
Stay Connected

Family Connections
University of Maryland School of Social Work

"BACK IN THE DAY"

GRANDPARENTS REMEMBER THE BALTIMORE OF THEIR YOUTH

Grandmother, age 59—"I remember when Baltimore was a safe place to live. On hot summer nights, families used to pack up a dinner and sleep all night in Druid Hill Park and no one bothered you. All the families in West Baltimore had regular family outings to that park. There were swings and you could walk through the zoo at night. The air was so fresh. No one carried a door key; you never even had to lock your door. Everyone was family back then."

SUMMER 2006

Grandfather, age 55 - "I grew up in Sandtown. There was a parade every Saturday or Sunday. You could count on it. You saw the balloons and heard the drums and everyone would drop what they were doing to run outside and watch. Best of all was the Easter Parade. Even the prostitutes and pimps, the drug dealers, and the numbers runners dressed up in their finest clothes and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue."

Grandfather, age 67—"I remember the Inner Harbor before it got developed. The McCormick Spice Factory was where the Hyatt is now. The harbor was full of tugboats and you could buy watermelons off the boats. There was a produce market behind the factory where you could get fruits and vegetables. You didn't want to be down there after the sun went down, though."

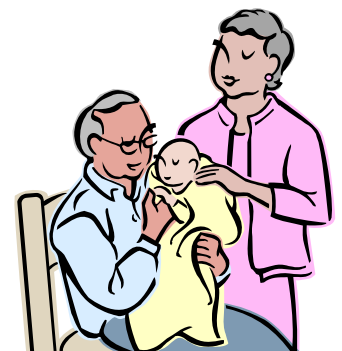
Grandmother, age 61 - My stepfather was an A'raber. On Sundays he'd put all the kids in the truck and we'd go out to Edmondson Avenue. At that time it was where the rich people lived. He'd cut up watermelon and give fruit to everyone. I also remember the midnight shows at the Royal Theater and block parties all the time. Baltimore used to be right on the money, but now it's going down."

Grandfather, age 58 - "Baltimore used to keep the steps—they called them stoops back then—clean. People were friendly. Now they mostly stay to themselves."

Grandmother, age 65 - "Our time was a different world. People looked out for one another's kids. You could leave your doors unlocked. If your kid got too wild, he'd be corrected by another parent. People don't care about their neighborhood anymore and children aren't as respectful as they used to be. Now they cuss you out. Children rule their parents now; parents don't rule their kids anymore. I have better memories about my younger days."

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TAKING BACK OUR COMMUNITIES: TWO GRANDMOTHERS WHO ARE STANDING UP FOR OTHERS

Ms. Rose* is a 62-year-old grandmother of three who has lived her entire life in the same West Baltimore row home. "When I was coming up, it was a great place to be a child. You could wander free, up and down the block, and there was always someone looking out for you." By the time Ms. Rose was raising her own children, things were starting to change. Drugs and gangs had become a part of daily life in the community and residents left their homes only when necessary. Soon families started moving away from the block, to safer areas, and the majority of the homes were boarded up.

When Ms. Rose's grandchildren entered her life five years ago, she was determined to keep them safe without making them prisoners in their own home. She faced an overwhelming challenge. The block was so thick with drug dealers that they wouldn't even let you pass to get into your own home. Children couldn't play outside because there were frequent shootings and there was no more sitting on the stoop talking to neighbors on hot summer nights. The police were little help. "If they came at all, by the time they arrived, the drug dealers were gone."

Ms. Rose went door to door to talk to her neighbors about taking their community back from the drug dealers. They were with her. The first thing they did was find a contact in the Police Department's Community Relations Division. "We were very lucky," Ms. Rose says, "that we found a young man who really understood our frustrations. He told us to call him whenever drug dealing was going on and he's make sure someone was sent out." The neighbors set up a phone tree to keep the calls flowing into the police station when they saw a group on the block. The police made some arrests and wrote down license numbers. It didn't eliminate the problem, but most of the major dealers moved on to other neighborhoods where there was less police surveillance.

Ms. Rose and her neighbors didn't stop there. They set about trying to rebuild the sense of community that had been stolen from them by the dealers. They enlisted the involvement of the three storefront churches on the block. The first Friday of every month was Neighbors Night Out—a block party with hot dogs and chips, games for the children, and a chance for caregivers to talk. In the winter, they held coffees in each other's homes. Community meetings were held once a month at a church. They also cleaned out a vacant lot that was full of rubble, weeds and rats and turned it into a community garden. When a new family moved onto the block, they visited and said, "This is what we're trying to do. How can you help?" They began meeting with other blocks in the area to exchange ideas and provide support.

