

## **All Children Deserve A Permanent Home: Generations United's Work for Grandfamilies and Kinship Care**

By Donna Butts, Executive Director, Generations United, and Carol Scott, Communications Coordinator, Generations United

JJ knew he had to run away, and he had to take his two younger brothers and sister with him. His mother's mental health problems, including diagnoses of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, left her unable to care for her four children. His father turned to alcohol to numb his pain and often became abusive. As the oldest, JJ felt it was his duty to protect his younger siblings. He took on the brunt of the physical abuse, but he couldn't shield them from the verbal abuse.

To JJ, his grandparents offered the only stability he had ever known. So, one by one, JJ and his brothers and sister moved in with their maternal grandparents. When their father protested, Child Protective Services became involved. JJ's grandparents agreed to become licensed foster parents and care for the children full time.

Taking care of JJ and his siblings became an extended-family affair. JJ's aunt put her schooling on hold and took a job to help with finances. But the family still became mired in a trap of expenses, foster care licensing requirements and housing regulations. To keep JJ and his siblings together, they had to build a new house that met state requirements. The grocery bills, gas bills and housing costs were more money than JJ's grandparents had. Eventually, they were forced to file for bankruptcy.

### **A New Law To Help Grandfamilies**

JJ and his siblings are just four of the six million children being raised by grandparents or other family members in this country today. His grandparents and aunt provided safe and stable homes for him and his siblings at great personal sacrifice, one they were willing to make because of their love and commitment to caring for family. Yet they could have had a less extensive financial burden. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which became federal law in October 2008, was written to help ease that burden for families like JJ's. At Generations United (GU), the national organization uniquely focused on advancing intergenerational programs, practices and public policies, we worked tirelessly with our members and partners to achieve this victory for grandfamilies – grandparents and other relatives raising children.

Fostering Connections aims to support grandfamilies in several ways: making it easier for states to access federal funds for guardianship assistance; requiring states to notify relatives if children are being placed in foster care; flexibility in non-safety requirements in foster care licensing for relatives; providing grants to support family connections; and requiring states to work to keep siblings together.

At GU, we celebrated the passage of this act into law – but this is just the first step. Implementation of this law is critical, and GU is working with states to provide resources, technical assistance and the expertise needed to move Fostering Connections from idea to reality. GU is committed to successful implementation so that families around the country will benefit.

### **GU's Intergenerational Mission**

Generations United was founded in 1986 by the National Council on Aging and the Child Welfare League of America. AARP and the Children's Defense Fund soon joined in GU's efforts to promote cooperation and mutual support between generations. In 1997, GU incorporated as its own not-for-profit organization. Inspired by the 1995 White House Conference on Aging, our newly recruited board endorsed Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children as our first major initiative. Since then, GU has worked closely with national and local partners to advance a public policy and awareness building agenda in support of grandfamilies.

In 1997, we convened the first national expert symposium on grandfamilies. This successful symposium marked the first time the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren was explored from a multigenerational perspective. Symposium participants examined the issues, keeping in mind both older caregivers and children. The resulting recommendations were published in our first action agenda. This was followed by a 2004 symposium to review progress, celebrate our successes and develop the next action agenda to lead our future work.

GU's Grandparent Advisory Group – consisting of national organizations and experts from across the country – has met regularly since 1998 and continues to act as the coordinating body for effort on behalf of grandfamilies. The members also identify emerging issues the families face. In 2008, Casey Family Programs provided funding to formally establish this group as the Grandfamilies National Partnership Working Group.

### **Legislative Victories**

Changing federal policy to support grandfamilies is a top GU priority. The first legislative victory was the inclusion of grandfamilies in the National Family Caregiver Support Act (NFCSP) when it was signed into law in 2000. GU provided information and testimony to the U.S Congress and negotiated the compromise with other advocacy groups to ensure the recognition of these special caregivers. GU went on to assist with the implementation of the NFCSP by developing materials and training programs for the aging network. Another victory took place in 2006 when Congress voted to lower the age for older relatives raising children from 60 to 55. Now, nearly 50% of grandparent caregivers qualify for services provided through the NFCSP, rather than the original 27%.

In 2001, we launched GU's National Center on Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children. The Center, now known as the National Center on Grandfamilies, is the umbrella for all of our work on behalf of the families. This was the same year GU began working on LEGACY (Living Equitably - Grandparents Aiding Children and Youth), the first legislation seeking to create affordable housing opportunities for grandfamilies. Three important elements of LEGACY were signed into law in 2003. GU

continued to advocate so that the provisions would be implemented and funds would be appropriated. In 2005, 4 million dollars was earmarked for LEGACY and the first national training for housing professionals took place. We also held the first symposium on affordable housing for grandfamilies releasing subsequent recommendations.

Generations United continues to champion grandfamilies and encourage positive media and progressive policies. Towards this end, in 2005 we worked with communications experts to determine messages and terminology that would resonate with the general public with the goal of increasing understanding and support. This resulted in coining the term “grandfamilies” which is now widely used.

### **Resources For Families and Policymakers**

Our work with the American Bar Association established [www.grandfamilies.org](http://www.grandfamilies.org). This is a rich resource that includes every state’s laws, case examples and lessons from the field. It is the one-stop shop for advocates interested in supportive state policies for grandfamilies, including Fostering Connections.

Generations United is proud to work with many partners on projects such as developing and maintaining state fact sheets ([www.grandfactsheets.org](http://www.grandfactsheets.org)) and the three national GrandRallies in Washington, DC ([www.grandrally.org](http://www.grandrally.org)), beginning in 2003, which each brought close to 1000 grandparents and other relatives raising children from around the country to Washington, DC. While in the nation’s capitol, they shared their stories with federal policy makers and made a lasting impression which has helped move Congress to action.

Today, JJ is doing well. He majored in Public Administration and Policy at Oakland University and works as an advocate and a resource for human services and foster care groups. JJ’s story is a success, but he is always sure to say that it is only because of the help of his grandparents. At GU, we know that grandparents and other family members make incredible sacrifices and invaluable contributions. Children in these households report feeling loved, culturally rooted and connected with their family’s heritage and history. GU continues to work to shape policies and programs that will help support the success of grandfamilies – because their success means the success of our neighborhoods, our communities and our country.

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