

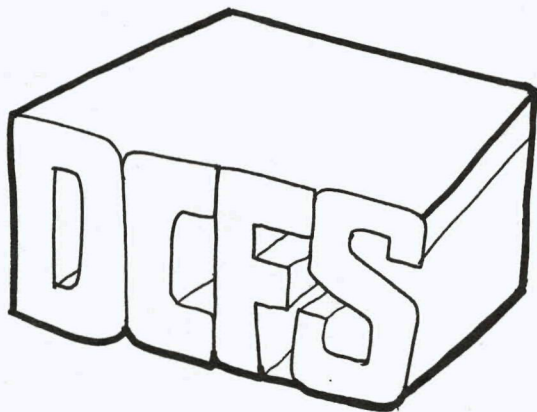
AND I WILL TELL YOU...

Grandparents raising grandchildren were asked to write short essays about the reasons they provided care for their grandchild, and some of the special meanings that they attributed to the experience. These are excerpts from the essays, which show perspectives on caregiving as a career, the care of a special needs child, the reasons grandparents assumed care, and some of the role shifts that grandparents experience.

Caregiving As A Career

By Lydia Slawson

When my daughter Mary was growing up, I could tell there was something different about her. She never had friends, did not get along with her siblings, and in general was different from other children. When Mary was 18 years old, we were able to get a diagnosis that she was schizophrenic and had many other brain disorders. In 1992, my stepdaughter called and told me that Mary had been to her home and left the children and that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was coming in a few hours to her house. As we waited for



DCFS to come over, we agreed that the twins would remain with her and I would keep the oldest child with me. Summer came and went. Finally at the end of summer, I took the children home with me, and my husband of 30 years said, "OK, now what do we do?" We decided that we would make the effort to find help and he would help take care of the children. We would do it together.

As I entered the DCFS system, I had no idea what was going to happen, but I knew I needed help. I needed information, resources, and education to help these children

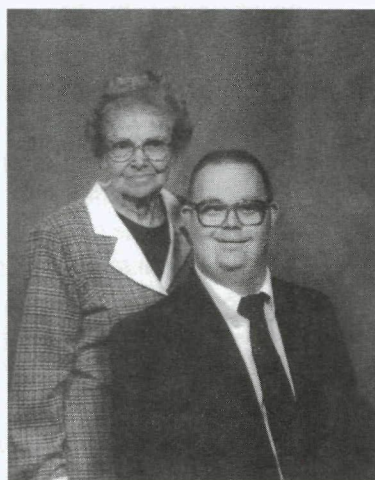
through this traumatic time. There was no information to be had. I decided that I would not be a victim and set out to correct this problem. In 1992 DCFS had sent out letters to kin caregivers telling them meetings were being held at their local offices. After only a few meetings, the letters stopped and we were on our own. There were only five or six of us, but we knew we needed help. We held elections and to my dismay, I was elected President. Over the next three years, we worked hard to get changes. Along with helping to organize groups in other counties, we provided monthly meetings and speakers to address the concerns of kinship caregivers. I wrote a newsletter for kinship for two years. We had support group meetings and our mailing list grew from word of mouth to over two hundred. Along with this, I served on many committees on kinship. In May, 1995, I served at a Mini White House Conference on "Parenting a Second Time Around," sponsored by the Department of Aging. At the end of 1995, DCFS decided they needed a kinship program and brought together two people from each of their eight regions. We talked, had meetings, and held elections. I was elected president and founded The Kinship Council of Los Angeles, Inc. I was President and CEO from 1995 to 1999.

Through all of this, I was receiving twenty to thirty calls a day from caregivers asking questions. They were confused caregivers wanting answers to questions on DCFS, court, financial issues, and permanency. Many questions had no answers. I discussed this with another caregiver and we decided we needed to make an effort to correct this problem. We created the Kinship Orientation Program. This program is four hours long and consists of fourteen components addressing all the key issues. We have

also presented to other counties that have adopted this program. From 1995 to 1999, I served on many committees. I became a MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) trainer for foster parents, participated in L.A. County's KEPS (Kinship Education, Preparation and Support) program, was certified as a trainer, and participated in a program to train teaching staff in the local schools. I created and edited the first Kinship Newsletter sent out by DCFS for over a year with a circulation of over 13,000. I have done workshops on Kinship Care at the Foster Parent's Conferences from 1995 to 2000. In August 2000, I did a workshop on Kinship Care for Children's Institute International. I have a workshop every year for the Foster Parents Association. I do many classes for the Community Colleges on kinship issues and serve on the Community Colleges Advisory Board. This board meets every four months in Sacramento to discuss educational needs of the kinship community. I am very proud to say that I did not allow myself to be a victim and will continue to advocate for kinship caregivers and the children in their care.

