

Happy Grandparents' Day!

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SEPTEMBER 4

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Grandparents raising grand kids



Submitted photo

Shirley Piedt of Kelowna (back row with sunglasses) enjoys a picnic with some of the Okanagan families that participate in a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG) Support Circle. Parent Support Services Society of BC is keen to bring a support circle to Kamloops and is looking for volunteers to undergo facilitator training in Kelowna in October. See page 14 for more details.

By Moneca Jantzen

Most grandparents, aunts and uncles expect to enjoy the privilege of spoiling their grandchildren, nieces and nephews and returning

them to their parents after a visit, but for many families this privilege never materializes. For a variety of reasons many kinship care relationships are borne of necessity and grandparents, aunts and

uncles and other family members end up raising children in their extended families temporarily or permanently. Along with this comes some special challenges unique to this kind of family.

Cassandra Strain is a prime example of a kinship care mom as she eventually became the parent of all three of her sister's offspring, Ivy (10), Sophie (9) and Maddie (4) in addition to her partner, Patrick's, 7-year-old daughter.

Three weeks before the birth of Ivy, Strain, a former child protection worker herself, discovered that her sister was expecting and the Ministry of Children and Families was planning to remove the infant at birth.

"I had a very short time to decide on whether or not I would take her. My entire life changed — I went from being a single, carefree, career oriented woman to being responsible for a newborn. To say it was an adjustment is an understatement," said Strain.

Taking on the other two just seemed like the right thing

to do although gaining custody of the youngest was fraught with legal complications. It required the help of a lawyer and was emotionally and physically draining.

It was during this time that Strain discovered Parent Support Services of BC (PSS). Her mother had phoned the "Grandparent Raising Grandchildren" support line looking for help and Strain said that the support line workers were invaluable.

"Without their support, I may have given up simply out of

frustration with the system," said Strain. "They not only supported me emotionally, but they pointed me to resources or to advocates who may help. They know the system well and are passionate about supporting grandparents/kin to be in the best position they can be."

Strain points out the many challenges that are faced by these "Kincare or GRG" families. Often the children involved have experienced trauma or

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See "Kamloops support circle" page 14



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GRG Support Circle in store for Kamloops?

Continued from page 1

have special needs such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FASD). The children will almost always have grief and loss issues from not living with their biological parents.

Grandparents, in particular, worry that they might make the same mistakes they made with their own children. Feelings of guilt and compassion are mixed in with the desire to protect the children and give them a healthy and safe upbringing when the parent(s) are unable to do so.

Kincare families face a certain amount of stigma because their families are "different." Some GRGs experience social isolation as their peers are off travelling and leading more leisurely lives in retirement. Younger parents simply don't see them as peers. There is often financial hardship coupled with a range of legal struggles related to access and guardianship.

In some communities like Kelowna and Prince George, PSS has been able to establish GRG Support Circles. These offer

families an opportunity to meet with others going through similar challenges. It becomes a place to discuss and explore the various issues that are unique to kinship care or "skip-generation" families. It provides peer support in a safe and relevant environment.

Strain and her family recently attended the PSS/GRG nature camp on Galiano Island.

"The camp was very beneficial to our family, especially the children. They have never met other kids being raised by family members. It normalized our situation a bit. It can be a bit confusing as I am their aunt but I am also the only "mom" the two eldest have had," said Strain.

She connected with many of the GRGs during the camp and said that many of the concerns held by the older group were ones that she could relate to and share. One very real fear for the GRGs beyond normal concerns of aging, is what would happen should they pass away or if they became incapacitated in some way.

The services offered by PSS are remarkably helpful in navigating this often second and unexpected round of parenting. The support circles in each community provide an extra layer of support to such "grandfamilies."

According to the 2016 Canada Census, Kamloops has 120 children under the age of 14 living with their grandparents without parents; and 55 with other relatives and no parents. By comparison, Kelowna has 180 and 70 respectively. Over 51,000 children nationwide are living with family members without their parents. This does not include children in foster care of which there are another 28,000.

Shirley Piedt is a volunteer facilitator of a GRG Support Circle in Kelowna. She joined forces with Joa Lazurus, a GRG that was interested in setting up a support circle. They both took the training and successfully established the Kelowna group three years ago.

Their circle meets each week for two hours

during the school year. They provide coffee and refreshments, childcare and a safe place for members to share their stories of success and challenge in raising their "kin."

Piedt said, "Knowing that you're not alone and that others understand what you're dealing with and going through is a help."

Since 2014, the Kelowna group has assisted between 30-40 families with anywhere from 3-10 participants joining the weekly meetings.

PSS was very supportive in establishing the circle and should a volunteer facilitator choose to take the training and establish a group in Kamloops, they will receive all of the support they require to get the group up and running. There is a manual, help with advertising and support from other circle facilitators. The next training session is scheduled for the weekend of October 13-15 in Kelowna. Contact Bella Cenezero at 1-877-345-9777 or visit the website at parentsupportbc.ca FMI.

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September 10, 2017

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