

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Building Voices for Advocacy in the Media

One of Deb Frisbie's favorite responses for publicly speaking out for grandparents who are raising grandchildren came from her adopted grandson, Richard Jr., 15. After welcoming a reporter into their family home to discuss the stigmas and challenges of their family and others in similar situations, Deb received positive reviews following the published front-page story in the Traverse City Record-Eagle. Neighbors and friends, including her son's school caseworker, all said they learned a lot about a largely hidden but growing trend. But it was Richard, "my boy who struggles," who instinctively understood the value of speaking out in the media. "Hey, Mom, you can help lots of other people," he said.

Using one's voice to speak out for children, youth and families in the media has never been more important for raising public awareness and support for policy change. Media attention brings exposure to community issues and needed policy changes. Through interviews, letters to the editor, commentaries the attention also helps generate new support from potential grassroots supporters and influence leaders. The way the media gets information they need about critical issues and ways to improve is changing. As traditional media companies nationwide and in Michigan continue to cut costs by shrinking reporting staffs, advocates who have information and personal experience to share like Frisbie become valuable sources for building credible articles that spotlight emerging social trends requiring attention from legislators and policymakers. Today, advocates who can frame issues with compelling data and real-life stories, and seek out journalists interested in telling locally relevant stories, raise their own value to the media and their service in the communities they live in. In this report, we outline how Deb Frisbie seized opportunities in her Northern Michigan community to shed better public understanding for a growing issue of community importance.

Today, nearly one-third of children in the state's welfare system are placed with grandparents and many others are cared for by grandparents not in the system. Many grandparents struggle on fixed income and ill health with children who have a variety of complex concerns. Children who have been removed from their own homes often suffer from trauma from instability and sometimes from living with parents who have been suffering from their own life challenges, leaving them abusive or neglectful.

Deb Frisbie's Story: Frisbie, a General Motors retiree, works as an adoptive parent consultant with Adoptive Family Support Network, a statewide post-adoption support organization for adoptive and foster families. She also works with the Michigan Kinship Coalition. She and



husband, Dick, who's also retired, adopted their daughter's children, Richard, and his sister, Ryleigh, now 12, in 2007. Richard was born with fetal alcohol syndrome, has been seeing a therapist for most of his life, and has an Individual Education Plan at school. The children's mother is serving a prison sentence for probation violations stemming from an identity theft charge. The children's fathers live out of state and neither one contested the adoptions. Deb and Dick moved from West Michigan to Northern Michigan for a healthier lifestyle for the children. Immediately, they became fixtures and regular volunteers in their children's schools. Deb started a support group for other families in her area.

Frisbie's Advocacy: Frisbie's part-time work with families provides opportunities for great insights into what's helpful to children being raised by grandparents and other extended family. In Northwest Michigan where she lives, Frisbie is among more than 1,000 grandparents responsible for their grandchildren, according to U.S. Census data. Many caregivers don't understand the distinctions among adoption, guardianship (both temporary and permanent), and foster care or the significant differences in family rights, services and subsidies. It's a complicated environment that begs for navigators to assist in the process, she said. (Should

"These parents, they don't know what they don't know. They don't know that love's not enough. These kids are coming from brokenness. You can't tell when someone is a baby the extent of brain damage they have," Frisbie said of problems that later emerge.

Frisbie has seen many examples of older adults risking their own economic wellbeing and health to care for grandchildren with limited means. Through her advocacy work, she frequently searches her community for free legal help for the families she's assisting. She is likewise a strong proponent for the need for trauma-informed practices and therapeutic parenting skills which can help children who come from homes where domestic violence, drug or alcoholic addiction, abuse and neglect were present. "I want to protect kids. That's why I help these parents here," Frisbie said.

Making Public Connections: Frisbie met reporter Carol Thompson at an Adoption Day celebration that Thompson was covering for the paper in January in Traverse City. Frisbie, representing the Adoptive Family Support Network, chatted briefly with her about her work with the Network and then shared her own family story. That encounter led Thompson to contact

Frisbie when she decided to write a larger piece, a feature story about the growing trend of grandparents raising grandchildren for a Sunday spread later that month. Frisbie, one of two grandparents interviewed for the story, said she was open to it because she's always considering ways to promote issues surrounding adoptive families in Northern Michigan and the unique circumstances of older parents. "The bottom line is, if we can save a broken adoption or a disruptive placement for a kid, then that's my heart beat," she said. "I want to raise awareness; I love what I do."

Thompson asked the family to describe a typical day in their life, and asked the kids what they remembered about their own adoption day. Frisbie said she felt comfortable and open talking with her, despite the personal nature of some topics – the strain on marriages from raising a new set of children, or becoming out of sync with couples their own age who don't have youngsters at home. Frisbie said she was happy with the story Thompson wrote. It not only accurately presented her story, but it delved into the advocacy work and the importance of raising awareness for issues of public interest and policy. The story also generated many new connections among grandparents in the area after others read it. "She did a bang up job with everything," Frisbie said of Thompson. "She wanted to be sensitive and got to the point about what was going on in the county. She did raise awareness for a whole rising sector of people."

Becoming Media Friendly: You don't need a journalism degree to know how to talk to the media. In the rural counties she works in, Frisbie makes it a habit to be in contact with local newspapers that serve as primary news sources for the area. Frisbie even contacted a local tourism magazine to pitch a notice about her grandparents' support group and was pleased to learn they offer a continuing "spotlight" article for local nonprofits like hers. Prepping for interviews has also made her more comfortable and effective. She will begin by asking reporters to describe the nature, or angle of the stories they're creating. She likes to ask them what they think their audiences are most interested in knowing so that she's prepared to address those points.

One day last week Frisbie was contacted by a television reporter interested in developing a story about her grandparents' support group, apparently interest generated by last month's newspaper article. "This makes it easier for people to know me, and what I strive to do for them," she said. "Media attention will help me reach more people. We all need each other."