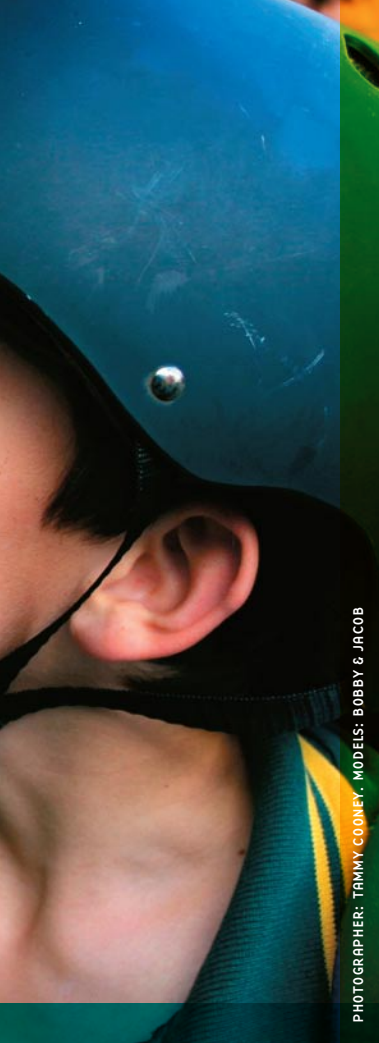




*by Paul Freedman*

***YOU'LL NEVER LEAVE ME,  
WILL YOU NANA?***

***(When grandparents raise their grandkids)***



PHOTOGRAPHER: TAMMY COONEY. MODELS: BOBBY & JACOB

ASK ANY PARENT, “WHY DID YOU HAVE kids?” and (aside from jokes about not knowing what they were doing) they’ll probably talk about “wanting to settle down and have a family ...” and “the joy of bringing a new life into this world ...”

Ask any *grandparent* about raising a *grandchild* and you’ll get a very different answer.

That’s what we discovered when we talked recently with four grandmothers and one grandfather. These grandparents are acting as primary care-givers for one or more of their children’s children. Which means they’re fully responsible for that child’s care, clothes, food, education, housing, welfare ... the works.

As one of them told us: “The common denominators in these all-too-frequent situations are drugs, alcohol, abuse, abandonment, prison ... or parents who simply don’t want their kids.

“It’s easy to get pregnant. But when your child’s left holding the baby ... and it’s a screaming, needy, demanding baby ... they think: ‘Oh my gosh, what’ve I done?’

“But, of course, it’s too late. So these little kids get shipped out to grandparents. Or they get fostered. Or they get adopted out. Or in some societies, I guess, they become street kids.”

What happens in Godzone? Read on, and meet our courageous grandparents:

**Tessa:** My husband's a Maori – so for him family's like that (*fingers locked together*). But for us Pakeha, taking on a child with special needs is much more daunting. It wasn't so hard with Simeon, but we could see that there were heaps of problems for Eli. Even things like feeding himself. At five he was still using his fingers to eat with. So we had to introduce him to spoons and forks and how to hold them – stuff like that. Our view was: if we didn't do it, how could we expect anybody else to?

**Susan:** Raising a grandchild wasn't something we'd planned on. We'd bought a house in New York where we'd hoped to spend our remaining years ... but no – we're here in New Zealand, raising this beautiful, dynamic four-and-a-half-year-old girl. There simply wasn't anybody else willing to step up to the plate for this little one. She could've gone out to foster care, but that was never going to happen!

**Aroha:** Sometimes, when I'm down, I think to myself, "This is crazy! What've I done?" But then I think, no, if I didn't take the children, they'd go to care. I know what it's like for kids who've been there, done that – and I wouldn't ever want my grandchildren to be separated from their whanau.

**Valerie:** We knew from the start that his mother wasn't going to be able to care for him. So James and I just looked at each other and said, "We're gonna end up being this child's parents!" This is our family. Other options, like adoption or care, never entered our heads.

**Ian:** I suppose, in retrospect, the decision was tough. But it didn't feel that way at the time. We'd looked after her a lot during her first year, and it'd got to a point

where the behaviour and lifestyle of the parents was so chaotic that finally – after asking us to babysit for a weekend, then not turning up until a fortnight later – we said: "This time her parents just aren't having her back!"

## TRAUMA, SECURITY & ENERGY LEVELS

**W**hen kids lose – or are deserted by – their natural parents, what does that do to them? And where do grandparents find the strength to tackle this job?

**Susan:** My granddaughter was watching *Baby Planet* (about little baby animals) on TV and she asked me, "Why isn't the mother with that baby?"

I answered, "Well, the mother's abandoned the baby – she doesn't want to look after it."

