

To see grandchildren

Grandparents fight for visitation rights

If Louella Davison has her way, Grandparents' and Grandchildren's Day will be as widely observed as Mother's Day or Father's Day.

But it's not the gift-giving, commercial aspect of so many national observance days that she would like to see copied. She hopes it will be a day when grandparents and grandchildren can spend time together.

Mrs. Davison, who lives in Sylvan Lake, is the founder of a group called Grandparents Anonymous.

"We are a group of grandparents who have been denied our right to see and visit with our grandchildren," she said.

In most cases, the separation is the result of a divorce between the natural parents of the child and the remarriage of the partner who has custody.

"That's when the trouble starts," she said. "Step-parents seem to think they are losing control. They feel the child has had a closer relationship with the grandparents."

Often, the natural parent, seeking to blot out memories of an unsuccessful marriage, will deny the child any contact with the parent of a former spouse. One mother, who defended her right to impose this restriction on her daughter, told Mrs. Davison, "That's all in the past. She has new grandparents now."

IN SOME INSTANCES, the child lived with grandparents after the divorce and before the parent remarried. In Mrs. Davison's case, her five-

year-old granddaughter lived with her and her husband for 18 months.

When the child's mother remarried, their relationship with the child was severed.

"It was like a death to me to be separated from her," said Mrs. Davison. State Rep. Mel Larsen (R-Oxford) wrote the resolution, which was adopted by the Michigan Legislature last year, establishing Sept. 18 as Grandparents' and Grandchildren's Day. This year a house concurrent resolution was initiated, once again by Larsen changing the date to March 18.

Last year, members of Grandparents Anonymous sold buttons commemorating the day and plan to do so again this year. McDonald's, the fast food chain, displayed posters of grandparents and grandchildren in its restaurants and also offered a free milkshake to each child who came accompanied by a grandparent. This is the kind of observance Mrs. Davison's group would like to encourage.

"We want to push for it to become a national day," she said.

Mrs. Davison would also like churches to observe the day with special sermons. She also would like to see schools encourage children to make items for grandparents in art or craft classes.

"I'd like to see the resolution included in every school and church in the state," she said.

THE GRANDPARENTS' and Grandchildren's Day is just one of the

goals set by Grandparents Anonymous. The other is passage of House Bill 4608, which would guarantee visitation rights to grandparents. The bill, which was introduced in the state legislature last April by State Rep. William Jowett (R-Port Huron) is being studied by the house judiciary committee.

The proposal would amend the Child Custody Act of 1970 to allow the circuit court, when dealing with any new or renewed action for custody from that court, to provide for paternal and maternal grandparent visitation rights.

The existing law pertaining to the grandparent visitation was enacted in 1971 also as a part of the Child Custody Act.

But under that law, the grandparent can't secure visitation rights unless his own child is dead. Visitation rights, if granted, are subject to the "best interests of the child."

Mrs. Davison and other members of Grandparents Anonymous will meet again with legislators concerning House Bill 4608.

"As soon as the weather clears, we plan another trip to Lansing," said Mrs. Davison. "We've just got to keep pushing."

What about the child who is in the midst of the hostility between parents and grandparents?

"Which is the lesser of two evils? The child is suffering anyway," Mrs. Davison said.

MRS. DAVISON maintains that it is wrong to cut the child off from a loving relationship with the grandparent.

"It's an emotional abuse to the child," she said. Grandparents Anonymous hopes to raise the consciousness of all grandparents. Members want to make every grandparent aware that he doesn't have adequate legal recourse at this time.

Mrs. Davison said she realizes that legislation will not solve all the problems. She hopes it will be a first step in ironing out the difficulties between parents and grandparents and may lead the courts to provide counseling.

"Grandparents and parents can't seem to communicate with each other," she said.

Grandparents Anonymous has 1,000 members in metropolitan Detroit and from as far away as Flint. Because they are spread out geographically, communication among members is done by letter or telephone rather than by regular meetings.

Mrs. Davison emphasized that members of Grandparents Anonymous are dedicated to promoting not only the well-being of their grandchildren, but that of all children.

When members held a garage sale recently, they were able to donate clothing to Children's Village in Pontiac, she said. Profits from last year's sale of buttons commemorating Grandparents' and Grandchildren's Day provided juice and snacks for a nursery run by the Social Services Department of Oakland County.



Louella Davison began to fight for grandparents' rights when her granddaughter was no longer allowed to visit. A national day, she says, will draw attention to plight of both grandparent and child. Organization now has 1,000 members asking for revision of current Child Custody Act. (Photo by Charlie Kidd)

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