

Feature

Fate decreed North Surrey resident Jim Skilling would never have his own children.

His only son died before reaching one year of age and Skilling's later adoption request was denied.

But that didn't prevent him from having grandchildren — eight of them.

Although his wife was not able to bear any more children after the first was born, and his adoption request was turned down because he worked on a military base with explosives, Skilling never stopped working with children in his spare time. He volunteered as a scout master and cub master in whatever location the military transferred him.

After retiring from the military 10 years ago, Skilling, now 68, found he had too much time on his hands, especially with the subsequent death of his wife that left him very lonely, he said. Furthermore, Skilling learned he had high blood pressure and was dangerously overweight.

That's when his doctor told him about the 20-year-old B.C. organization Volunteer Grandparents Society.

"My doctor... said 'you can't sit around and do nothing,'" recalled Skilling, who still wears the traditional military brush cut.

So, after a criminal record and background check by the society, Skilling suddenly became a grandfather of three boys: Josh, Andrew and Jonathan.

But three grandchildren weren't enough for Skilling, who knew more than 150 B.C. children were still in need of volunteer grandparents. He then became the grandparent of Terry, Tony and April, a Pitt Meadows family.

"My doctor...said 'you can't sit around and do nothing'."

And when he discovered a family from Ghana living across the street from him had no grandparents for their children, Jackie and Jeff, he promptly recommended himself to the society for the position.

"I sent their name to the office and said 'don't give them away, these are mine.'

"In fact, it's her (Jackie's) birthday in a couple of weeks. She's already got her present from Grandpa, a set of roller blades."

Grandpa himself has even tried a pair.

"I'm not worried about appearances. I put those roller blades on. My sister used to say 'he's two years older than his grandchildren and he's got the toys to prove it.'"

He's also involved himself in many other activities with his grandchildren he said he normally wouldn't do, such as fishing, visiting the Vancouver Aquarium or going swimming at the Newton Wave Pool.

"They got me down the big waterslide in Newton. I guess I made a fairly big splash landing feet first in the pool," he chuckled.



Volunteer grandparent Jim Skilling with Jeff and Jackie. Leah S. Briggs/Now

Volunteer grandpa

He has no children, but Surrey resident Jim Skilling has eight grandchildren, thanks to the Volunteer Grandparents Society. He credits his volunteer work with saving his life.

By Cheryl Ziola

On another occasion while visiting Fort Langley and listening to a tour guide describe some of the

tools, Skilling said "his boys" made him laugh in spite of himself.

"The guide was holding up one tool saying 'this is 10 years old, and this other one is 100 years

old. Anyone know anyone who's 100 years old?' My boys nodded ... looking at me."

Besides giving him some humorous memories and easing his loneliness, Skilling credits volunteer work with saving his life.

"A letter from my sister to my older brother says 'you can thank God for the Volunteer Grandparents Society. That's why you've still got a brother.'"

For example, Skilling remembered his recent stomach surgery when one of his grandchildren, April, maintained a bedside vigil.

"She kept saying 'Grandpa, don't die, I love you.' It pulls you back," he said. "You're there when they need you and they're there when you need them.

"If I don't answer the phone for a while, one of them will be over."

Skilling said he wishes his friends would also join the group and not only help themselves but other children without grandparents in their lives.

"I've still got too many friends sitting on a lunch counter stool thinking about their aches and pains. They don't know what they're missing. The youngsters don't want expensive things from you, they want time. And grandpas have lots of time."

Skilling especially has time to cheer on his "football hero" grandchild, Jeff, at his Surrey football league games.

Skilling's also quick to pull out his wallet photo of Jeff in his team uniform, proudly adding Jeff was voted most valuable player in '92.

Jeff's mother Dorothy Twum said in a phone interview the relationship between her children and

"She kept saying, 'Grandpa, don't die, I love you.' It pulls you back."

Skilling has made her "very happy.

"They didn't even know them (their own grandparents in Ghana) because they've never been back."

And Jeff, 13, said of Grandpa: "He's nice. He helps me with lots of stuff, like homework sometimes.

"He also takes us to the carnivals," he added, admitting he was "lonely" before Skilling became his volunteer grandparent.

Skilling said he doesn't even look upon his commitment to his grandchildren as volunteer work anymore. "The word volunteer disappears after about the third visit. This is my hobby. I don't go to bingo. I don't go off on trips to Reno. Kids are my thing.

"I'm looking at these children and I'm seeing the future and, darn it, it's in good hands."

Probably his only regret about joining the society is that he didn't join earlier.

"The worst part of it for me is that I didn't find out about it four years earlier because they would have known the love of a grandmother. My wife would have still been living."