She turned to me and said, "My mummy left me when I was little. But *you'll* never leave me, will you Nana?"

So, yes, there is probably some trauma. But she's secure enough now to know and trust that we're always going to be there for her. (*Pause*) Which means I can't die, can I? I'll have to live till I'm about 120!

**Aroha:** Trish won't go back to her parents ... she's never had much support there. She wanted to see her dad during the holidays, but he said, "Oh, I'm not working at the moment. I want to be able to give you money and take you here and there!"

She said, "I don't want *money* – I just want to see *you*, Dad!" But ... it all came to nothing, and she fell out with him. Never contacted him again. So I've got Trish for the long haul.

I'll have the nephew and another



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*Raising a grandchild wasn't something we'd planned on. But here we are, raising this beautiful, dynamic four-and-a-half-year-old girl. She could've gone out to foster care, but that was never going to happen!*

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grandson – and a couple of other little boys too, because they won't go to their dad, either.

**Tessa:** When Simeon first arrived I was in my 40s. Back then, I felt I was bullet-proof – going like a train, loads of energy, lots of outside interests and activities. But now that we're in our 50s I've had to re-prioritize: "Come on – you can't do that anymore!"

If I take on too many unnecessary things, I'm never going to make the 10-year plan – I'll never reach the finishing gate!

**Ian:** When you're getting on a bit, you don't have the energy to throw a kid over your shoulder and enjoy that physical fun as often as you did when you were younger, that's for sure!

**Susan:** That's the major thing we all find – getting tired! You're not meant to be doing this at our age. Life's supposed to get easier. We're really meant to be doing what our peers are doing – and most of them have got empty nests. But here we are, starting off in that parenting role all over again!

## MONEY WORRIES & SPECIAL NEEDS

**T**he grandparents we spoke with agreed: there were huge demands placed on their finances by the new family. So how do they cope – especially when the grandkids have extra problems?

**Susan:** We had money set aside for our retirement ... well, it *would've* been for our retirement! Suddenly we're landed with a four-year-old who's growing fast ... who needs to be educated ... who wants to go dancing, swimming, everything her friends are doing.

At the moment we're under CYFS, so we get a fortnightly board allowance and a quarterly clothing allowance. We're also fortunate because we get her crèche fees paid. We get medical bills up to \$200 a year. And she gets birthday and Christmas money.

**Valerie:** Our finances were fine before my husband took sick. (He had a stroke seven years ago and he's in care.) Since then, I've had to budget very carefully for everything. You definitely have to save up. I hate doing it, but occasionally I've got to tell my grandson, "Well, I'm sorry, but we simply can't afford that!"

**Ian:** I know grandparents who've lost their houses. They've had to sell up and rent, and put their capital into getting expensive assistance for their grandchildren.

The financial pressure's definitely right up there. It's one of the biggest factors. A lot of them would've had to put their plans on hold: maybe the new boat, or the trip overseas, or whatever they were going to do with their life when they moved on from being parents. Because suddenly they're being parents again ... as *grandparents!*

**Valerie:** When she first became pregnant my daughter kept it a secret. She'd suddenly have two or three days of not taking her medication, and then she'd double-dose on everything. She was drinking and smoking, going out and having a good time. And, because of all that, the baby suffered.

He has Asperger's Syndrome and goes to a special school. He doesn't like change. Everything must be done in routine. He's got very little confidence ... like, even crossing the road. You couldn't send him to the dairy for a loaf of bread because, although he'd know what he was doing, he'd still get confused.

And learning's a big problem for him – very difficult.

**Tessa:** My husband's got some wonderful skills with the boys. And I certainly couldn't do all this on my own, I can tell you that! When I see other grandparents struggling on their own I heave a huge sigh of relief. My husband's been such a tower of strength.

I've been watching just lately how Simeon's bonding and interacting with his granddad more than me these days. Their relationship's getting stronger. And that's good ... that's great. What he gets from my husband will be rounded and grounded – and it'll set him on the right path for manhood, I believe.

They're a good team together!

## TRAGIC CASES – HEAVY LOADS

**A**ll grandparents raising grandkids have their work cut out. But some do double-duty ... carry double-size burdens ... and have had to face daunting tragedies with their children.

**Aroha:** Mike and I are separated. He



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had a stroke six years ago: I was living in Whangarei and he was in Kawakawa with our youngest son. After the stroke my older children approached me and said, “Listen, we don’t want him staying in a rest-home. But what’s gonna happen? He needs looking after, but we’ve got young kids – we can’t take him on.”

The trouble is, they *all* depend on me! And they know that too: “Oh-my-gosh, Nan. What’d we do if something happened to you?”