Of course, the block is still not as safe as Ms. Rose would like and she is not finished fighting. She sees the vacant, boarded up buildings—over half the homes on her block—as the biggest threat to the neighborhood. "There are always fires in those buildings and dead bodies, not to mention the rats. The slumlords could help cut back on crime if they did their job. If they're not going to fix the building up, they could at least brick it so squatters can't get in." And rather than having the buildings sit there abandoned, year after year, Ms. Rose would like the city to seize them and either sell them for \$1 to families who will fix them up or turn them into soup kitchens or day care centers.

Ms. Rose also had a plan for the young men who are arrested on drug charges. "Why not make them go back into the communities they're destroying and give something back? They would have to report in to a community

leader and spend 30 days on a project the community decides is important, like clearing out a vacant lot. Community members would keep an eye on them to make sure they were really working, not just talking to their homeboys."

Ms. Rose concedes that cleaning up Baltimore is an endless, frustrating process. "As fast as you clean it up, they tear it up again. But we can't give up. The drug dealers want us to get tired and stop. We have to make them tired of us."

Many people call Ms. Hart,* a 66-year-old grandmother of 20 and great-grandmother of two, "The Mayor of East Baltimore" because of her role in the community. She remembers a time not so long ago when people looked out for one another and she is trying to bring back that sense of community.

Ms. Hart works in small but powerful ways to help those in need. She collects clothing that neighborhood children have outgrown, sorts it by size, and redistributes it to other children it would fit. When she has no child in mind, she hangs the clothes on a fence in the community that serves as an informal "clothes closet." She organizes the children to check on the elderly on the block and run errands for them. She sweeps the block clean of trash. When she has extra food, she shares it with others. When the children in the neighborhood start arriving home from school, Ms. Hart gathers them together to do their homework. When caregivers are exhausted, she takes in their children for the weekend to give them a break. Neighbors know she will gladly watch their children, at no cost, if they have a doctor's appointment or a job interview.

Ms. Hart is especially drawn to helping out young men and women who are trying to better themselves. She told the story of Chantel,* an 18-year-old mother of an infant who had just begun her studies at Coppin State. When Chantel's own mother suddenly decided she no longer wanted to watch the baby and Chantel was afraid she'd have to drop out of school and give up her dream of becoming a nurse, Ms. Hart's granddaughter said, "My grandmother will help you out." She was right. Ms. Hart watched Chantel's child every day for five years while Chantel worked and took classes, never asking for more money than the young woman could afford. Chantel is now a nursing instructor and drops by to see Ms. Hart several times a week.

Several other young women dropped by the house to visit with Ms. Hart while this writer was interviewing her. They all said the same thing: "She turned me around because she saw the good in me at a time when I was heading in a bad direction. She didn't just point her finger at me and say you're doing the wrong thing. She was supportive and understanding. I wouldn't be where I am today without her help and belief in me."

This same approach extends to the young men selling drugs in the neighborhood. Ms. Hart explained, "When I see them on my corner, I approach them real nice and ask if I can speak to them. I make it clear that I'm not trying to change their ways, but I have day care kids and great-grandbabies and ask if they could please move themselves off my corner. They do move, and when I see them around, they call me Grandma too."

Ms. Hart's philosophy is that we reap what we sow, and she is trying to recreate community by sowing goodness and kindness rather than hatred and violence. "I'm just trying to be a good neighbor," she says modestly. "I think we need to look out for each other."

*Names have been changed, and identifying information removed, to protect confidentiality.



Generations United held a hearing on April 25, 2006 entitled, "Grandfamilies: Supportive Policies for Children, Families, and Older Adults," to discuss some of the issues related to subsidized guardianship. We are so honored that Ms. Pearlle Knight, a grandmother who participated in the Family Connections program, addressed the gathering.

Ms. Knight focused her comments on Agency on Aging policy that restricts services to caregivers 60 years of age and older. Ms. Knight described the many valuable services the Baltimore Department of Aging has to offer, including support groups and emergency grants, but noted that, because she is 59, she does not qualify. She pointed out that many, many grandparent caregivers are in their fifties and urged supportive services for all these caregivers regardless of their age to enhance their ability to raise their grandchildren.

Several members of Congress or their aides were in the audience. A highlight of the event for Ms. Knight was the opportunity to meet Senator Hillary Clinton, who also addressed the gathering. Ms. Knight commented, "I was very, very nervous to go to Washington DC, but I kept thinking of all the other grandparents that would be helped if they lowered the age limit for services."

As energy costs continue to skyrocket, everyone will be struggling this winter to make their BG&E bills. There are some resources available to assist you with your bills.

