

# "I WANT YOU TO BE MY MOTHER, NOT HER": CONFLICTS OF GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

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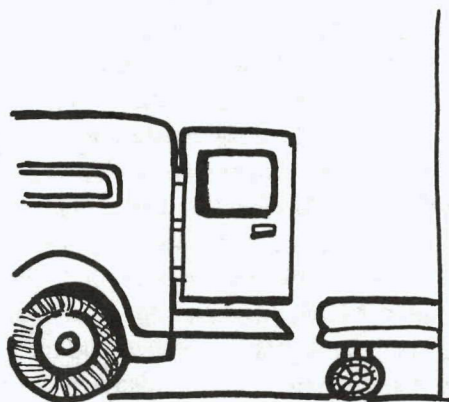
*In this narrative, two sociologists share an account from a grandparent family. The grandparents' experiences are representative of the researchers' general empirical findings. Grandchildren fare quite well in grandparent families compared to those children raised in other family structures. Yet, grandparents solely raising grandchildren experience increased physical and mental health risks. The complexity of the findings are communicated through these grandparents' words in a manner that is often lost by mere statistics. The researchers hope the narrative sensitizes practitioners to the challenges and rewards in raising grandchildren.*

With tears streaming down her young cheeks, in desperation and pain, Danielle\*, 12, pleaded, "Grandmamma, why can't you adopt me like you have Mark. I want you to be my mother, not her! Please, please adopt me!"

Laura, her husband Mike, and their granddaughter Danielle were sitting in the family room outside the hospital's emergency room where their daughter Karen was being rescued from an overdose of cocaine. Danielle had gone to visit her mother and found her overdosed on the bathroom floor. She called 911 for an ambulance and then

to rescue him from the dangers of his parents' drug habits. The mother's drug abuse and child neglect pattern seemed to be repeating itself with Danielle, but the Clarks knew that Karen would bitterly fight Danielle's adoption. They would have to decide something soon. The damage to Danielle was just too painful to watch and allow to continue.

The Clarks joined the ranks of grandparents raising grandchildren 15 years ago when their 16-year-old daughter, Karen, gave birth to her son Mark. Karen did marry Mark's father, and being "helpful" grandparents, the Clarks built a small home for the young family. The drug abuse that had preceded the pregnancy soon manifested itself with Karen frequently dropping off Mark for the grandparents to baby sit while she and her husband, Chris, went out to "party" and play the night away. The drug abuse escalated, and by the time that Mark was one, he was staying at the home of his grandparents on a routine basis. Laura told me, "Karen wanted to have her cake and to eat it too. She just wouldn't take the responsibility of Mark's daily care and nurturing and so I had to do it. Mike and I discussed the fact that Karen was not accepting her responsibility as a parent and we wanted to make sure that Mark had what he needed. We were willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to assure that our grandchild received the most loving care possible." Two years later



notified her grandparents and asked them to come get her and take her to the hospital. This wasn't the first time Danielle had seen the ravages of drugs on her young mother's body. It was a too frequent occurrence and that was why Danielle stayed in her mother's parents' home. Her older brother, Mark, 15, also lived there. Laura and Mike had adopted him when he was three in order

*\*Names have been changed*



this agreement would lead to the grandparents legally adopting Mark.

The initial purpose of the adoption was to rescue Mark from any relationship with his father. Since the divorce, Karen and Mark were now staying full time with her parents. Chris would come for his time with Mark, take him to a friend's house, go and make a drug buy, come back, use, and then take Mark back to Karen. Karen realized what danger Mark was in, so she did not fight the adoption proceedings. Laura related that "She would later throw it up in my face that I had stolen her child. I quickly reminded her of the conversation we had when I told her that she had a choice of taking on the responsibility of being Mark's mother and giving him the love that he deserved and needed or that I would because I was not going to let him go without that kind of love." This hostility from Karen is one reason the Clarks hesitate to initiate adoption proceedings for Danielle.

The family dynamics of the Clarks are similar to so many other grandparents who find themselves engaged in the role of "parents-once-again." The issues they face and must resolve are often overwhelming and demanding in terms of the emotional, physical, and financial strains experienced by the family members. Laura and Mike support each other emotionally as they try to work through the disappointment of the choices their daughter made and continues to make for her life. They are united in their efforts to insure that Mark and Danielle know that they are loved, cherished, and worthy individuals regardless of the mistakes their parents make.