I simply answer, “Why? What’s going to happen to *me*? I ain’t going anywhere!”

I’ve got Trish – she’s about to turn 16. And there’s Hohepa who’s eight, Tane who’s seven, Mihi who’s five, Petera who’s three and little Ani’s just two. Their mum had problems with drugs, and she’s in prison at the moment. Don’t get me

wrong, she’s not a bad person. Okay, she broke the law, but she’s got a good heart. She’s a good mum, but the drugs ... they just took hold of her life and turned it upside down.

I look after another grandson, Harry. He’s my oldest daughter’s. He’s 15. He wasn’t getting on with his dad, so he just turned up on my doorstep.

And I also look after a nephew, Zeb, who’s 17. He’s my sister’s son. She went off to England and married a guy from Liverpool when Zeb was 10. He reckons he’s ‘abandoned’ – but she didn’t abandon him; she left him with my mum. But then my mum had a stroke and couldn’t cope, so Zeb came to me.

**Ian:** My stepson was obviously having trouble in his younger teens. His mother often asked for help – from various

agencies – but it didn't really happen. It makes you question what could've been done, either within the family or from outside, to help this guy avoid the destructive path he finally took.

He's now no longer with us – the victim of a drug-murder. That's the life he was heading for, and that's where he went.

Thankfully, he hasn't taken his daughter with him. We were able to stop that happening ...

**Susan:** My daughter's whole life has been very difficult. But I always hoped she'd come right. I hoped she'd get past this sort of mad stage – the terrible teens. But ... she didn't.

We got a call in January 2007 to say that her little one had swallowed a tiny camera battery. And it was left in her oesophagus for *three days* before my daughter did anything about it!

We came out (from the USA) in April for a Family Group Conference. That's when the decision was made that the child would come to us for six months while my daughter got psychological help.

They think she may have fictitious disorder by proxy ... (which is Münchhausen's Syndrome.) That's where they harm the child in order to get help or attention for themselves. Our granddaughter was in hospital for a couple of months and my daughter kept saying, "She won't eat – she won't eat!" But the staff were watching all this, and they found that my daughter was putting the food out of the little one's reach, so she *couldn't* get it.

My daughter was wanting the attention, but she didn't want the hassle of actually raising her own little girl!

She had presented her other children to hospital too, all with some kind

of dreadful disease. One time it was Canavan's Disease. My daughter must've gone online and found out all about it – she's very clever. So she told everybody that her little boy had Canavan's Disease. Of course, he hadn't. He was good as gold. But she invented it all so she could get the attention and hospital admission.

She'd go to any lengths to get that.

## FINDING A WAY THROUGH THE SYSTEM

**S**upport is available. But some grandparents find themselves struggling – not only with their children, but with the very agencies supposedly there to help them.

**Tessa:** I've found that with CYFS you don't get continuity. You meet one person and get treated one way, then you're shunted off to someone else and everything changes. You go from one office to another and they all treat you differently. They're forever talking about the rights of the parents – or calling another Family Group Conference. But you can't just keep sitting around *talking* about it forever!

For the first five years of his life, Eli lived with his mother in a chaotic situation – totally unsuitable for a child. He was obviously unhappy. His behaviour was extreme, to say the least. And I was really worried that he might have been abused, because my daughter was now in a relationship with a known paedophile – whose own four children had been removed by CYFS.

We kept in contact, picking him up each Friday and taking him home each Sunday – as much as I hated returning him to his mother. But then my daughter got involved by association with a murder!



“Budget?” I thought. “What budget?” And I just started to cry. They truly had no idea. So I went home, got onto the WINZ website, and came across this support group: *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*. I rang the lady and a couple of days later she rang back. We just talked and talked. She listened to me, and had lots of good advice. And that’s how it started.

**Tessa:** They know what you’re going through. They understand when you’re having a tough time, and something’s gone wrong, and you just want to scream. Or you have to take time off work and tell your boss: “I need to go early today ... again!”

With *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*, you can pick up the phone and tell a friend, “I’m having one hell of a week!”

**Susan:** Having the support of other

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***The financial pressure is one of the biggest factors. Putting your plans on hold: maybe the new boat, or the trip overseas, or whatever you were going to do. Because suddenly you’re being parents again ... as grandparents!***

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This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Eli had seen and heard things that a child of five shouldn’t be privy to, so CYFS finally removed him and called us in.

Only time will tell if his behaviour is in response to abuse, sexual or otherwise. We’re still working through these issues with the Child Mental Health team and addressing his learning difficulties.

**Aroha:** I went to WINZ. It’s demoralizing going to this particular branch. I’ve had problems with them before in earlier years with a sister of mine. And the thought of having to go there again – arrrgh!

