

The New Generation of Grandfamilies

The number of grandparents raising grandchildren has catapulted in the past decade, impacting millions of lives and hearts.

By Sierra Dawn McClain

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A shriek came from outside. Brenda Louthan peered out the window. Were they doing all right? Her husband, Richard, gripped a baseball in his wrinkled hand, preparing for another pitch. The ball met the bat this time with a crack. Ethan, Louthan's eight-year-old grandson, dropped the baseball bat with another happy shriek and skirted the yard on flying feet. Louthan smiled. They were all right—for the moment.

Richard's Alzheimer's was worsening, Ethan had severe autism and Brenda Louthan was taking care of them both on her own.

In 2008, Louthan had to retire from her administrative job at Sacred Heart Hospital to take care of her husband as he battled dementia and Alzheimer's.

Then another tragedy struck. Louthan got the call from DHS: her youngest son and his partner were abusing drugs and neglecting their autistic son. DHS placed Ethan with Louthan, who was already caregiving for her husband full-time.

"I went to Alzheimer's and autism meetings all the time," said Louthan. "I met so many older people going through the same thing—people who could hardly take care of themselves trying to take care of grandchildren."

But that was then. Ethan is 15 now. Richard is gone. Louthan, 78, has been widowed for six years and her grandson Ethan, who she raised for eight years, is back with his birth father. "I remember the bad things and the good things," Louthan said. Her voice cracked. "It all happened so fast."

A 2017 Children's Defense Fund report revealed that the number of U.S. children living in households headed by grandparents or other relatives was 7.5 million. In Oregon alone, Census data showed that nearly 51,000 children live in grandparent-headed households.

Tricia Brown, a DHS trainer who teaches local foster and adoptive parents how to raise children, said that a decade ago, relative providers made up only about 10 percent of her clients. Now, they constitute around 80 percent. Every day, she sees the financial, physical and emotional toll grandparents experience from raising their grandchildren.

The American Society on Aging reported that grandparents are raising grandchildren primarily because of the opioid crisis and other forms of addiction.

Rachel Jacobsen, a manager for Oregon's Senior and Disability Services Division, explained that across the state, the children's parents are addicted, incarcerated, chronically unemployed or dead from overdose. "We call it the missing generation," said Jacobsen.

Grandparents and other relatives are trying to fill in the gap. "The burden on these grandparents is huge," said Jacobsen. They are often struggling to take care of their spouse, parents or themselves, let alone grandchildren.

"Parenting the second time around isn't easy financially for most families," Jacobsen said. "Suddenly, grandparents are the breadwinners." But some can barely afford bread. Jacobsen said that Social Security—meant to be supplemental—has become the only reliable source of income supporting many Oregonian grandfamilies.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway found that one in five grandparents raising grandchildren lives below the poverty line and one in four has a disability.

When Louthan was caring for her husband and grandson, she was also struggling to maintain her own deteriorating health, wrestling with the devastation of knowing her son's life was falling apart and questioning whether she had the strength to parent a grandson who had been through trauma. She said her faith kept her going, but some nights all she could do was weep.

But not every relative caregiver is a grandparent. John and Margaret Hardin were in their 60s when disaster compelled them to raise their niece and nephew, Nikia and Shakoiya, then ages 4 and 7. Their mother had spiraled from divorce into meth addiction. She went from unemployed to homeless. Sometimes she slept under a bridge, other times in a freight container. "She basically went away and left her kids," said John Hardin. "She was a good mom when she was sober, but meth wrecked her."

Raising their niece and nephew was difficult. The Hardins had five restraining orders against their own daughter. They were barraged with bills and legal expenses.

But Hardin said the hardest part was meeting the children's emotional needs. "You can't make it right," he said. "We loved them like our own, but we could never replace a mom and dad. 'Why are drugs more important to my mom than I am?' How do you explain that to an eight-year-old? So we said: 'Until she gets better, you're going to have to be with us for a while.'"

Even though raising the children was challenging, Hardin said it was a joy. "We did everything with them just like they were our own kids. And we would do it all over again."

Although being abandoned by parents and raised by relatives is a traumatic experience, some children have come out grateful on the other side.

Crystal Rutherford, 28, has worked for DHS for over two years putting broken families back together. Rutherford was once a child in the system herself. She came from a neglectful and abusive family battling drug addiction and alcohol, so she was placed with her great-grandparents.

“The hardest time for me was when I was little,” Rutherford said. She didn’t understand why her mom had abandoned her. She felt isolated, anxious and angry. Every evening, her great-grandpa read her a story or completed a word puzzle with her. Every night when she curled up in bed, her great-grandma sat beside her and listened while she talked about her day. “They never made me feel like a burden,” she said. “I wouldn’t be the person I am today without my grandparents.”

DHS trainer Tricia Brown said that grandparents don’t often get the support and encouragement they need from the government or their communities. Brown said that support organizations such as the Relatives as Parents Program are understaffed and underfunded, with long waitlists of grandparents who need help. She also said Oregonians can do a better job noticing and helping grandparent caregivers—people like Brenda Louthan. “Grandparents should be celebrated,” she said. “People tend to respond in judgment to kids in the system and families that look different. It’s an imperfect system. But grandparents are a vital part of it and should be commended for the work they do.”

Brenda Louthan took a sip of her cocoa and closed her eyes—thinking, remembering. “My husband was in the earlier stages of Alzheimer’s when we got Ethan,” she said. She opened her eyes. Her lashes were wet. “They loved and helped each other though they both faced mental challenges. They would sit and color together for hours. My husband fiddled around in the yard and planted a garden, and Ethan was right there beside him. They loved to play baseball together in the yard.” She sighed. “Those were hard days. But I want them back.”