This has not always been easy. When Mark was young he just accepted the fact that Laura and Mike were his parents. He called Karen "Momma Karen" and Laura "Momma" but then he grew older and had to explain to his friends why he called both Laura and Karen "Momma." That is when the anger and confusion emerged. Through counseling, Mark began to reconcile and accept the role Karen had in his life. She was simply his biological mother. Mike and Laura were the parents who gave him the

unconditional love and support he needed. They were the ones who fed, clothed, and housed him. They were the authority figures and the people he turned to for advice. He accepted their discipline as a positive part of his life and evidence of their love for him. It is Mike and Laura he always refers to as Mom and Dad. With this acceptance also came a freedom to be able to look at Karen, acknowledging her presence in his life but not allowing it to control his self-esteem. The pain and bitterness still come out sometimes, but he talks about it or just sloughs it off and goes on with what must be done. Laura shared, "We both feel that Mark will always wonder why his parents didn't feel that he was important enough to make sacrifices for; however, we both feel that Mark has truly known the love of a mother and father because he has always known us as Mom and Dad. We hope he will remember how much we always love him and that he looks at the discipline as a positive part of his growing into a fine young man."

The embarrassment of their mother's drug abuse is something that Mark and Danielle share. It is more than embarrassment. They just don't understand why she continues to make the mistakes many of their age group are now making. Will she ever grow up? Danielle constantly wants the security that will come when her grandparents adopt her and remove from Karen the responsibility of being Danielle's mother. She is tired of seeing her mother strung out on drugs or in the hospital emergency room seeking rescue. She doesn't want to explain who Karen is. She wants to be able to go with Laura and Mike and introduce them as her parents. Danielle is so grateful for the shelter, caring, and love from her grandparents that she is willing to be patient. Danielle told them once, "Thank you for letting me be here. I know you don't have to." She is waiting for her mother to make one more mistake and then she will demand that the Clarks be accountable for their statement that "if Karen messes up once more, that will be it. She will have to leave immediately and not expect to ever come back."

Mike and Laura are encouraging Mark



to plan for college. He is quite intelligent and looks forward to obtaining a degree in business. Although this will add to the financial burden they already experience, the Clarks are confident that with loans and scholarships, Mark will be able to get his



degree and become a successful businessman and responsible citizen.

The financial burdens have taken a toll on Laura and Mike. Retirement is a word they don't have in their vocabulary. While most of their cohorts are planning for retirement, they are deciding whether they need to sell their business and find something else to provide a more substantial income. The expenses incurred for the house for Karen and her first husband placed them about \$10,000 in the hole and the numerous attempts to help Karen get the drug abuse treatment she needed added another \$20,000. They will never recoup this money. Their home has been refinanced and now that their business is in a downward spiral, they face another financial struggle. Medical costs for Danielle can also put a dent in the cash flow. If they adopted her, they could add her to their medical insurance and ease that expense. As it is now, they just pray that she doesn't get sick or hurt and need medical attention. Danielle's father (from Karen's second marriage) does not provide consistent financial support.

Keeping up physically with two active children sometimes causes Mike and Laura to feel more than their ages of 53 and 57. Church, school sports, and other extracurricular activities demand much of their time and energy. But that is one area that brings

enjoyment for them as a family unit. They enjoy the pool at their home and find it a relaxing escape from the hectic schedule of the children's activities. Mike finds time to hunt and Laura enjoys her church work. They have dinner out twice a month with friends. These are necessary and cherished emotional and physical outlets for them.

Laura shared that their marriage is stronger for taking on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. "It could have gone the opposite way. It almost did at first but now we can be totally upfront with each other. We share the decisions and the pain." She said that at first it was so painful to look at their daughter and see what she was doing to herself and to her children. They were angry at her because she was wasting her life and neglecting her children but also angry at themselves for not recognizing the early signs of drug abuse. If they had known what was going on, could they have prevented the outcome? This is a question they kept asking themselves. They realized that their knowledge about Karen's drug abuse came too late to prevent an unwanted, teenage pregnancy and that their attempts to force Karen to get help with her drug problem would not make the problem go away. They had to take over the parenting responsibilities for the sakes of their grandchildren and they don't regret it. Knowing how the events unfolded and what lay ahead, they would do it again. The grandchildren have been a blessing in so many ways. They are bright, basically happy young adults. It feels good to have a chance to make a positive difference in their lives. "I told Danielle and Mark, you touch one drug and you are out of here with what you came with—your birthday suit—not your car or clothes, food or money. That is not a threat. That is where I draw the line. Been there, done that, and I just can't do it again. And I won't. It is not an option. You make the choice." They both looked at her as if to say, "Mom, you know we aren't going to do that." They have seen and felt the hurt and pain that comes from drug abuse. For parents facing the same situation, Laura offers this advice. "Never be afraid of



having your child drug tested. Insult them. Just do it. I heard about drugs but we did not realize how easy they were to get or what the symptoms of drug use were. It is so painful to realize their problem. It was totally devastating. One minute you are going to die. You don't want to face tomorrow. You talk until you are blue in the face and then you go through all the strict rules and if they don't want to get off the drugs, you can't make them. And then they bring a child into the world and you have to decide if you are going to rescue that child, hold the parent responsible, or place the child up for adoption with another family or with yourself. Whatever the decision, know that it will be a struggle, filled with frustration and anger. But you will also have moments of pride and joy, laughter and tears."

