

Stepping into the parenting role—again—
isn't easy, but nearly **2.5 million Americans** are doing it.
For most, it has brought joy and renewal.

Grandparents To The **Rescue**

TEN YEARS AFTER their youngest child moved out of their home, Maggie and Roosevelt Lee became parents once again. The circumstances were tragic: Their 32-year-old daughter, Patrice, a kindergarten teacher, had been murdered in the lobby of her apartment building. That same afternoon, her four motherless children—Conradine, Conrad, Patrice and Letricia, ages 9, 5, 4 and 3—moved into their grandparents' sprawling Harlem apartment next door.

That was 11 years ago. Since then, the once quiet life of Maggie Lee, now 61, has changed in more ways than she ever could have imagined. (Her husband died in 2000.) Evenings spent visiting friends or at the movies became dedicated to cooking dinners for her brood, ironing school uniforms and helping with homework. To keep up with her grandchildren, Lee enrolled in an after-school program to learn how to use a computer. "Eight weeks of classes, and all I can do is turn it on and off," she says with a laugh.

Grandparents Step In

Maggie Lee is not alone. Across the U.S., nearly 2.5 million grandparents currently are raising more than 4.5 million grandchildren, according to the 2000 census. While this is the first time the government has formally accounted for the number of grandparents with primary responsibility for grandchildren, the American Association of Retired Persons

(AARP) estimates that the number of children living in grandparent-headed households has risen 30 percent since 1990.

Many reasons—including teen pregnancy, poverty, drug abuse, death, imprisonment and mental illness—are responsible for the record number of parents unable to care for their children. And the situations that call on grandparents to step in cut across all socio-economic boundaries:

"Both movie stars and homeless people are raising their grandchildren," notes Amy Goyer, coordinator of AARP's Grandparent Information Center.

Not only are these silent heroes saving their kin from the emotional trauma of being placed in foster care, but they also are saving taxpayers \$6.5 billion a year, according to Donna Butts, the executive director of Generations United, a national organization dedicated to promoting intergenerational programs.

"These kids give grandparents a reason to get out of bed in the morning," says Goyer. "And, in exchange, the grandparents give the child a loving, stable home."

That dynamic is the reason most states' social services will call first upon "next of kin" to be a child's caregiver when a parent is found unfit. "A grandparent who takes in a child has a deeper emotional commitment to the child than a stranger would," explains Butts. "So the grandparent not only helps keep the family together but also provides continuity and familiarity for the child in a very difficult situation."

to keep up with unplanned costs.

Barbara and George Sullivan moved to Miami in 1982 with an eye toward retiring in a warm place, but that expectation shifted in 1986 when they learned that their 16-year-old granddaughter had given birth to a son, Louis. The Sullivans took him in at 4 months. Four years later, Louis' brother, Lamar, was born premature. "They said he wouldn't make it," recalls Barbara Sullivan, now 71. "But I sat by

his incubator every day, talking to him and praying, and took him home three months later."

Louis and Lamar, now 17 and 13, have since grown into "fabulous young men," according to their great-grandmother, who adopted them with her husband in 1993. "The girls drive me crazy, calling here every night for Louis," says Sullivan. Lamar is in the school orchestra and plays football despite chronic asthma, which has often landed him in the emergency room.

In fact, the Sullivans are still paying off a \$6000 hospital bill: Florida cut off the boys' Medicaid and monthly support checks following their adoption, maintaining that the couple—both retired and living on a small fixed income—made too much money. George, now 74, went back to work as a janitor

**BY LIZ
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Resources For Grandparents

"Grandparents say the support groups are the best resources out there," says Amy Goyer, coordinator of AARP's Grandparent Information Center. "They offer emotional, psychological and moral support while serving as a conduit for pertinent information. To find out about a support group near you, visit www.aarp.org/grandparents/searchsupport or write to Grandparent Information Center, 601 E St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049. Or visit www.parade.com on the Web.

Financial Costs

Though made willingly, the commitment to raise a grandchild can put financial pressure on the grandparents. Many are forced to live beyond fixed incomes and must deplete their retirement savings in order

and got a weekend job selling fruit. Barbara petitioned the state, and the boys were reinstated on Medicaid in 2000. "Those years were hard," she says. "But we'd do it again if we had to. These boys are the light of our lives. Having them in our lives has kept us young."

Legal Guardianship

It was their legal relationship with the boys that allowed the Sullivans to get them the medical attention they needed and to enroll them in school. "Legal guardianship or custody is the key to the kingdom when it comes to accessing services for children that everyone takes for granted," explains Mary Bissell, an attorney for the Children's Defense Fund.

Dot Thibodeaux, 65, found this out the hard way. When her 12-year-old grandson, Travis, asked if he could move into her and her husband's Baton Rouge home because his mother was coping with addiction problems, Thibodeaux says she readily agreed. But the couple never adopted Travis, in hopes that their daughter would reclaim him one day. Without a legal relationship, they had a tough time enrolling him in school and never were able to get him covered on their health insurance. "Thank God Travis didn't need braces," says Thibodeaux. "But if he did, I'd have found a way. I'd have done cartwheels if need be to get them for him."

Travis, now 26 and an installer for Circuit City, has moved out of his grandparents' home, though he visits weekly. "We perk up when he walks through the door," says Thibodeaux. "He's still the highlight of our life."

The Missing Parent

The bond between grandparent and child is intensified by the relationship both have with the missing parent, particularly when he or she

is still alive. Some grandparents may be required to testify against their children in court in order to win custody of the grandchildren, while others live in fear that the parent will take the child back before he or she is ready. If the parent never visits, there is lingering pain. "It's a

difficult spot to be left in," says Dot Thibodeaux. "Try explaining to a child that his mother loves him, but she's not strong enough to take care of him. In the end, I felt so sorry for her. Every time I looked at that beautiful boy, I thought, 'Look at what she's missing.'"



Top: Maggie Lee with her grandchildren (l-r) Conrad, Letricia, Conradine and Patrice Linton in New York City. Bottom left: Barbara and George Sullivan with their great-grandson Lamar, 13, in Miami. Bottom right: Dot Thibodeaux with her grandson Travis in Baton Rouge, La.

Many grandparents say the children give them a reason to get up in the morning.

Another often-expressed regret is missing out on being grandparents. "They grieve over that traditional role," explains AARP's Amy Goyer. "And as committed as they are to their grandchildren, there's still this feeling of 'this isn't what I planned.'" That sense of loss is especially painful when their own child failed as a parent.

Love At Any Age

Of course, grandparents also feel the strains of old age and worry about their well-being. It

can be exhausting to raise a child at a later age. Maggie Lee says that she often dreams of taking a nap, a luxury she rarely has. Barbara Sullivan's arthritis often forces her to use a cane. Roosevelt Lee lost a leg to diabetes two years after his grandchildren moved in.

"But his prosthetic leg didn't stop him from walking the kids to school or watching them play in the park," recalls Maggie Lee. She adds: "I thank God my health is good. And I thank these kids for keeping me young at heart and active."

Ultimately, the grandparents succeed simply because the children know they can be counted on. "I always want my grandkids to know I am there for them," Lee says.

They know. Last Mother's Day, Lee received a framed store-bought card that read, "Grandmothers have a special place in the heart—I know that you will always have a special place in mine." It was signed by all four of her grandchildren.

"I cried when I opened it," she says. "It sits on my bedroom dresser, so it's the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see at night." 