

AS WE AGE: Volunteer Grandparents making a real impact



Maureen Hopper has been a volunteer grandparent to Radhika Patel for seven of her 10 years.

MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

By [Nicole Clark - Burnaby NewsLeader](#)

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Seema Patel hit a low point in her life after the birth of her daughter, Radhika. Sufferering

from severe postpartum depression and coping with the loss of her mother to Lou Gehrig's disease when Radhika was only two, Patel felt as though she was in a black hole. That's when her social worker introduced her to an organization called Volunteer Grandparents.

"I thought it would be so nice if my daughter could have a relationship with someone from an older generation," said Patel.

Two and a half months later, just in time for Radhika's third birthday, she was matched with Maureen Hopper, a Burnaby nurse whose own daughter had a volunteer grandparent while growing up. Having had a child later in life, Hopper knew she wouldn't have grandchildren anytime soon, so she decided to become a volunteer.

Hopper knew as soon as she met Radhika that they were a great match.

"I couldn't have gotten a better kid. She's very loving and we have many of the same interests," said Hopper. "We've been very compatible right from the beginning."

Volunteer Grandparents is a Burnaby-based non-profit organization which serves the Lower Mainland. The organization was founded by social worker Marjorie Anderson in 1973 with the goal of bringing together people of grandparenting age with children who don't have the immediate presence of grandparents in their lives, said Veronica Grossi, program coordinator. The organization offers the family match program, where volunteers over 50 are matched with a child who has no access to natural grandparents and is aged three to 14. Volunteer grandparents can have their own natural grandchildren and must commit to spending two to four hours a week for one year with the new child. The organization also has a school-based program, where volunteers go to elementary schools for one-to-one reading time with children. The organization may be small, with approximately 35 grandparent volunteers, but has had a significant affect on the families it serves.

When Patel met Hopper, she was in an abusive relationship and felt ostracized by her community for wanting to leave her husband. Patel said that Hopper empowered and encouraged her to end the relationship, even when her friends and family told her not to.

"Maureen opened our eyes to female power. She taught us that healthy self esteem frees you from the judgement for others," said Patel.

"She gave me the courage to leave him."

The idea of female empowerment has been passed on to Radhika, who wants to be a doctor or veterinarian, said Patel, adding that Hopper has opened Radhika's eyes to many things

she may have not otherwise experienced.

Radhika, who is now 10 years old, says she loves skiing and kayaking with her “Granny.” They live a seven-minute drive from each other and enjoy time together at least once a week. Patel says Hopper is there for all holidays and birthdays, and also goes to watch Radhika perform traditional Hindu dances.

“Radhika is such a sweet girl. I have gotten far more out of this than her, she has been such a joy to be around,” said Hopper. “I have a hard time being out of town a few days because I miss her.”

Hopper encourages those of grandparenting age to become volunteers with the organization, which has a waitlist of families hoping to be matched with a grandparent.

Radhika feels lucky she has Hopper in her life and has only positive things to say about her grannie.

“My Grannie is really special and she’s really kind. I love her.”

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