They told me, “Go and see so-and-so – he’ll help you with your budget.”

people who are going through the same sorts of things is so important! I’m trying to get a group started in Wellington. Everywhere else it’s really taken off – but Wellington, no. And yet, there are lots of grandparents here raising their grandchildren.

**Valerie:** Since joining *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* I feel like I’m not alone in this. If you’ve got a problem and you need advice – or you just feel you need to check that you’re doing the right thing – you can ring one another up. Like homework time: your grandchild’s got homework (and it’s soooo different from when I was at school!) ... you can ring

up the others and ask, "How long do you give them for homework?" And they might say, "Oh well, I only give them 20 minutes. If it's not done by then, they can finish it at school."

We support each other in ways like that.

## WHAT ABOUT THE GRANDDADS?

**G**randmothers are often the first to get called on in an emergency – and the first to insist they mother their grandchildren-in-distress. But how about the grandfathers?

**Ian:** It tends to be the grandmothers ringing each other up more than the guys. Quite early on I did suggest, at a *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* function, "How about we start things, like 'Guys Days Out'? A group of us grandfathers, say, taking grandsons or granddaughters fishing or four-wheel-driving?" I felt that there was a need for the male side of the relationship to be catered for in the boys'-toys or boys-day-out sphere, and I hoped that this suggestion would be taken up. But ... it didn't go anywhere. Didn't fly at all!

I think grandfathers often hold back. They think, "I'll stand here and see what I can do for my household, my family." But some of them don't feel very empowered – maybe even a little pushed out.

I suspect some men (and it might be more than just some) feel uncomfortable safety-wise – with their granddaughters especially. And I can understand that.

The majority are having to parent their grandchildren because the parents have been involved in drug abuse or alcohol, the girls in prostitution, the guys in all sorts of illegal activities. Those grandparents have already seen the world that their children have gone into ... the problems

they've brought down on the family by living those sorts of lives, and the nastiness that can happen. And there's a very real fear (not an unfounded fear) that comes from this.

I think that fear might well be behind some of the guys' reticence. That, and the fact that most of them are coming to the end of their working lives. And their retirement savings are going to be depleted bringing up another child.

I'm not sure if my experience will work for anyone else. But the first thing I'd say is: don't take it personally. What's happened isn't a reflection on you. These things haven't happened because you've failed in any special way. You're still the head of a household, and the patriarch of a family (or whatever words you want to use to express that idea).

Just take a little while to realise that those things haven't changed. All the knowledge you've ever had you've still got – and you're probably about to get a whole lot more! Your wisdom is still yours. So keep yourself calm and strong. Stand your ground and speak your truth and don't let anyone push you around.

## LOOKING AHEAD ...

**F**amilies are often stronger than they look. Kids can overcome incredible setbacks. Bad times can be replaced by good times. And the wildest dreams can still be realised ...

**Tessa:** One thing we chose to do with my daughter is to let her stay connected with the family. Even though a lot of tough stuff has happened over the years (and we've seen some real shockers!) we still want her included in the boys' lives. We don't want to shut that door.



until she straightens her life out for good and proper.

**Valerie:** You have to think about your grandchild's future ... because we're not going to be around, some of us, when they grow up. It's making sure you have something set in place for them up ahead. Ensuring someone's going to be there to care for them.

There's also the pleasure of seeing them grow: from a childhood that has often included terrible trauma and made them afraid of their own shadow ... to where they mature and blossom. When they've got stable adults in their lives and the security of knowing that there's a bed to sleep in, and food on the table, and they don't have to fight for these – to see them actually become little individuals with a

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*To see them grow from a childhood that has often included terrible trauma, to where they mature and blossom – to see them actually become little individuals with a real future, there's great pleasure in that!*

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**Susan:** It's very important when they're young to let the children know if they have siblings. And to let them know, in terms they can understand, what's the matter with their parents. Our granddaughter asked us why mummy couldn't look after her – and why daddy wasn't on the scene. So I told her, "Well, they're sick." That's the only thing I could say that she could really understand.

As she gets older and can understand more we'll fill in more details. But for now, "being sick" is fine.

**Aroha:** My family will bounce back. The children's mother is due to come out of prison shortly. But she won't be able to take her kids back for some time – not

real future, there's great pleasure in that!

**Ian:** My dreams are still intact – for my granddaughter, and for me. I'm still capable of dreaming far more than I'm ever going to be capable of doing. So ... if I get five minutes to have a crack at it, just watch out!

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TO CONTACT 'GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN' GO TO [WWW.GRG.ORG.NZ](http://WWW.GRG.ORG.NZ) – OR FREE-PHONE 0800 472 637.

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