

Network offers caregivers support

Jennifer Ficaglia/Catholic Courier

Linda James of Rochester knows all too well the challenges faced by grandparents raising grandchildren.

While living in Maryland 15 years ago, James' drug-addicted daughter prematurely gave birth to her baby girl in a drug house. After they were taken to a hospital, a social worker became involved in the case. The social worker called James, who learned that her newborn granddaughter had spent five months in the hospital and that the child's mother could not take care of her.

Before that call came, James had thought her child-rearing days were over. Her youngest child was in college, and she planned to save some money so she could finally go on a cruise for vacation. But when she learned there was no one to take care of her granddaughter, she said she didn't think about those things.

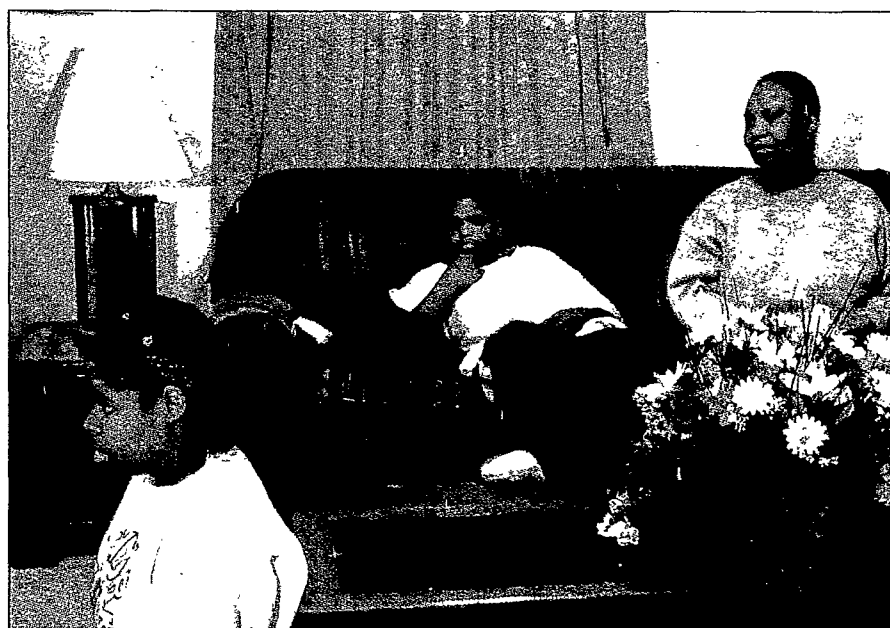
"I agreed to come and get my granddaughter," said James. When James' daughter had another child in 1989, he, too, came to live with his grandmother.

"I always had hoped that she would get herself together and take care of her children," James said of her daughter, who in 1990 came to live in Rochester and appeared to be turning her life around. "She did well for awhile. Then she had a setback."

James' hope of reuniting her daughter and grandchildren was dashed in 1991, when the body of a murdered woman was found in a field. She was later identified as James' daughter. After her daughter's death, James filed for formal guardianship of her grandchildren and has been raising them ever since.

And she is not alone. According to data from the 2000 Census, over the past 10 years the United States has experienced a significant increase in the number of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. In Monroe County, 2000 Census data shows that nearly 11,000 children are being raised by their grandparents.

The high occurrence of "kinship caregivers," or people taking care of their related family members, did not escape the notice of several local agencies, including Catholic



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Linda James of Rochester watches television with her grandchildren, Terry Myers (center) and Jasmine Myers. James has raised both children since they were infants.

Healthy Retirement

Family Center.

"This is a really difficult thing people do, and they do it out of love and care and compassion for their families," said CFC's Laurie Marshall, who facilitates Parents...Again!, a support group for grandparents and other kinship caregivers.

In response to the local increase in kinship caregivers, CFC and six other agencies — Brookdale Grandparent Loss Center in Manhattan and Albany, Community Place of Greater Rochester, Family Resource Center of Rochester, Monroe County Legal Assistance Corp., Catholic Youth Organization and the Urban League of Greater Rochester — in 1999 formed the Kinship Care Resource Network, an alliance to provide services and support to kinship caregivers. Marshall, a certified social worker, is program manager for the Kinship Care Resource Network at CFC.

Marshall said the network offers various types of assistance, including information and referral; case management; education and counseling; social support and support groups; financial counseling; legal

assistance; assistance in getting Social Security benefits; assistance in navigating the Family Court system; and assistance in accessing a child's school and health records. Workshops for professionals, intergenerational and youth activities, respite for caregivers, and a yearly kinship care conference are also provided.

Sometimes, Marshall said, caregivers need more than just information and help getting services. That's where the alliance's support groups come in.

"In order to raise a healthy child, you need to be healthy yourself," James noted.

Parents...Again! meets twice a month, Marshall said, and the Family Resource Center's three support groups, under the heading Skip Generations, meet at various times, in-

cluding evenings sessions for those who work during the day.

James works in an administrative position at Family Resource Center, and because she is caring for her grandchildren, she was approached by the agency five years ago and asked to oversee Skip Generations.

Both Marshall and James noted that raising a child today is much different than it was 20 to 30 years ago.

In her generation, James said, parents instilled in their children a sense of values, respect, manners and love, but did not communicate with them, did not allow them to ask questions or to be expressive, and did not give them the freedoms children today enjoy. James' generation was also taught to work with their hands, but today's children need to learn computer skills.

"We need to learn another way of doing things," said James, noting that this is among the services support groups offer. "I think it's much harder now than when I was raising mine."

Aside from financial and guardianship issues, Marshall and James said they have heard grandparents raising grandchildren express concerns about such issues as safe computer use in the home, how to deal with friends who no longer associate with them because they are raising children, and how to help children who find it hard to have an older adult raising them.

"We don't have all the answers," Marshall said. "But if people call us, we'll do our best to obtain the help they need and to work with them with the strength they have. We are very solution-oriented. We like to make a positive difference in people's lives."

For more information on the Kinship Care Resource Network and its services, call 585/262-7048.

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