

Seniors rearranging lives to raise grandchildren

By Michelle Dupler, Tri-Cities Herald, September 7, 2008

Marie Saylor remembers when her two grandchildren came to live with her, they wanted to call her "Mommy."

But Marie and her husband, Darwin, weren't Mommy and Daddy, even though they were taking over parenting Samantha and Cameron, then 23 months and 10 months old.

As the nation celebrates Grandparents Day today, the Kennewick couple are among the more than 35,000 Washington grandparents in their 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond raising grandchildren.

The Saylor family were in their early 40s when their grandchildren came to live with them after their son's marriage crumbled. Neither their son nor his ex-wife could care for Samantha and Cameron, now 18 and 17.

Marie Saylor, now 60, said they still had a 17-year-old son at home and had been looking forward to planning for their retirement and enjoying some of the benefits of having an empty nest.

Instead, they rearranged their lives to raise children for the second time.

"I don't feel we've missed anything," Saylor said. "We don't have the freedom. You do have to say that. ... I think for a lot of parents and grandparents, we get our greatest joy from the sunlight that comes from our kids."

But they've always been clear with Samantha and Cameron that they're Grandma and Grandpa, not Mom and Dad, because they felt it was important to keep those roles clear, Saylor said.

Officials with the state Department of Social and Health Services said the number of grandparents caring for their grandchildren has been rising for several years.

"Grandparents are coming to the rescue," said Carlos Carillo, area administrator for the Division of Children and Family Services office in Richland.

Whenever possible the state's mandate is to put children from trouble homes with relatives rather than in foster care.

"I think the need is enormous for relatives to take care of children who are abused and neglected," he said.

"We have enough evidence to prove that children blossom with families," Carillo said. "But we also know there are some families not equipped to protect children."

Ann Philip, a Kennewick widow raising her grandson, said that even for someone already experienced as a parent, caring for a grandchild comes with surprises.

"(Parenting) definitely has changed," said Philip, 58, of Kennewick.

Things like putting 10-year-old Nathan to bed, fixing him breakfast in the morning and making him do his homework are familiar routines from her first time as a parent to one daughter.

But there are new challenges this time, like having to explain to Nathan why his mother and father aren't there.

"You want to be honest, tell them everything they need to know, but never put down their parents," she said.

And other questions came up since it's her first time raising a boy.

"One of the toughest things for me was, if there's no male in the house, how do you teach him how to pee standing up?" she said with a laugh.

Her solution was to throw Cheerios into the toilet bowl and tell him to aim in the middle.

Connie Wormington, raising grandchildren ages 12 and 15, said one of the biggest challenges for her is how to balance being their parent and grandparent.

The Kennewick woman said she doesn't have the time or energy to give the eight grandchildren not living with her the attention they crave, she said.

"The two I'm raising take all of my time," said Wormington, who runs Just Roses.

Philip, who works full time at Washington State University Tri-Cities, said finances can be another struggle, especially for older grandparents who live on fixed incomes. Sometimes retirees who take on parental responsibilities are forced back to work to make ends meet.

Carillo said there are programs through DSHS that can provide medical coupons, basic food help and financial grants for relatives caring for children.

Parenting at an older age also can take a toll on grandparents' social lives.

Saylor said she's lost friendships because she can't do the same kinds of activities her friends are interested in.

"They didn't want to go see Bambi," Saylor said.

As a single woman, Philip has struggled with trying to date while raising a young boy. She said she usually makes it through one date, then the guys learn she has a child at home and they disappear.

"Most men my age are not interested in raising a child," she said.

That's one reason Philip started a support group about seven years ago for grandparents to talk about parenting, to help each other find resources or just to lend each other a shoulder to lean on.

Wormington now runs the Relatives As Parents group, but is finding it hard to keep the group going as her grandchildren become teenagers. She hopes someone will volunteer to help lead the group.

"It is a group that really needs to be out there," she said.

Saylor's advice is grandparents should make sure they're ready for the commitment before agreeing to raise grandchildren.

"They have to make sure that they realize the long road, because they have to have stability," Saylor said.

"You have to make sure you're up to it. ... When you look back, 18 years is a lot of your life."