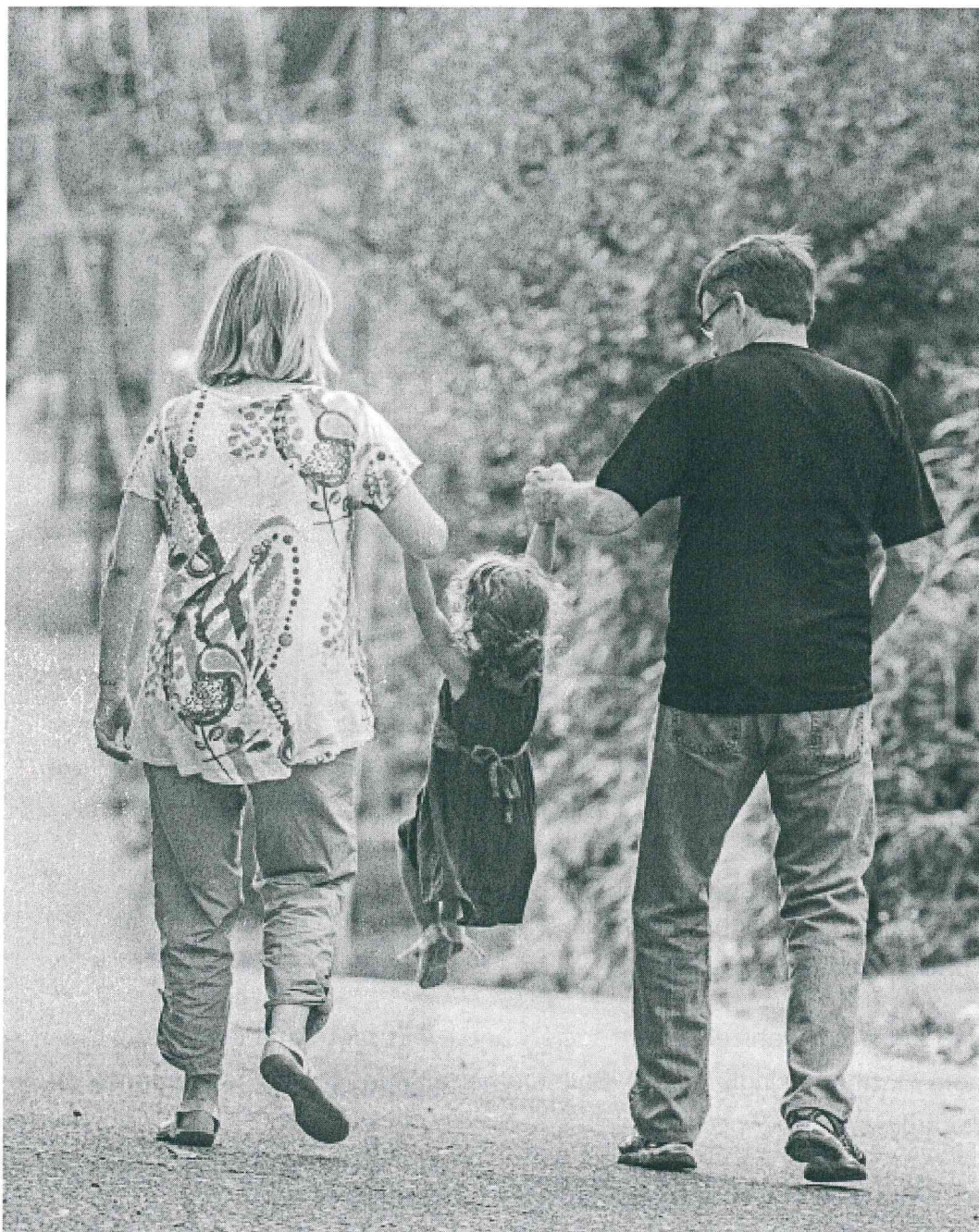


B.C. non-profit group looking for more volunteer grandparents

BY STEPHANIE IP, THE PROVINCE SEPTEMBER 12, 2015



Volunteer grandparents Shaun and Pam Fitzpatrick take a walk with their "grandchild" in North Vancouver, B.C., on September 5, 2015.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, PROVINCE

A non-profit organization that pairs grandparents with families in the community is seeking more volunteers.

Sept. 13 marks this year's National Grandparents Day, and the Volunteer Grandparents Society is hoping more senior folks will consider giving their time and love to building relationships with

grandchildren and their families who are in need of intergenerational support and care.

"A lot of families are lacking that grandparent role model in their child's life for a number of reasons ... but having that extra support person for a parent is a really valuable asset," said Veronica Grossi, program manager with the society.

The program -- which currently only serves Vancouver, Burnaby, North Vancouver, and New Westminister -- functions similarly to traditional Big Brothers and Sisters programs, where an older individual is paired with a child. However, instead of a one-on-one mentorship-type relationship, the society endeavours to match grandparents to entire families, not just the child, so that a relationship can be built at all levels.

A secondary program also pairs volunteer grandparents with local schools, where they can help out in classrooms.

Grossi notes that families and volunteer grandparents become involved for a variety of reasons, and that the demographics are all across the board.

"We get single parents, dual parents, high and low income, so it's a really diverse population that's applying," Gross noted. "Some of our volunteers have their own natural grandchildren but have the time and love to spare."

North Vancouver resident Pam Fitzpatrick does not have any grandchildren of her own and her daughter lives across the country.

"I was just really ready to have a grandchild in my life and I had a heart, and was wanting to give love to a grandchild," she said. Pam, 54, and her husband Shaun, 69, then began looking into Volunteer Grandparents, to see if it might be the right fit.

"You get to this phase of life -- they call it the legacy phase -- and I thought this might be a great situation where I could give back," Shaun said.

The Fitzpatricks then attended a picnic organized by the society and it was there that they met three-year-old Michelle and her mom Martha, a single parent. Both mother and daughter's names have been changed to respect their privacy.

"It was an instant connection," Pam said of first meeting Michelle at the picnic.

It wasn't long before the Fitzpatricks grew to love the young girl and love spending time with her, going on day trips and "adventures."

Each pairing is given about six months to become acquainted and see if the other is a good fit. The Fitzpatricks, once paired with Michelle, were committed to providing Michelle and her mother a stable and safe place to build a relationship.

"Love is not a feeling, it's a decision -- and it's kind of like that," Shaun said. "There's a need there

that I can help with and I'm going to make the decision to help these people."

According to Grossi, many pairings even lead to lasting relationships, long after the grandchildren have grown up.

One volunteer grandmother in North Vancouver who was set up last year eventually ended up going on vacation with her paired family to Iran.

"Things like that just happen and it's amazing to see the different cultures being shared as well," Grossi said.

Currently, there are about 35 active pairings, and about 10 volunteer grandparents working in schools. Another 25 families are on a waiting list, hoping for a volunteer grandparent.

The process to becoming a volunteer grandparent does involve an application and various background checks, but is well worth it, according to the Fitzpatricks.

"Just take the leap. It's so worth it and the reward is just tremendous," said Pam. "Michelle and Martha are very grateful for what we do but that's not it at all.

"We are so grateful that we have the opportunity to do this."

For more information on the program, visit www.volunteergrandparents.ca or call 604-736-8271.

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