social institutions that we and our children must navigate. These social institutions are premised upon conceptions of the nuclear family and are not flexible enough to deal with other family forms, such as grandparents raising grandchildren, single parent families, or same sex couples. Everywhere we go, we are seen as different, and this sense of difference impacts your overall family group, as well as individuals within that family group. Our family has been engaged in efforts to advocate for grandparents raising grandchildren through the formation of support groups and advocacy projects to address some of these issues. These attempts have mostly been unsuccessful, as the pressures of everyday life have taxed our time and resources. However, these types of endeavors are necessary to change the structure of our society's institutions to better reflect these differences.

### **Strength and Joy**

The primary result of our family's journey over the more than five years of legal custody of Devan and Eric has been the development of an inner and family sense of strength over time, and the incredible joy that we take in our "family." This strength is the result of years of work and effort by all, and the joy is in experiencing this strength and watching our family grow. Carole and Jim have made a firm commitment to their grandchildren, have applied the effort necessary to make this commitment work, and have given up a great deal in making this commitment. However, they have also received a great deal in this exchange. The morning smile through tired eyes, the games to extend bed time, the "A" on the spelling test, and the compliments of strangers are ample payment for their commitment. Watching these boys grow and amaze underscores the convictions and efforts put in by Carole and Jim.

Lori and Jeff both have also given much of their time, given up various opportunities, and played a significant role in the growth of our family. Having two other adults to help out has made a tremendous difference. Although they live away from home now, both Lori and Jeff have spent considerable time living with the family at different points, serving as another "parent" at times and being an older "sister" and "brother" at other times. While they have given, both have also benefited personally from the strength and joys of the family. The family unit that we have become has served to help strengthen and guide them through their journeys, as well as needing them in its journey. They boys struggle with their departures, but have learned to express their feelings through the family "doghouse." This doghouse consists of a wooden model of a doghouse and little wooden dogs with each family member's name that can be put into the doghouse. When Jeff and Lori leave home, the boys will place them in the doghouse to represent that they miss them





and want them to come home. Through this, the boys have learned that it is safe to express their anger and grief.

The strength and joys of our family are also represented through the recent marriage of Jeff and Sara. Sara came into the family soon after Jeff left home, potentially causing further feelings of abandonment. However, knowing that Jeff would always be there for them, the boys accepted Sara into our family and represented this through their charm, maturity, and giving at the wedding. A potential test of the family, the wedding proved to be another example of our strength and a time of celebration and pride. While difficulties remain, and we will be tested in meeting both old and new challenges, we will continue to draw on available supports to overcome these difficulties and meet these challenges. Thus far, we have been blessed with ample support. Whether this will continue is a question that we must continually ask ourselves.

### Hope

We end this essay with a message of hope. Hope that our story will provide some insight into how one family has coped with tremendous change and challenge. Hope that professionals, policy makers, and politicians will begin to consider the complexities in the various family forms that are part of our social landscape and reject the common rhetoric that is so damaging to the many families that do not fit defined forms. Hope that social structures and institutions can be re-made over time so that they will serve to include all sorts of family forms. Hope that those in power will listen to the stories of these families and begin to provide more immediate relief and resources to help these families survive in our current social structure that continually oppresses across issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The arrival of "grandparents raising grandchildren" on the national radar presents not only an opportunity to meet the many and varied needs of these families, but also an opportunity to re-think definitions of family that have marginalized many family forms. Our story shows that given the right resources and

support, these families can thrive. This is not, however, a burden that should be placed upon the family itself, but one that needs to be shared more broadly by our society.

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