



VOICES *Speaking out to keep all families strong and supported.*
for Relative Caregivers
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Michigan's
Children



An Aunt and Uncle's Unwavering Love Made All the Difference for a Troubled Teen

The product of an upper middle class upbringing in Dallas, Texas, Brooke VanProoyen, now 43, was “shipped out” to out-of-state relatives each summer by parents consumed by their careers. A latchkey kid lacking self-discipline and solid study habits, she struggled with truancy and became “a pretty out of control teen.” By age 15, VanProoyen’s summer visits with an aunt and uncle on a farm in White Cloud, Michigan, became a full-time living arrangement when her parents could no longer “manage my behavior.” “White Cloud, where the North begins and the pure water flows,” she said, was where her life took a starkly different turn from the gated community she came from.



Aunt Nan and Uncle Terry were rural, small town farmers, who lived a modest lifestyle, and represented the salt of the earth. They offered their troubled niece what she needed most -- stability, discipline, and set boundaries. But taking in another child (they had two grown children by then), particularly one that required vigilance and unwavering love, wasn't easy. In the years to come, the family dealt with their niece's serious mental health issues. “It was strict, and there was chores, and it didn't always look huggy,” VanProoyen said. “But there were so many memories I'm so thankful for. I made horrible choices, but the fact is their love just never stopped.”

VanProoyen's personal experiences underscore the fact that too many relative caregivers struggling silently and alone. “When I think of families coming into kinship care, the financial burdens are great. Therapy and those things that were needed - my aunt and uncle didn't know how to access them and cover them. I don't think he ever made more than \$27,000 a year.”

VanProoyen's aunt and uncle cared for her as informal guardians, and could have benefited from a system to help them with the difficult process of raising a relative child with health issues. At 18, she swallowed a handful of prescription medicine. For a while, she was committed to an inpatient facility. She was diagnosed with depression, and later in adulthood, with ADHD. She dropped out of school before graduation. “My uncle used to say, ‘I had no idea what I didn't know.’ They were so sad. The system wasn't really there for them.”

With their support, VanProoyen grew up to earn a master's degree in social work and today is the program coordinator for the Adoptive Family Support Network, based in Kent County. She's passionate about her work with foster, adoptive and guardianship families, and helps connect

them to necessary tools, including parent-to-parent peer support. In this role, she's excited to be involved with the first [Annual Relative Care Day at the Capitol](#), and help raise the voices of families raising children who have experienced trauma. "I hope some of these legislators come out and hear what's being said, listen, and realize these are their constituents, just regular people going above and beyond in so many ways," she said. The Capitol Day is sponsored by [Michigan's Children](#) and the [Kinship Care Resource Center](#). As a program director, VanProoyen assisted in advocacy for Legislative funding to create the resource center.

Referring to a package of three bills regarding relative care and proposed by [Reps. Kathy Crawford](#), R-Novi, and [Frank Liberati](#), D-Allen Park, VanProoyen said they're a good start for creating better opportunities for caregivers and children in care. The proposals outline legal assistance for families, a navigator program for relative caregivers and a "landscape study" of the state's child welfare system. Addressing the need for the drafted legislation, she said many kinship families are uncertain about their rights, and unfamiliar with various legal options, such as kinship care, guardianship, foster care, and adoption. "And if they can't take in a relative, in what capacity can they still be connected to them?" she said many ask. Legal questions and help with financial and emotional concerns are critical for the families she meets, she said. "These families need support. That's the number one thing. I firmly believe that they should be able to access support and information with others who have had this lived experience. To hear from another parent that gets it is a game changer," she said.

VanProoyen's uncle passed away in December, but in recent years she often discussed her work with relative caregivers with him and her aunt. "When I share with them about this work being done in kinship care, they often tell me they wish they had known about support or resources when I was young. I remember the financial burdens and emotional challenges they faced. They never knew to even ask and silently struggled alone. It shouldn't have had to be that hard, and this is why I'm so thankful for this work. Looking back, they did the best with what they had."