Needs of Grandchildren Versus Grandchildren with Special Needs

By LaVonne Bottoms



Troy came direct from the hospital to me. He is a child with *special*, special needs. He was born with Down Syndrome. This tubby little guy was a quiet baby, little

laughter, and not much crying. He had a lot of love, and he was loved a lot. As a newborn there was no difference in his needs than those of any other baby. Troy's progress was approximately average as he grew, but at age two and a half, he didn't say much and still did not laugh. I contacted a therapist. She told me I was expecting too much. I just said, "If I expected nothing, I would get nothing."

I started looking for a school. Troy's father and grandfather decided if I was going to "dump" him in a school all day, they should at least see the school. As they visited the classroom, I talked to the director. We went to the playground where there was a step stool type of bridge—three steps up and three down. Troy counted as he climbed up "one, two, three," and as he stepped down "one, two, three." The Director stated, "You said he was non-verbal." "No, I said he did not speak much." About that time Troy asked "What's at?" He heard something but did not know what it was.

Troy started school younger than most other students, but he loved it. When he was five, his grandfather said he should go to public school. At that time there were no regular classrooms for special students. I suspected public school was a mistake when his teacher's mouth fell open as he told her his name, and spelled it for her. I was sure it was a mistake when the teacher called to tell me he had locked himself in the restroom! I arrived at the school to hear: "He made a fool of me." His teacher had decided to crawl under the door to get him. He was sitting on the stool, legs crossed, waiting for her. I laughed. "You should have known that if he could lock the door he could unlock it." He hadn't made a fool of her; she had done it to herself. Back to private school he went.

It took a lot of looking to find a school I liked that would accept him. When I found one that extended to the third grade, Troy worked with the first graders. His teacher said, "He is not the best student, but he's not the worst either." I was so proud of him.

I purchased two of each plaything for Troy. That way, the children in the neighborhood could play and he could learn by

watching and playing with me or one of the others. My yard was used as a playground, and the children took turns helping Troy learn to do things that were so easy for them, yet so hard for him to do. That way, no child was excluded from the game all the time. I rode the bike, jumped the rope, played soccer and tennis, and even rode the skateboard with him. It was a lot of hard work to teach him to be one of the children of the neighborhood but it paid off. He was included in their bike riding, invited to their birthday parties, and *no one* was allowed to torment or make fun of him.

I am well past the age most think of as the Golden Years, but my grandson is still with me and he is still in school. It is hard for older grandparents to give one grandchild a normal happy life. Because of the prejudice and ignorance that is still a part of everyday life, it is even more difficult when your grandchild has special needs.

A Distinct Connection

By Mildred Page

I can't recall, nor do I remember, a circumstance of crisis that led to our assuming care for our grandchild, Jasmine. I do recall that at first sight, she was the most beautiful baby in the viewing room. And when we were afforded the chance to hold her and embrace her, there was a special feeling, a distinct connection and bonding. Without a word or pledge being said, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and joy. Instantly we knew that she not only needed us, but we realized, we too needed her to make our lives complete. To infer we will cease to care is strictly a "no-no" and unthinkable in our table of contents. Happiness, joy, responsibility, and caring entered into our realm one July day—the 29th to be exact—in 1991. May God grant us the wisdom and capabilities to meet every challenge, fulfill every need necessary to supply her life with joy beyond measure. And may God give us the pleasure of knowing that our efforts and acts of kindness and consideration have formed and forged a life of feminine loveliness personified.

Tragedy to Triumph

By Ben and Angie Colclasure

Tragedy hits all families at certain times and ours was no exception. The phone rang on July 7th at 6:11 am with the news that our 18-year-old daughter, April Michelle, had been hit by a drunk driver while she was walking away from her vehicle that had broken down. April had an 18-month-old baby boy, Christopher, and a husband, Michael, in the Marine Corps, stationed in Germany. Michael was en route home for leave and was met at the airport with the news of April's death.

The world does not stop when tragedy hits. The clock keeps ticking, the bills are still due, the baby still needs to be fed and changed, and the overwhelming grief that floods the minds and emotions are incomparable.

April was my stepdaughter. Her father and I had both had previous marriages at young ages and when we met, I had two daughters and he had April. April and my girls immediately bonded as sisters and I loved her like a daughter. Her death devastated her husband, Michael, and sent him into a depression. His inability to pull his life together led to the decision to assign custody of the baby to us, the grandparents. The father has never fully regained emotional stability since this tragedy and rarely calls or visits Christopher, who is now 13 years old. Christopher was born with respiratory problems, several learning disabilities, ADD-HD and then, at a crucial bonding age, was removed from his mother! When he came to live permanently with us, his nighttime screaming and uncontrollable crying was at times unbearable. The decision that this child's life was on our shoulders became a stark reality, and we were at the crossroads to accept or decline the job!

