

FAMILIES

Volunteer Grandparents unite generations

Group matches seniors with kids and their families — and everyone benefits

BY JENNY LEE
VANCOUVER SUN

With spiky red hair and a penchant for leopard prints, Carol Wells (then 62) sure didn't look like a proper grandma.

Zoe and Ruby Gilson — seven and four years old respectively — assessed the applicant speculatively.

Little did they know just how much preparation had gone into the meeting.

Wells had arrived at their home via Volunteer Grandparents, a long-standing but low-key Vancouver non-profit organization that is seeking seniors to match with young families.

"I'm single and I love children and I worked for the airlines as a flight attendant for 42 years and I was busy with that and never felt any void," Wells said.

"I retired three years ago, and all my friends were becoming grandparents, and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, being a grandparent sounds quite wonderful.' I just sort of felt like I needed some young people in my life."

Meanwhile, North Vancouver social-work student Liesel Gilson had been lamenting that her kids would never experience the pleasures of growing up with grandparents — their only living grandparent lives in faraway Dublin.

Gilson, like Wells, found Volunteer Grandparents on the Web.

Volunteer Grandparents was started in 1973 by Marjorie Anderson, who was a Vancouver Crisis Centre volunteer when she took back-to-back calls from a senior and a young mother who missed having family to share Sunday afternoons.

"How can children, without the acceptance of at least one older person, grow up to feel that they belong, are part of the continuum of mankind, are part of something larger, and hence can become adults responsible for part of that?" Anderson recently said to Volunteer Grandparents' current program coordinator Veronica Grossi and intern Po-Yi Liu while they were researching the organization's history.

"Our mission is to bridge and enrich the generations," Grossi said. "It's a win-win situation for everyone."

"The grandparent is matched to the entire family, not just the child or children. Parents get additional support from the volunteer. The volunteer continues to be engaged in the



STEVE BOSCH/PNG

Volunteer grandparent Carol Wells has milk and cookies for Ruby Gilson, 7, (left) and Zoe Gilson, 10. Wells receives hugs in return.

community, sharing skills, and is mentoring this child. The child benefits from the stable, loving, consistent role model.

"It doesn't happen overnight. That's one of the challenges. It takes time to develop these close relationships. We are not just a free babysitter."

The program presently has 30 matched grandparents, 36 children waiting for grandparents, but only two volunteer grandparents waiting for a match. Some families wait years, Grossi said.

Not only is there a shortage of volunteers; unless a match seems highly likely to succeed, Grossi holds off making

introductions. The children are aged three to 14. Volunteers are 50 and older and may or may not have biological grandchildren.

Volunteers go through a 2½-hour screening interview, a second interview, and submit five references, a criminal-record check and a driving record. Grossi also spends several hours with families learning their values and getting to know the child.

As the tiny organization's sole employee, Grossi, does everything from matching children with grandparents to training and promotions. Funding is limited, so Grossi, who holds a

post-baccalaureate in gerontology and a degree in family and nutritional sciences, works half time.

"Carol is such a light of our life," Gilson, 44, said. "She's a real get-down-on-the-floor-and-play-with-the-kids lady. She's like a surrogate mom for me — a member of our family."

The day Gilson and husband John, 45, a vice-president with Cobs Bread, met Wells, they weren't sure what to expect. "She came over," Gilson said. "We had a craft planned, and I can't even remember how much of that happened. They just took to each other."

"She's brought a whole new perspective," Gilson said. "She's brought a lot of joy and energy, and she got me into jazz. She and I go to concerts together. We go out, just the two of us. She's increased the size of our family. She's part of our network, part of who we are. I know the kids are really proud and they say 'My grandma this, and my grandma that.'"

Wells has been the Gilsons' Grandma Carol for three years now.

"I go to all their dance concerts and piano concerts and everything a grandma does," Wells said. "I just go over and watch videos with them on

Friday nights and... Nothing is better... gling up with... watching a movie...

"My own grand... lived in the sam... she says. "I wa... grandfather.

"I think it enri... Makes you feel... you are. Makes... life more. I just... within myself. I l... spending time w... hearing about v... doing at school... me feel the circle... plete. Zoe said to... an awesome gra... just sort of melte...

She does try to... tal preferences... like candy.

"The kids always... ones on me," she... er night I was giv... ner, and Ruby wa... chocolate in her m... probably deep de... a normal proced... what grandmas c... you knew it Zoe v... They didn't rush... parents that one... asked for chocol... after dinner, I sa... ter wait for Mom... and ask about tha...

Grandparents... own expenses, ar... responsible for... partnership with... Foundation prov... cess to events.

For the first s... parent is expecte... the child and vo... they meet. "We... families," Grossi... relationship is... child, that's not... is about. We wa... healthy commu... ple are connecte... er, then we're go... more caring soci... ing to have less s... less age segregati...

Volunteer grand... ma, 63, and Man... Burnaby have bio... children in Easter...

"We get to see t... blue moon, which... difficult for us,"... "There was this... that will help us... child who would... gate grandchild."

It took six mo... match.

"I don't know I... did the matching... just like one of... grandchildren. O... er, could have be... in another lifetim...

jennylee@vancouver...

ONLINE

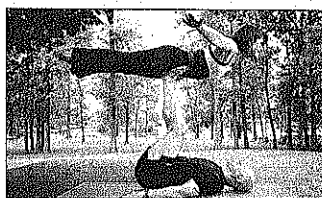
Plants aplenty

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Team spirit

Couples who work out together reap not only the physical benefits of exercise but the psychological benefits as well.



TUESDAY

Recycling those rags

A new culture is gathering steam in the Vancouver area as the weakened economy bumps into people's growing desires to reduce, reuse and recycle.