The first place to start is with your local Home Energy Program Office. They provide grants (one per heating season) toward part of your energy bill. There are six locations (Community Action Centers) in Baltimore City:

- Southwest, 3411 Bank St., 21224 (410/545-6512)
- Eastern, 1400 Orleans St., 21231 (410/396-9468)
- Northern, 5225 York Rd., 21212 (410/396-6084)
- Western, 1133 Pennsylvania Ave., 21201 (410/396-0893)
- Northwest, 3939 Reisterstown Rd., 21215 (410/984-1384)
- Southern, 606 Cherry Hill Rd., 21225 (410/545-0900)

Call the office closest to you and ask about their hours. When you go, you will have to take: 1) proof of your identity, citizenship and residency; 2) Social Security cards for the entire household—including children; 3) proof of your total household income for the last 30 days, such as pay stubs or an SSI or TCA benefit letter; 4) a copy of your most recent BG&E bill; and 5) your lease or a rent receipt. This is a lot of documentation to collect, but the program can be a life-saver in terms of preventing a turn-off.

There are several other programs that may have funds (generally up to \$100), especially for turn-offs. Some are restricted by zip code. They are also worth a call.

- Salvation Army, 410/783-2920
- Echo House (21223 zip code only), 410/947-1700
- Samaritan Center, 410/659-4020
- Paul's Place (21223 and 21230 only—1st Friday of each month), 410/625-0775
- Echo House (21223 only), 410/947-1700
- Enon Baptist Church (21201, 21217, 21230), 410/728-1490
- City Temple Outreach, 410/383-8040

Metropolitan UMC Outreach (21201, 21217, 21223), 410/523-1469

Finally, if you think your bill is incorrect (for example, if you are being billed for a time when you were no longer living at that address), call the Office of People's Council at 410/767-8150 and they will investigate the situation and advocate for you with BG&E.

GRANDPARENTS

Who are these people?

G - Guidance, always pointing children in the right direction.

R - Respect is what we encourage; love others as you love yourself or want to be loved.

A - Achievement is what we urge; finish school and be someone.

N - Nourish, always nourishing our grands, body, mind and spirit.

D - Dependability; when there is no one to walk, talk, sing or cry with, you can depend on us.

P - Proud of our grandchildren, yes we are, whether right or wrong; love is unconditional.

A - Always loving our grands, through the good times and the hard times, is what we do.

R - Righteousness; we are here to bring out the best in you.

E - Ego, helping the children to feel good about themselves no matter what. God did not make no junk!

N - Negotiation--talk it over with thyself before responding in anger.

T - Teaching one to help another.

S - Salvation is in everyone, so believe it will all work out in the end..

Without grandparents, many families would not exist. We are the backbone of Creation. Remember, we have a month just for us—September.

By a grandfather of three

FAMILY CONNECTIONS WELCOMES A NEW STAFF MEMBER

Patricia Noel joined the Family Connections staff as an Academic Coordinator in June after her graduation from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Many of you already know Patricia; she was an intern at Family Connections last year.

Patricia was excited about working for Family Connections because, she says, "The program isn't just about talk. It's about action." She especially enjoys working with grandparents. "It takes a lot of dedication to raise children again after you've already raised one set and these caregivers deserve more than just a pat on the back." She added, "I've learned a lot from the grandmothers and their stories. They truly inspire me."

Patricia grew up in West Baltimore and looks forward to being able to give something back to the community in which she was raised. "It's changed a lot since I was a child. There's much more poverty. I see my role as giving people a little bit of hope, whether it's by providing resources or being there to listen."

A RESOURCE FOR GRANDPARENTS IN 21223 ZIP CODE

Echo House Multipurpose Center at 1705 W. Fayette St. offers an ongoing grocery program called Survival Package for Seniors for people age 55 and over who live in the 21223 zip code area. Once a month, you pay \$7 and, in exchange, receive \$25 worth of groceries. Call Echo House at 410/947-1700 to apply for this service .

FREE BOOKS!

The Book Thing of Baltimore, located at 3001 Vineyard Lane (near 30th St. and Greenmount Ave.), is crammed with tens of thousands of used books for children and adults on every subject you can imagine. All of the books are free and there is no limit on how many books you can take—except for the size of your arms. It is open every Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m.-6 p.m.. You can call the store at 410/662-5631 for directions.



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HELP US TO HELP OTHERS

Grandparent Family Connections has gone city-wide. We are now providing services to grandparents who are raising grandchildren (at least one of whom has to be between the ages of 5-11) anywhere in Baltimore City. Our former and current clients are our best referral source and we appreciate your efforts in promoting the program. If you know of grandparents in your extended family, in your neighborhood, or in your church who might benefit from some extra support, please refer them to our program.

**To Make a Referral,
Call 410-706-3672**

Who Are We

Family Connections collaborates and partners with a number of community organizations by having membership on City Wide, the Education Advocacy Coalition, the Kinship Care Resource Center, the Kinship Care Multidisciplinary Committee, the Pigtown Executive Roundtable, the Fair Housing Coalition, and the Southwest Consortium, Baltimore's Success by Six Partnership.

