



Lynn Stephens never thought she would be raising a child again at 48 years old, but when the Children's Aid Society threatened to seize her grandson, Stephens and her husband fought for him and were awarded final custody. Stephens is part of a growing trend of grandparents across Canada who are raising their grandchildren.



Stephens' grandson points at the trees outside the Ontario Science Centre.



Stephens and her grandson look at a human skeleton on display at the Human Edge exhibit.



Stephens hangs back to let her grandson explore by himself.



Stephens worries about what kind of childhood her grandson will have but she's determined to do all the same things with him that she did with her children.

Where's The Village?

Photos and Story by Solana Cain

Lynn Stephens never got the chance to be the grandmother she wanted to be.

Stephens, a mother of two, was just getting used to having an empty nest after recently sending her youngest child off to university.

She enjoyed going to concerts at the ACC with her husband, taking trips to Las Vegas with friends and treating herself to the occasion designer purse - a Coach bag was on the top of her wish list.

Her child-rearing days were supposed to be behind her.

"I had a wonderful childhood," said Stephens, "and my children had a good childhood as well."

Two days after her grandson was born, his parents were served with court papers in the hospital. They were told the baby would not be going home with them.

That day, Stephens and her husband went to Children's Aid Society and told them they wanted to keep their grandson. A month and \$11,000 in lawyer fees later, a crying newborn came home with them.

Today, Stephens has given up her basement to an onslaught of toys, she organizes play dates between two year olds and on the top of her wish list now is a durable backpack.

An estimated 75,000 children across the country are being raised by their grandparents, according to 2011 census figures.

"People will stop us and say, 'Oh you're out with grandma for the day, aren't you lucky,'" says Janette Anderson, administrative assistant at Family Space in Belleville.

"Never ever do they think that this is a permanent situation. It's not for a day, not for a week, not for a month. In certain cases it's forever," said Anderson, who leads an information group for grandparents raising their grandchildren the second Monday of every month from 6 to 8 p.m..

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NDP MP Claude Gravelle

Anderson relates personally to the grandparents because she has been raising her two grandchildren for almost 20 years since her daughter's death.

She said the biggest concerns are related to finding childcare and financial assistance. Many grandparents don't know where to begin.

Betty Cornelius has seen grandmothers take out reverse home mortgages eventually losing the house to afford raising their grandchild.

Cornelius, founder of Cangrands, a not-for-profit organization to help support grandparents and other kin who raise their grandchildren, believes the government isn't doing enough to help Canadians in this situation.

Cornelius, who spent 17 years raising her granddaughter Ashley with her husband, remembers that after bringing Ashley home people commended her. She would reply, "I don't need a crown. I need some coin to raise this kid."

In 1995, Cornelius took out a small ad in a local newspaper in Bancroft, Ont. where she called out for other grandparents raising their grandchildren.

"I knew I wasn't the only one who had a drug addict for a son," said Cornelius.

There are 21 Cangrands chapters across the country. The most, 15, are in Ontario.

"They need support, and to realize that they are not alone," said Cornelius, "literally some cry when they feel that connection."

Cornelius is actively involved in getting more assistance for grandparents raising their grandchildren.

"Our freedom 55 plan went out the window and it's still out the window even now that she's gone," said Cornelius. "Financially we will never recover from raising a child we didn't plan on."

NDP MP Claude Gravelle is pushing a private member's bill aimed to financially help grandparents in this situation through more tax credits and deductions.

Gravelle said he would also like to see grandparents receive Employment Insurance when taking parental leave for raising a child under five.

"These grandparents have stepped up to prevent their grandchildren from being placed into care and are frequently already struggling to make ends meet on limited incomes. The least we can do is recognize this and afford them the same benefits biological parents would receive," said the Nickle Belt MP before the House of Commons on Mar. 26, 2013.

Most weekends, Stephens drives an hour and a half into Toronto to bring her grandson to the Ontario Science Centre. They have a membership for the season. Before the Science Centre they had a membership to the ROM, but Stephens says there wasn't much for the two-year-old to do there.

For the next three hours, he'll run around the KidSpark area playing with a variety of educational toys for children. It's a busy Saturday and Stephens' grandson has little hesitation approaching other children.

Stephens hangs back to let him explore by himself. Occasionally, he takes off and she has to run and bring him back.

By 3 p.m. the little boy is cranky and Stephens is tired.

After a small struggle to change his diaper before the drive back to Cobourg, Stephens is on the road with her grandson dozing off in the backseat.

She plans to bring him back one Saturday in the near future for a moon and stars exhibit because she knows how much he loves staring at the moon in their backyard.

"I would do it again," Stephens says about taking her grandson in, "and I will fight to keep him safe for as long as I have."