

# Across Generations with SOWN

*By Beth Varcoe*

## How does an organization that works with older adults find itself also serving children?

In Philadelphia, more than 17,000 children are being raised by their grandparents because their parents are unable to do so. Many of these children have survived traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect. Many have witnessed or experienced violence. As a result, they often have special needs. For these children, the future is likely to be in the foster care system, unless grandparents step up to raise them.

Grandparents feel strongly about keeping children in the family, yet they are overwhelmed by the emotional, physical, and financial demands of returning to full-time parenting. SOWN's Executive Director, Merle Drake, realized that SOWN was uniquely positioned to help. Since 1984, SOWN has been providing support and counseling to older adults. One of the key roles older adults perform in families and communities is that of caregiver. SOWN has extensive expertise in "caring for the caregiver," often an older woman who benefits tremendously from the opportunities SOWN offers to bond with, and learn from, others in similar situations.

In 2006, SOWN launched the GrandFamily Resource Center, a one-stop network of support and services to meet the needs of these vulnerable families. The Green

Tree Community Health Foundation was among the first foundations to recognize the need for the Center and to support it. Grandparents participate in professionally-facilitated, weekly support groups, parenting education, and individual counseling. Children and grandparents together learn about healthier living at family workshops.

Mary\*, 64, is deeply involved with SOWN's GrandFamily Resource Center, attending weekly support groups and parenting education workshops. Recently she began volunteering as a Grandparent Ambassador to spread the word about the program to other grandparents in need. When she first called SOWN, Mary was exhausted, frustrated, and ready to give up. The Department of Human Services (DHS) had removed her grandchildren, ages six, five and two, from their mom's home. DHS called Mary and gave her 24 hours to decide whether to take them in. She couldn't fathom her grandchildren in foster care.

It had been years since Mary had potty-trained a child, helped with homework, or cooked family dinners. Furthermore, Mary has several health problems, including high blood pressure and diabetes. Worst of all, she



had just had surgery on both of her hands for carpal tunnel syndrome. Using her hands was excruciatingly painful. Caring for three children, aged six, five, and two, seemed impossible. She didn't know what to do or where to turn.

Mary contacted SOWN's GrandFamily Resource Center and immediately received guidance about child care, respite care and health care options from SOWN's coordinator. Mary decided to join one of SOWN's GrandFamily Resource Center's weekly support groups, which is led by trained clinicians. She attends faithfully to this day, safely venting her frustration, anger, and sadness, exchanging information with group members, and learning how to handle discipline issues. Discipline has changed dramatically since Mary raised her own children. "I understand now that my grandson acts out because of what happened to him... he really had no control over his behavior, because he was never taught how to express his feelings. Now, I am helping him with that, and together we are learning how to be a happy family."

Today, the children live in a loving home with Mary and are excelling in school. When asked where she'd be if her grandma had not agreed to raise her, Siena, now aged 9, said, "I wouldn't have anything! I would be in foster care or with somebody else. But I just want to be with her, 'cause she loves me the most." ■

*\* Her name has been changed to protect her identity.*



Mary and her family involved in Grand-Family programming.

To learn more, visit [sown.org](http://sown.org) or call **215.487.3000**