

2017 International Day of Older Persons Celebration

Age Concern NZ, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust NZ, Volunteering NZ and Carers NZ

Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision - Wellington, 2 October 2017

Speech by Kate Bundle, CEO, GRG Trust NZ

Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon everyone.

It is an honour and privilege to be here with you all today.

A special thank you to Stephanie Clare, CEO for Age Concern NZ (who unfortunately is unable to be here today) and thank you to her team too for their initiative in putting this joint-event with Carers NZ, Volunteering NZ and GRG together.

Our organisations support the older persons in our community in varying ways and it is a wonderful opportunity today to acknowledge that and our ability to work together to ensure there are good supports in place in our society for the older person.



As CEO of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust NZ, I am particularly delighted, on behalf of all our members and all grandparent caregivers, to be part of today and that the theme for this year's celebration of the **International Day of Older Persons** is about **Tapping the Talents, Contributions and Participation of Older Persons in Society**.

We know, from our work and experience that older persons make a significant contribution to our society.

There are thousands of full-time grandparent caregivers who have stepped up to provide a safe, secure and loving home for children who can't be cared for by their parents and in circumstances where they would otherwise have needed to go into foster care.

At the last Census in 2013 there were more than 9500 of them raising more than 17,000 children in New Zealand. I expect that the numbers are considerably more now judging by the growth of our own membership and the numbers of new grandparent care families we have joining GRG for support each month.

We currently support nearly 4,000 grandparent care member families nationwide which represents nearly 7,000 caregivers and around 12,000 children.

In 2016 with the help of a Lotteries grant, we conducted the largest survey of the social and economic issues affecting grandparent caregivers in the world to date.

1100 participants raising 1750 children took part in our study.

In Survey terms, it was massive. 152 questions + 40 questions on each child.

We have further in-depth reports on specific issues to follow. For example, participants have written 28,000 words between them, explaining how the children came into their care – on that issue alone and this data will be analysed separately.

If anyone is interested in this work, please have a look at our website under our Publications tab.

But what I think is important to mention today, in particular, in terms of what we learned through that study is just how much these caregivers have given of themselves and the extent to which they really are the unsung heroes in our society.

At any one time in NZ, official figures from Oranga Tamariki show that around 5,000 children are in just over 2400 state approved out of home care placements of which 65% (about 1500) were approved whanau care placements, many of which were grandparents.

Beyond those caregivers, however, as we know, there are thousands more grandparents who are largely providing care without the involvement of the state. More than half of them are over the age of 55 years of age with 42% of them over 60 years.

Our research showed us that the leading causes for children being placed or going into grandparent care is their parents drug abuse, family violence, inability to cope and neglecting their children's needs.

Drug abuse being the most predominant cause.

Our recent internal membership survey showed methamphetamine use to be the primary drug of choice leading to family breakdown in a whopping 86% of cases.

This is a particular concern of course because apart from the fact that most of their clothes, bedding and toys often have to be destroyed and replaced, the circumstances in which this kind of drug use occurs inevitably leads to an environment in which the child is endangered, they are neglected and often exposed to violence and crime.

Our research in 2016 also showed that 41% of the children in grandparent care have psychological issues or disorders, most of which impact their behaviour and stem from past trauma and neglect.

They are dealing with a range of disorders that read like a veritable alphabet soup of conditions such as ADHD, FASD, ASD through anxiety and attachment disorders.

It is challenging stuff for their caregivers and yet our experience and our research shows that these grandparents, with limited financial support and additional professional support are playing an incredibly important role in the lives of these thousands of vulnerable children.

Many of these caregivers have given up their retirement years or plans for retirement, hobbies, interests, dreams of travelling the world etc, because they value the lives of their grandchildren more. Their incredible love and care for these children is what keeps them going and their desire to provide a safe, stable and secure loving home that offers a sense of routine and most of all a sense of belonging within their family and whanau needs to be better acknowledged, recognised and this care relationship – better supported.

We have hundreds of stories of grandparents who have raised grandchildren who have had very traumatic starts in life but through their love and support have gone on to lead great lives with careers in practically every sector imaginable including the arts, sciences, armed forces and health. These children were on a life path to wind up in the worst of our social welfare health, crime and justice statistics. But with the selfless and steady love and support of their grandparents (often at their own expense and sometimes even to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing), these children have grown up to be constructive and contributing members of society.

Our Trust's purpose, our support services and education programmes are set up to enable and empower these families to achieve better life-long outcomes for the vulnerable children and young people in their care. And this is another area where we need to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions that older persons are making to our society. Our 35 Volunteer Support Group Coordinators, Advocacy and Outreach staff and many other GRG volunteers are grandparents themselves in the 'older person' demographic. From Kaitia in the North to Invercargill in the South, these people are doing an incredible job in the community supporting other grandparent caregivers with the often very complex issues they must address in their roles. For example, assisting them with applications for income support at their local Work and Income office, attending family/whanau community or FGC meetings as a support person, or advocating on their behalf for better support with government and non-government community service providers and professionals.

Last year, one of our former Field Officers, Sharon Lee completed her Master's thesis at Waikato University. Her study was on the grandchildren's reflections on being parented by grandparents. It is an excellent read (also on our website).

What was so telling from the study, was the insight these grandchildren shared, their understanding of the sacrifices their grandparents had made for them and the gifts they gave them. The words of one grandchild nicely sums up the gratitude and insight shared by the grandchildren in this study:

"I said to my Nan, that when I do die, I want to make sure that I've made it to where she has – when it comes to the time when she passes, I want to make something successful for her, not for myself, but for her - just to know that she does have acknowledgement from someone."

To me, that says a lot about the impact a grandparent raising a grandchild can have on the life of a child. For him; she is his hero and inspiration and for us; the thousands of grandparents raising their grandchildren in NZ– against all the odds, challenges and difficulties they face – they are our heroes and most certainly make our society a better place for our tamariki and their future.