I have never regretted the choices we have made to invest our lives in Christopher. We are teaching Christopher to appreciate life, to hold onto memories and to press forward. As a family we have grown through the tragic loss of our beautiful daughter and we realize it is in the hardest times of life that we pull together and go on.

As the teen years now approach and our ages increase, we will need to deal with the generation gap, the social effects of life today on a teenager (much different than we even knew), and the emotions that Christopher deals with every day as he enters his teen years. Our philosophy to pull together and trust God in all things keeps us going and causes us to truly enjoy life, even when tragedy hits.

Would You Change?

By Duane J. Kriesel

My dearest granddaughters! It has been three weeks since you asked me to write this. The wording of my "assignment" was *"If you could go back in time what would you change to make life better?"*

I have contemplated. I have procrastinated. I have wished the question would go away. I have stayed awake thinking about the question. That is certainly not an easy question to answer – not at my age. Oh sure, when I was young I could easily have answered that question; when I was young I had an answer to every question, but now I am old.

What would I change?

— There were countless times past that I wished for change, but in retrospect, the changes that I desired would have been disastrous. Fortunately every time I wished for change God overruled me.

The day that your mother announced that she was pregnant I wished for change. I wanted to go back in time to a time that your mother was still my little girl, to the day that I first held her. I did not want my daughter to bear a child out of wedlock; I did not want the embarrassment. I did not want my grandchild to live in a home without a father. Worst of all I was scared; I feared for the safety of a child born in the circumstances that then existed. You see, I could not yet picture the miniature human being that would grow inside.

A few weeks later when your mother announced that she was carrying not one

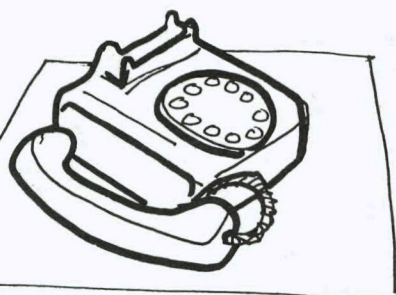
child but two, I wished for change. I wanted to go back in time and undo the matter. *"Please God, just one."* I feared that one child would be a burden for your mother and that two would be an impossibility. I could not yet picture the two beautiful babies holding each other close. I could not yet picture two beautiful toddlers teaching each other to walk and talk or the two youngsters supporting and protecting each other. I could not yet picture the two beautiful ladies that you have become.

For twelve years, I feared that the authorities would remove you from your home. Your grandmother and I attempted to prevent disaster, but we could not prevent the inevitable. The changes that I longed for were not to be. So many things were beyond my control; I could not forestall that fateful day when authorities took action. I wanted to go back in time, way back – twelve years to the day you were born – twenty years to get a second chance at parenting your mother. I wanted to close my eyes and make everything OK. I wanted to fix your world, but I could not make the changes I longed for.

I took the phone call that day. I then knew that you were coming to live with us. I pictured the trauma that you would go through when you received the news. I wanted to hold you and make everything better, to go back in time and change the hand that life dealt you. Of course that was not within my power. My task was to love you, to protect you, to be a substitute parent.

Now as I look at these events, I realize that I'm selfish. I no longer want to go back. I am happy with things the way they are; the last four years have been special, and I don't want things to change.

But then I look at things from a more realistic point of view — from your point of view. I wish you could go back. I wish there could have been changes in your early life. For you I wish a natural, two-parent, God-fearing family with the love and the means to take care of you. I wish for a family that would provide all your needs. I wish that I were not needed in your life – only wanted.



The Caller Asked

By Duane J. Kriesel

The caller asked "Will you provide a home for two twelve-year-old girls?" The call was not totally unexpected; we had lived with the prospect of that call for twelve years. I quickly said, "YES!" I didn't even consult with my wife. We both knew that the answer must be "YES," but that didn't stop the floodgate of doubt from opening. So many thoughts, fragmented, disjointed, yet all related. So many reasons to say "NO!"

·I didn't ask "How long?" Did she mean forever?

·I'm too old to raise a family.

·My life is all settled; why does it have to be uprooted now?

·What about all the trips we have planned?

·Our house is always so clean; will it ever be clean again?

·I like my free time.

·Will their mother make life unbearable?

·They are almost teenagers; do you remember what teenagers are like?

God, you asked me to raise a child once before; I was young then and had a lot of energy, but I was still not very good at it; how will I be able to handle the task now that I'm older? What next? Are you going to ask me to lead a bunch of people around the desert for 40 years?

I forgot that God never asks us to do more than we are capable of doing.

·I didn't know that God would send me two angels disguised as two little girls.

·I didn't know that so many people were ready to help.

·I didn't know that those girls would enjoy old-folks' things like live theater, walks in the park, and drives in the mountains.

·I didn't know that those girls would say "thank you" for the littlest things.

·I didn't know that those girls would give so many hugs and kisses.

