

Many grandmothers experience motherhood twice

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By **Susan Harrison Wolffis | Muskegon Chronicle**

Five years ago, her house was empty.

Retta Laajaj-Ntatoukidi's big, old dining room table — a family heirloom as old as the house she grew up in on Cora Avenue in the Buel Park neighborhood on Russell Road — was eerily quiet and unoccupied.

Not today.

In a stunning turn of events, in 2006, just after Laajaj-Ntatoukidi retired from a career in teaching, she took guardianship of all five of her grandchildren.

"All of them," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says, drawing out the words, then repeating herself for effect. "All. Of. Them."

Today five teenagers — ranging in age from 12 to 19 — crowd around that once-vacant table, doing homework after school, eating meals together, talking about their day, laughing and joking and creating a family tree of cousins and siblings.

In the center of it all: Laajaj-Ntatoukidi, a 64-year-old grandma — "Granny," to the kids — who thought she'd retired long ago from childrearing, until her grandchildren needed her.

"God works in so many mysterious ways," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says. "They came into my life when they really needed me, and I really needed them."

Laajaj-Ntatoukidi is one of 4.5 million grandparents in the United States raising their grandchildren today, according to the U.S. Census. In Michigan, 173,435 children live with grandparents.



Matt Gade | Chronicle

Surrounded by her five grandchildren Retta Laajaj-Ntatoukidi, center, is the legal guardian of her five grandchildren. Her grandchildren from left are: Jante' Miller (18), Ardis Miller (16), J'Lisa Miller (19), Antoine Ballard (18) and Aurelius Miller (12).

KINSHIP CARE PROGRAM

What: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren/Kinship Care Program

What to expect: Monthly support group, community resources and educational opportunities, family events.

When: The "alumni" group meets the second Wednesday of the month at Church of God

An additional 183,621 are being raised by other relatives in Michigan.

There are some reports, including one by the Pew Research Center, that estimate one in 10 children lives with grandparents.

Laajaj-Ntatoukidi isn't surprised by such statistics. She is raising her grandchildren in the same house where she was brought up, in the same neighborhood where she still has relatives, and there is precedence for caring for one's own.

"When I was growing up, everybody seriously helped everyone else," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says. "Everyone helped raise the children."

Laajaj-Ntatoukidi has guardianship of her son's three daughters — J'Lisa Miller, 19; Jante' Miller, 18; and Ardis Miller, 16. She also is the guardian of her late daughter's two sons — Antoine Ballard, 18; and Aurelius Miller, 12.

Granny says she doesn't try to "sugar coat" the circumstances that led to them living with her. Neither does she "dwell on anything negative."

When 19-year-old J'Lisa was just a toddler, she came to live with Laajaj-Ntatoukidi for awhile when the baby's parents were in a rough patch of their marriage. Eventually, Laajaj-Ntatoukidi's daughter took custody of J'Lisa and her two younger sisters because their folks could not responsibly care for them.

Granny visited them whenever she could.

"I truly love being a grandmother," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says.

Even when it calls for tough love and action.

Five years ago, Laajaj-Ntatoukidi took guardianship of the blended family of siblings and cousins when her daughter became seriously ill. Laajaj-Ntatoukidi didn't like the living conditions or the other adults to whom the children were exposed — and stepped in.

Her relationship with her son, who lives in the Chicago area, is "rocky," Her ties with her daughter, who lived in Milwaukee until she died last year, were "strained" at best.

"But I had to think of the children," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says. "It was the best thing I could have done. I feel like I had

United, 1630 Harvey. Ongoing classes also offered.

Who qualifies: Open to grandparents/relatives raising children in Muskegon, Oceana and Ottawa counties.

Cost: The program and classes, which are sponsored by Hackley Community Care Center, and Senior Resources of West Michigan, are free.

Information: Call Cynthia Will, family life educator and program coordinator, at (231) 733-6669.

BY THE NUMBERS

- 6,687,495 grandparents report they live with grandchildren in U.S.
- 2,696,053 grandparents report they are responsible for grandchildren in U.S..
- 173,435 grandparents report they live with grandchildren in Michigan.
- 69,712 grandparents report they are responsible for grandchildren in Michigan.
- 804 grandmothers responsible for grandchildren in Muskegon County.
- — Source: 2009 U.S. Census American Community Survey

to do what I was supposed to do. Family should try to keep family together.”

Cynthia Will, who coordinates the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren/Kinship Care Program for families in Muskegon, Oceana and Ottawa counties, says she could tell “story after story after story” of situations like Laajaj-Ntatoukidi.

“There are so many different kinds of families these days,” Will says.

Some grandparents have custody of grandchildren while their parents serve in the military or are incarcerated. Some are raising grandchildren because their parents have died or were declared unfit parents for any number of reasons. Others are bringing up grandchildren during the week while the kids’ parents work out of town.

“There’s a sensitivity that’s needed. We need a heightened awareness that not every child lives with mom and dad,” Will says.

Laajaj-Ntatoukidi is one of 20-or-so grandparents who regularly attend a monthly support group offered by Grandparents Raising Grandchildren/Kinship Care Program.

“Our problems may be different, but they’re similar. At first I thought: What do I need to know about being a grandparent? I’ve been a grandparent for a long time, but this is what I needed,” Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says.

Will, who has run the program since November, offers a series of classes for alumni and newcomers alike that talks about everything from anger management to money issues.

Budget cuts in Lansing have severely reduced the \$138 in state aid Laajaj-Ntatoukidi used to receive every month per child, she says. If she were a foster parent, she would get more than that to help feed and clothe the youngsters. But as a grandparent, she is expected to absorb the cost. For now, she only receives food stamps while the state budget is being worked out.

“I worked my whole life. I have contributed to society. I am not a beggar,” Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says, “but I could use some (financial) help.”

For all intents and purposes, she is a single adult raising five children — three of whom will graduate from Reeths-Puffer High School in June. Laajaj-Ntatoukidi is married, but her husband, who is from Africa, lives in Paris. When the couple married, they didn’t know Laajaj-Ntatoukidi would soon get custody of her grandchildren.

“Your life is turned upside down when you think you’re going to retire, but you are raising grandchildren,” Will says. “As much as you love them, it’s a big change ... a loss of some of your own plans that get put on hold.”

There are big issues facing grandparents in Laajaj-Ntatoukidi shoes, Will says. Laajaj-Ntatoukidi will be in her 70s when the youngest is in college. Her health is not the best. She has macular degeneration and can no longer drive, and she is diabetic.

But there’s never been one day of regret that her days of retirement are busy bringing up a second batch of kids.

"They keep me on my toes," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says. "I'm not going to tell you it makes me feel younger because some days, I am tired. I am really tired."

School is the family's "number one priority." Academics, sports and other student activities, plus their commitment to New Mount Zion Baptist Church in Muskegon, keep them busy.

Five years ago, the house where Laajaj-Ntatoukidi was oh-so-quiet. Now it's filled with teenagers, and Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says she is fulfilled in ways she never imagined.

"We're a family, nothing more, nothing less," Laajaj-Ntatoukidi says. "And these children? They are my blessing."

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