

'It's been wonderful. I'd recommend it to everyone.' – Gail Dunn



Jason Lang/BURNABY NOW

Just like grandma: Jonah Eruera curls up for a story with his 'volunteer grandmother,' Gail Dunn. Dunn signed up with Volunteer Grandparents, which sets up matches for children who don't have a chance to spend time with their own grandparents.

When you really need a grandparent

Erin Hitchcock
staff reporter

Gail Dunn spends time with three-year-old Jonah Eruera about once a week.

They play games, go for walks or simply hang out – all the regular things that grandparents do with their grandchildren.

But Dunn isn't Jonah's real grandmother – she's his volunteer grandparent.

But that doesn't bother Jonah as he looks forward to Dunn's visit and their playtime together.

Although Dunn loves children, she

doesn't have any of her own. When she saw an advertisement at a Burnaby library calling for volunteer grandparents, she quickly saw an opportunity.

"I actually saw a notice in the library," Dunn said, adding that she thought to herself that she's got the time and she likes children, so she applied to become a volunteer grandparent.

"I thought this is terrific. I really, really like (children)," she said, adding that she has eight nieces and nephews.

The notice Dunn saw was from Volunteer Grandparents, an organization that matches volunteers age 50 and up with

children without grandparents or without grandparents living near by.

"I thought this was a perfect opportunity. It's been wonderful. I'd recommend it to everyone," said Dunn, a Burnaby resident who started volunteering about seven months ago.

She was linked with Jonah, whose one set of real grandparents live in a care home and the other live too far away, unable to visit.

Veronica Spiess, program coordinator for Volunteer Grandparents, said volunteers help parents throughout the Lower Mainland who might not be able to spend

as much time with their children as they would like.

"The parents are so busy," she said, adding that not only are parents provided with that extra person to help out with the kids, but the children also benefit.

"They learn, they learn a lot of things from the grandparents," Spiess said, adding that the organization's family match program helps bridge the generational gap.

"A lot of children have no exposure to older adults."

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Group: Small but dedicated

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The program provides seniors like Dunn the opportunity to share their time and life experiences, while also giving families the support and wisdom of seniors, Spiess said.

She said the organization relies on grants and some funding from the federal government.

"We're quite small," Spiess said, adding that the organization only has about 50 volunteers, even though it has been around since 1973.

Robert Tan, program assistant for the organization, said that, in addition to spending time with children ages three to 14 who don't have grandparents living near by, many of the volunteer grandparents help in schools across the Lower Mainland through the School Grandparent program.

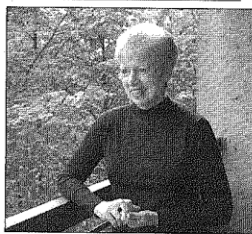
"We assign volunteers to schools around the Lower Mainland," Tan said, adding that the volunteers help out in the classroom and participate in arts and crafts.

"There are a lot of senior citizens who would like to volunteer but don't know we exist."

Once volunteers are matched with families, they go on outings, such as to the movies or on picnics.

"We colour, we draw, we play imaginary games ... we do all sorts of things together."

GAIL DUNN
volunteer grandmother



Spiess said children learn how to do new things their parents might not be able to teach them. She said, for example, one girl learned how to sew after she and a volunteer made a dress for a teddy bear.

"They (volunteer grandparents) just love being around children. It gives them energy. It gives them an opportunity to learn as well ... They get new experiences."

She said, for example, a volunteer grandfather fed a horse for the first time through the program as that was one of the things a child wanted to do.

Volunteers, Spiess said, are screened before they are connected with a family.

Once connected, the volunteer spends six months with the whole family before being left alone with a child.

"That way you gain the

trust of that grandparent," she said. "It's so inspiring to hear the connections created."

The grandparents help foster intergenerational understanding, cooperation, trust and communication between the generations.

"Sometimes children don't want to turn to their parents," Spiess said, adding that a grandparent builds trust and serves as a loving individual and mentor.

Dunn said she and Jonah spend time together for a couple of hours once a week, playing games, digging in the sand or playing with toy trucks.

"He's really into (monster) trucks," Dunn said.

"We colour, we draw, we play imaginary games, go to the park, we do all sorts of things."

"He's just a good boy. He's a character."

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Mom: 'It's been great'

Erin Hitchcock
staff reporter

Jonah Eruera's mother, Theresa Schmidt, said she had given birth to a second son, Elijah, not long before hearing about the Volunteer Grandparents program. She had been thinking to herself earlier that there should be such a program, although, at the time, she didn't know one existed.

"I actually saw an advertisement at the Eileen Daily Centre Pool," Schmidt said. "We don't have family close by. Hiring people isn't the same."

She quickly applied and was then hooked up with volunteer grandmother Gail Dunn.

"It's been great. Our son, he was just over three when they were matched. She's very energetic. The fit is very good," Schmidt said, adding that Jonah has a lot of energy himself and therefore benefits from Dunn's visits.

"Grandparents, they have time for it. They have the patience," she said,

adding that parents tend to concentrate more on getting their kids through the day safely while juggling all the responsibilities that come with being a parent.

"As parents, we tend to forget about play ... The great thing about grandparents is they don't have that responsibility."

Schmidt said she is happy that three-year-old Jonah has a grandparent figure in his life, especially since she never had the same opportunity when she was growing up.

"My mom had me when she was 40, and I had my kids when I was 35. I knew my grandparents, but they passed away when I was seven."

She said that, in today's society, parents are having fewer children than they used to, so kids today miss out on the benefits of having multiple family members to spend time with and look up to. Having a volunteer grandparent like Dunn helps provide that extra relationship.

"It's an overall positive experience," Schmidt said,

adding that Elijah is also starting to spend time with Dunn.

"He just turned two. Initially, she would come over just to spend time with our older one," she said, adding that the younger one is starting to get involved. "I guess he just kind of adopted her."

She said Jonah seems to be benefiting from the experience and enjoys spending time with his volunteer grandparent.

"He just sees her as a loving grandparent figure."

The experience has also made Schmidt consider her future role with Volunteer Grandparents.

"They always have families in need. It's something I would do when I'm older. It's positive for everybody."

For more information on the organization, visit www.volunteergandparents.ca.