

Woman champions grandparents' rights

By Greg Kowalski
staff writer

It would be nice if every family was as idyllic as the Huxtable on the Bill Cosby show. But this is the real world and in reality families feud, often crumble and go separate ways.

Frequent casualties of alienated families are grandparents and grandchildren. While the law traditionally has guaranteed estranged parents the right to have contact with their children, it's only been relatively recently that grandparents have established any rights to see their grandchildren.

Much of that is due to the efforts of Sylvan Lake resident Luella M. Davison, who founded Grandparents Anonymous in 1976. GA has successfully lobbied to push legislation ensuring the rights of grandparents.

On May 23 the Waterford Schools will hold a Grandparents' Day in which grandparents will spend the day with the school kids, share lunch and be entertained at a program staged in their honor, Davison said. It will be a time to reaffirm the ties that grandparents have with their grandchildren.

DAVISON FOUNDED GA when she painfully learned that grandparents at that time had no legal visitation rights to see their grandchildren.

A rift in the family can become painfully compounded when children are alienated from their parents and carry the separation to the point of denying their children the opportunity to see their grandparents.

Often, the children divorce and the parent who gets custody cuts off contact with the parents of the other parent.

"I started with a group of 10 people, and I found this to be a real

common problem," Davison said. "I had a time with my first group. There was so much friction. But their needs were the same. And I knew what these people were going through."

A typical situation, she said, was the case of two grandparents in Ohio who raised their grandson for four years. Their daughter was underage when the child was born and was involved with drugs.

But one day the child's mother announced she was taking the child and walked out on the grandparents. After hearing about GA, the grandparents came to Davison for advice.

Another woman told of being denied the right to visit her grandchildren. "She could look out her window and see them play, but she couldn't even talk to them," Davison said.

Feeling a sense of injustice, Davison began exploring ways to establish legal rights for grandparents. She enlisted the aid of state legislators and by 1981 pushed through a state law that for the first time granted grandparents legal visitation rights.

Today, all states have some form of grandparents' rights, although Davison said they often don't go far enough. Stepparents, she said, still lack visitation rights in most states.

As word of Davison's work spread, she began to get contacts from people across the country seeking help. "I was getting 40 to 50 letters a day. Our mailbox was jammed full."

In response she has created a form letter that offers basic advice to grandparents.

Along with tips on how to seek visitation rights through the courts, Davison advises grandparents to keep open whatever lines of communication remain. But, she advises, "Keep a low profile and not pester (the) custodial parent if you have any communication. There is always the

possibility of a parent moving with an unknown address and/or an unlisted phone number."

FOR HER EFFORTS, Davison has received numerous awards, including being named National Grandparent of the Year in 1982. But the satisfaction, she said, is in her accomplishments. She noted with pride that she was instrumental in helping establish a National Grandparents Day in 1985.

Although she has curtailed her activities with GA she still welcomes calls from people in need. She sends them her informational letter and can refer them to grandparents' groups. She prefers calls and can be reached at 682-8394.

"I was a pioneer, but other groups are carrying on," she said.

Still, the calls for help continue. "Hardly a day goes by that she doesn't get a letter from somebody," said her husband Ken Davison. "I like to work with people. And if I can get any of these kids with their grandparents, I'm satisfied," she said.



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Luella M. Davison founded Grandparents Anonymous in 1976. Since then, she has helped ensure visitation rights for grandparents across the country.

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