Laura and Mike have allowed Karen and her brother, who is recovering from crack addiction, to return home temporarily. They have told them firmly and without reservation that this is the last chance. No more. If they blow this, they are gone and will NEVER be welcomed back. The choice is theirs. I asked her how she could say that now. What gave her the strength to be so firm and no longer be an enabler for her children's drug addictions? Her response was, "The continuous hurt and betrayal of your child and then seeing the pain, fear, anger, and embarrassment of my grandchildren. No more. God has given me the strength to get this far. If I have to, he will make me strong enough to say 'no more'. God's grace is sufficient!"

Laura and Mike return home, leaving their daughter in the care of the medical staff. Danielle gives each of them a hug and tells them she loves them. She goes to Mark's room and fills him in on the evening's events. He comforts her and assures her that she is safe here and is loved: "Maybe someday Mom and Dad will be able to make you legally theirs. Be patient."

Mike goes to his recliner to find some peace and quiet. Laura goes to the kitchen to clean up the remains of the dinner that was abruptly interrupted earlier that evening. She turns on the teakettle and brews a cup of



comforting tea for herself and Mike. When she returns to the family room, Mike has fallen asleep and so she quietly drinks her cup of tea, turns off the light by Mike's chair, covers him with a blanket, and utters a prayer of thanksgiving for being blessed with such a caring husband and father. She locks the doors, securing their home and family from any outside dangers. As she goes down the hall, she passes Mark's room and sees Danielle curled up beside her brother, sound asleep. Mark looks up at Karen with a reassuring smile and whispers, "She'll be okay Mom, Dani just needs our love and security."

Laura kisses Mark goodnight after he has carried Danielle to her bedroom. She tucks in Danielle's covers, kisses her goodnight, and closes the door. As she prepares for bed, she reflects on Mark's words and knows a peace that all will be okay tomorrow. She reaffirms the decision to raise her grandchildren regardless of the physical and mental stress she experiences. "Isn't that what it is all about? The need for love and security—that is why I do it. That is why I know I can continue with God's grace to be the mother these children need. Thank God for second chances."

#### CODA

Our empirical research (Solomon and Marx 1995) utilizing data from 1988 National Children's Health Supplement finds that grandchildren raised by grandparents fare quite well relative to children with biological parents present, a category which includes both single-parent and blended families. Furthermore, children raised solely by



grandparents are not significantly different, except for academic performance, from children raised in traditional families where two biological parents are present. On the other hand, we (Solomon and Marx 1998, 1999, 2000) have explored the possible negative health consequences of surrogate parenting to grandparents. The physical, mental, and social health of custodial grandparents is clearly poorer than that of the same age peers. They have more chronic conditions, lower self-rated physical health, and they find strenuous activity more difficult. By most measures, the emotional health and life satisfaction of custodial grandparents is lower than that of grandparents with fewer caregiving responsibilities. Finally, the social health of custodials, as measured by both quantity and quality of relationships, is also worse than that of grandparents who do not have full responsibility for grandchild care. This means they have fewer people to rely on for assistance with childcare, fewer people to turn to in emergencies, fewer people to confide in, and fewer sources of other types of support.

In the preceding narrative, individual biography is used to illustrate those general findings. Clearly, extreme constraint in utilizing general patterns to explain individual cases is warranted. Rather, our aim is to give life to the faceless numbers that surround this important topic. The story (a result of several taped interviews with the grandparents) brings to life the challenges of raising grandchildren and the struggles and battles that grandparents confront. While grandchildren may benefit from the custodial grandparent family structure, grandparents are confronted with many unique challenges and responsibilities that increase certain health risks. We hope this narrative is insightful and encouraging for those who are facing the decision of whether they need to take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. Such grandparents need to make new choices for their grandchildren within the long shadow cast by their previous decisions made with their own children. Mike and Laura are examples of the determination, love, perseverance and courage it takes to

accept the challenge a second chance at parenthood brings. Their story illustrates the complex dynamic between the joy of giving and the pain of sacrifice. It becomes evident that the heavy responsibility of grandparents raising their grandchildren could be lightened if there was coordination of the varied institutions that intersect in this life challenge. Grandparents must have knowledge about and access to the services available to them. Community based support of services, such as substance abuse, school teachers, counselors and administrators, social work professionals, medical personnel, and financial planners, to name a few, must be readily available to these families. If the families are to make the wisest decisions, the cooperative assistance of these institutions is imperative.\*

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