

Parents again

More and more grandparents are the primary guardians for their grandchildren

By Ashley Ames

Democrat staff writer

It wasn't exactly how Sid Jenkins and Suzanne Parke had imagined their retirement.

"It was a whole re-do, reset of everything that we thought we were going to do," said Parke, 65. "We thought that when Sid retired we'd sell the house, get a motor home, see the country.

"It's a whole different lifestyle, for sure," she said.

The couple, who have been together for 10 years, took on the responsibility of raising Jenkins' grandchildren after their mother died of cancer two years ago.

On a recent afternoon, cries of delight wafted into the living room from outside their midtown Tallahassee home, where the children — Donovan, 6, Joseph, 8, and Dakota, 9 — played in the pool before dinner. The eldest — Alexandria, 12 — was in her room.

"Everything is different," Jenkins, 64, said. He has not yet retired from his job as a physical therapy assistant.

Jenkins and Parke are part of a growing demographic of grandparents acting as parents.

In 2009, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 6.7 million grandparents acting as caregivers for children under age 18.

Ashley Webb, who runs a program for this special demographic at the Tallahassee Senior Center, said that number is only growing.

In 2000, one out of every 12 grandparents was acting as a primary caregiver to their grandchildren, she said. In 2010, that number had jumped to one in 10.

Webb coordinates the Grandparents as Parents program, which meets monthly and offers support to grandparents in the form of health consultations, referrals to additional community resources and tips on how to be a new parent — again.

No need to go it alone

The program, a partnership between the city, Leon County and the Tallahassee Senior Center Foundation, also shows the grandparents something that many didn't know: They are not alone.

"It really is just a networking group for the grandparents," Webb said. "They get more support from each other than I could ever provide for them."

Jenkins and Parke both attend the GaP meetings and have for about two years. Parke said the experience has been incredible.

"After the first meeting it was just like, thank God," she said. "Thank God that there were people in the same situation who could help you out and tell you where to turn."

Webb said there are about 2,000 grandparents acting as parents in Leon County. The support group serves about 85 of them.

Dr. Alice Pomidor, a professor in the Depart

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"We love them and we want them to have the best life possible. We are here for them and we know we have a lot of support from a lot of people. We can't imagine life without them now."

SUZANNE PARKE

grandparent



GLENN BEIL/DEMOCRAT

Sid Jenkins and Suzanne Parke pose for a family photo with their grandchildren Dakota, in pink, Joseph in blue, Donovan in orange and Alexandria. Their retirement plans changed after Jenkins' daughter died.

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Grandparent s

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ment of Geriatrics at Florida State University, emphasized the importance of a support system for grandparents raising a second set of children.

"Don't hesitate to ask for help. There are always benefits to being able to share," she said. "It's really helpful to find other people who can give you survival tips."

She also said that grandparents are facing a whole new set of challenges, on top of the ones already associated with being a parent. Often, age reduces physical stamina, something that could affect a grandparent charged with the care of a younger child who has lots of energy or needs to be picked up.

Communication with older children might also present a problem, she said, based simply on generational differences and the new forms of communication that have exploded in the last 10 years.

"Older adults may not be quite as comfortable with the use of computers or mobile devices," she said.

Culturally, things have changed as well.

"Behavior standards and dressing standards tend to be so very different, so there tends to be more conflict, potentially, as what constitutes ready to go out the door appearance," she said.

Webb said that the reasons a grandparent takes on the role of a parent vary and could include the illness, incarceration or unwillingness of the parent. Often, she said, the grandparents are also dealing with a child who is trying to handle the uprooting and traumatic removal of their parent.

"A lot of times the kids have experiences of loss or abandonment," Webb said. "We do try to focus and provide access to counseling services because there are issues emotionally they are trying to handle."

Grandparents have experience

But there are advantages to running the gauntlet a second time. Most grandparents know the tricks, Pomidor said.

"They have raised at least one set successfully, so they've seen this once before," Pomidor said. "They tend to be more patient and have the virtue of accumulated experience."

Since it does represent a drastic change in lifestyle for most grandparents, Pomidor said that carving out a little personal time is also important.

"They should take some period of time every day, even if it is only as little as 15 minutes, to do something for themselves alone," she said. "And not devote every second of every day to taking care of the child."

Parke said, "We do feel overwhelmed at times, and that's where the support of other people really helps. Because there are other people in the same situation. There are people raising one kid, there are people raising five kids.

"It's just not easy, but knowing you aren't alone in the whole thing (really helps)," she said.

Mary Coker, 62, was charged with raising her daughter's boys 12 years ago after their mother was incarcerated.

Now three of the four are in their te ens.

Coker said that the GaP program has been invaluable. It helped connect her with the Children's Home Society's MODEL Mentoring program to provide a male role model for the boys and exposed her to Young Marines Big Bend. Young Marines, a youth education and service program, has helped her eldest grandson, Kaytron, stay and excel in school, she said.

"I've only seen good come from this," she said of GaP. "(We are) constantly meeting people that can help us as a group."

Kaytron Coker, 17, said that he greatly admires his grandmother for what she has been able to do.

"The one person I look up to is my grandmother and the way she raised us," he said.

He credits her with getting him involved with Young Marines.

"I don't know where I would be if my grandmother didn't find that program," he said.

He owes his success to her, he added . " I can't see myself making good grades without my grandma being there for me," he said.

Jenkins said that, despite the difficulties, he is happy to be given the chance to take care of his grandchildren. We've got these kids now, he said.

"It wouldn't be right without them," he said. "Just like the first time, you are still swimming in the dark sometimes. Hoping you are going to see sunlight down the road. Then you find it and you can go on. It's just very rewarding to see them grow up."

"We love them and we want them to have the best life possible," Parke said. "We are here for them and we know we have a lot of support from a lot of people.

"We can't imagine life without them now," she said.

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