



Photo by Linda L. Riley

Evelyn Taylor (left) and Shirley Shelton find sharing experiences helps them cope.

By Linda L. Riley

John Steinbeck once wrote "it takes courage to raise children." If so, courage abounds among the increasing numbers of people who are stepping in to raise their grandchildren.

"It can be intimidating and overwhelming when you first start," says Shirley Shelton, age 60, who is raising three grandchildren, ages 6, 9 and 10.

According to the Supportive Older Women's Network (SOWN), Shelton is one of more than 16,800 grandparents in Philadelphia who are raising their grandchildren. The organization provides support through its two GrandFamily Resource Centers, in Manayunk and North Philadelphia.

Love motivates them; courage keeps them going

Shelton says when she first learned about the GrandFamily program, she was resistant. "I said, 'I'm not telling anyone my business.' I thought I was the only one on earth doing this. I was sitting home, thinking, 'My daughter is the only one who left me with these kids.'" That was two years ago. Today, she says, "I love this group so much."

Richelle Phillips, program coordinator for SOWN's GrandFamily Resource Center, says she often encounters resistance. "Outreach is difficult," she says. "It's hard because of the stigma – because people are embarrassed," she says. Grandparents encounter hurtful remarks, even in places where one might expect a more charitable attitude.

"I've had some of my grandparents tell me when they're in church with their grandchild, how much it hurts them when people get catty about the reasons these ladies are raising their grandchildren," says Phillips. Those reasons often include drugs, incarceration and abandonment, she says. "Most of the reasons are kind of ugly."

But when they get together with others in the same situation, the support and

understanding really helps, Phillips says; especially for those who are isolated. "I have a lady in her 80s with a 2-year-old," she says. "We have a telephone group with five of us on a conference call every week, sharing resources and information."

Evelyn Taylor, 68, who is raising her grandson's 8-year-old daughter, finds the group offers shared wisdom, sympathy, support and sound advice. When Taylor's great-granddaughter started acting up in school, "Shirley (Shelton) told me to get counseling for her." SOWN helped connect her with counseling.

Her great-granddaughter "talked about things that were bothering her, and she's doing much better," Taylor says. "She's in church, she's on the praise team, she's in the choir – so she can focus on what she does have, not on what she doesn't have."

"They're angry. They've been angry ever since they realized, 'I'm not with Mommy,'" Shelton says. "They have abandonment issues, behavioral issues. They wonder, 'What did I do wrong that my mommy doesn't love me?' They think, 'All the other little kids at school have a mother and a father, why don't I?'"

At school, other children's curiosity can

be hurtful – or cruel. "My great-granddaughter's girlfriend wants to know, 'where's your dad? Where's your mom? Why are you being raised by your grandmother?'" Taylor says.

But, says Shelton, "I didn't do wrong. The mother did wrong." And, she says, the children see it clearly. "At 4 years old, my great-granddaughter said to her mother, 'You could have chosen us or you could have chosen drugs. You chose drugs.'"

"These kids need a fighting chance regardless of the situation they were born into," Shelton says. "They don't go out of the house without a hot breakfast."

"We're raising our grandkids the way we were raised – we have rules and regulations in the house," says Taylor. "I say, 'I'm pointing you in the right direction – it's up to you to follow.'"

Both Shelton and Taylor were determined to keep their grandchildren out of the foster care system, no matter the cost to themselves. Both went to court to obtain permanent custody of their grandchildren.

"I tell them – your grandmother loves you so much, she chose to raise you," Shelton says.

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