



Volunteer grandmother Ruth Nyman and her "granddaughter" Xaria. The Volunteer Grandparents program matches kids without grandparents to seniors who love kids.

Volunteer grandparents

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Memories of grandparents often include playtime at the park, story time and fresh baked cookies. For kids without grandparents, these are missed opportunities. Seniors without children also feel the loss.

That's where the Volunteer Grandparent program steps in. The program matches kids lacking biological grandparents in Metro Vancouver with seniors looking to make a difference. It also provides companionship.

Program director Veronica Grossi said the initiative was founded in 1973, after a social worker named Margery Anderson took two back-to-back calls at a crisis centre.

"One [was] from a single parent who was struggling with their child and was feeling very alone, and the second call was a senior that was feeling very isolated," she said.

It was this coincidence that sparked the program. The program currently runs two streams — one for seniors to match with families and another that places seniors in schools. Grossi said the program helps seniors stay involved in the community and provides a sense of connection.

"For the senior, staying engaged with the community and being able to share their experience and skills, that is really rewarding," she said.

That was certainly the case for Ruth Nyman who became involved with the program after facing some regrets of her own. "I don't have any children of my own and I was feeling the regret of that to be honest, and feeling, 'Oh gosh I wish I could have kids in my life in some way,'" Nyman said.

Today Nyman is "grandmother" to Xaria. The two were matched when Xaria was six-and-a-half, and Nyman said the two "clicked immediately."

"She is nine and she's a very active, outgoing little girl. She's very social and physical, very friendly and so we just hit it off."

Nyman said she likes the youthful energy of kids and the way they see the world.

"There are certain things you only do with kids, like she'll say, 'Let's play a game of thumb wars.' I didn't even know what that was before I had a child in my life," Nyman said.

Patricia Dent, a volunteer grandmother in the school program, has been working with the group since 1998. She volunteers at Grandview elementary helping students in a literacy program read every Thursday morning. Dent had always been around kids as part of her job as a medical secretary at B.C. Children's Hospital and wanted a way to give back after she retired.

"I'd been retired about a year and wanted to do some volunteer work anyways. I like being with children," Dent said. "It's good to feel a part of that."

Grossi said one of the best experiences for her came this year when she received a photo from a young woman's wedding.

"The photo showed an adult getting married and beside her was her mom and her [volunteer] grandmother," Grossi said. "Just to see that, to get a photo, and see just how long-term these relationships can last, is very touching."

For more information on the program, visit volunteergrandparents.ca.

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