·I didn't know that those girls would add more to my life than I could ever add to theirs.

But I Thought I Was Just Grandma

By Alberta Kriesel

I am the grandmother and foster mother of two girls — 16-year-old, identical twins. I

have been their foster mother for nearly four years, but I have been their de facto mother for most of their life. They are the offspring of our adopted daughter, but I have had a special bond with them since birth. I was even in the delivery room when they were born.

I enjoyed being a grandmother; I certainly did not want to be a mother again. My vision of a grandmother was a person that spoiled kids and then sent them home, a person that attended school plays and sporting events rather than teacher conferences. I enjoyed saying "*Here! Your kid's diaper needs to be changed.*" I relished the fact that I could enjoy the girls when they were healthy and send them home when a runny nose appeared.

But I had resigned myself to another fact; I would always have to provide financial support for the girls and for their mother. Their father has not provided ANY financial support and their mother, at age 37, has never held a steady job. She cannot keep even an entry-level job. Yes, clearly the financial responsibility was left to me. But not parenting! At least that is what I told myself.

I took comfort in the fact that their mother loved them. I knew in my heart that she would not intentionally allow harm to come to them, but there was always an underlying fear; I acknowledged that she did not have the parenting skills required to keep them safe; they were constantly exposed to men whose track record included violence. My husband and I did what we could to keep Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) out of the picture, but for twelve years they lived on the edge.

When the girls were two years old we renamed our spare bedroom "the girls' room." They spent many nights in that room; they began to appear every week to spend one or two nights. I began keeping clothes and toys at our house so they would not



disappear in a yard sale. Without realizing, it I was becoming more mother than grandmother.

When they reached the age of ten, a brother appeared. No longer were the girls allowed to spend the night at our house. No longer were they allowed to confide in Grandma. They became parents themselves – primary caregivers. For two years they carried that primary responsibility. Worse yet, for two years they were exposed to an undesirable situation with their mother's live-in boyfriend. Thanks to their school and the school psychologist, DCFS was forced into action.

For twelve years I tried to remain at arm's length, to help their mother avoid DCFS action. Was I wrong? Was I being selfish in wanting to be a grandmother rather than a mother? Did I exacerbate the problem by delaying action? I will never know the answers.

They were ten years old when my husband and I retired. We were ready to travel, to enjoy the fruits of our labor. For two years we relaxed – the same two years that the girls were caring for their brother. For two years we saw little of the girls and almost never saw their brother. I was never allowed to cuddle their brother; I was not allowed to hold him even one time. I rationalized that the boy's father was a good father figure for the girls and that finally the girls were part of a real family. How blind I was. I had no idea what was going on behind closed doors.

I can never thank the school psychologist enough; she saw through the charade. She was instrumental in getting DCFS involved. In spite of the guidance and warnings of DCFS, our daughter failed to

change her ways, and the inevitable happened. The children were removed from her care.

I dreaded having the responsibility of raising children. I feared the worst. Would the girls be mirror images of their mother? Would they resent us? Would they be hostile to us? There were so many questions, so many fears.

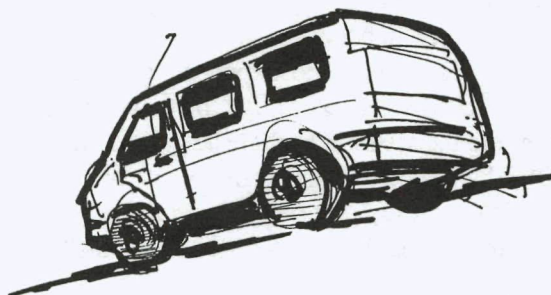
Fortunately the fears were unfounded. The transition from grandmother to mother had been a slow and progressive process. The completion of the process by DCFS was, therefore, neither traumatic nor stressful. The girls blended into our home easily and completely. They have given my husband and me the opportunity to be parents, to experience the joys of parenthood for the first time free of conflict and rebellion. They have filled a void in our lives.

I am more fortunate than many relative caregivers in that no financial burden was created. I am fortunate to have the means to live comfortably. My heart goes out to the grandmothers that are forced to make great sacrifices for their grandchildren. I am grateful for the help and support provided by my husband; without that help and support, life would be much more difficult. My heart goes out to the grandmothers that are raising grandchildren without such support. I am more fortunate than most in that the girls are loving and helpful. There is no rebellion or resentment. My heart goes out to the grandmothers that are raising difficult grandchildren.

It may not be the way I pictured retirement, but retirement has made parenting easier.

Our life together has been simplified; retirement has insured that there are few outside forces competing for my time and energy.

"But what about the travel plans?" you ask. Take heart Grandmas of the world. Our RV has become a school on wheels, a registered California private school. We travel and the girls receive an outstanding education. Our retirement plans were not ruined. No! They were enhanced. We are truly blessed.



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