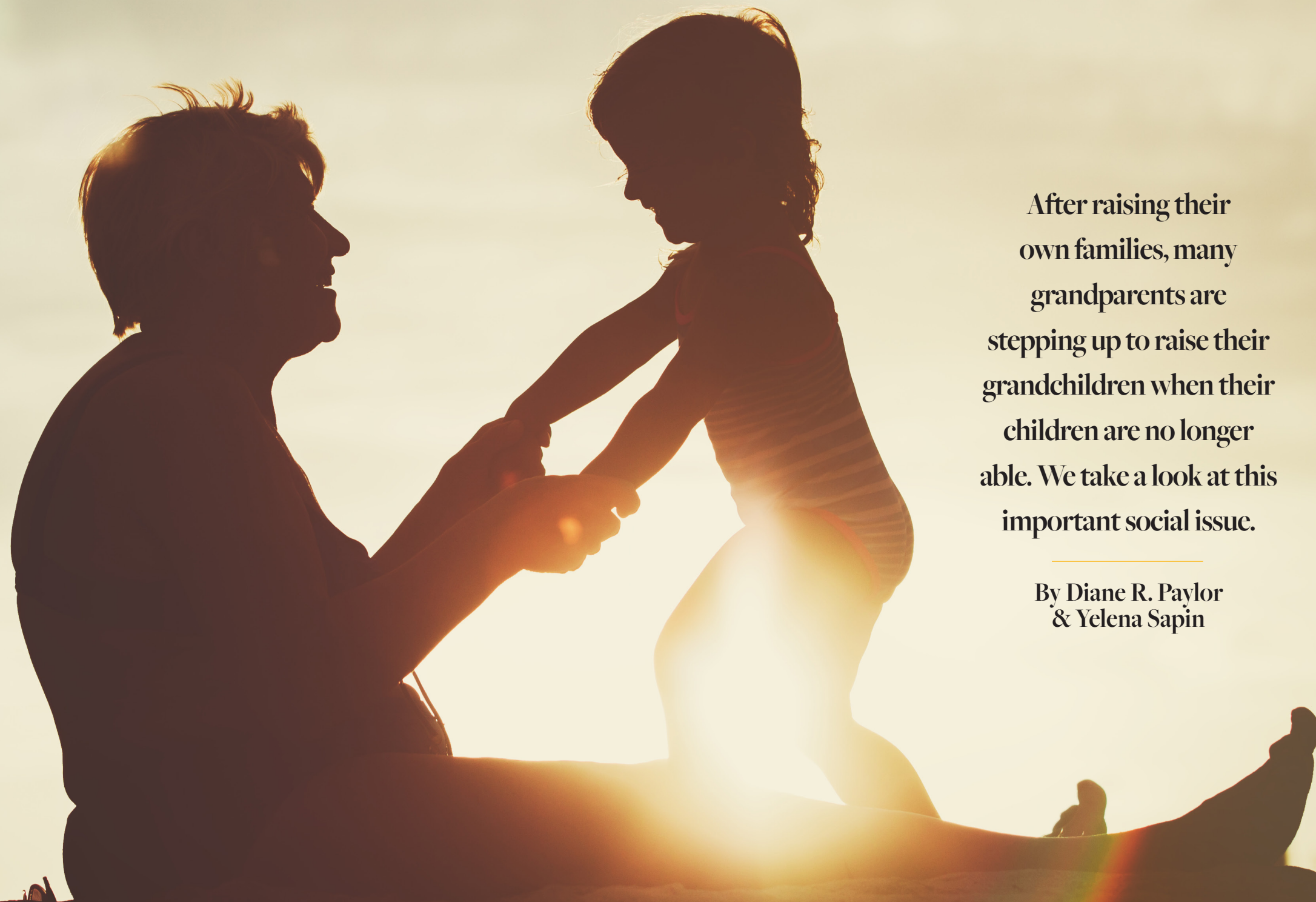


IT TAKES A VILLAGE



After raising their own families, many grandparents are stepping up to raise their grandchildren when their children are no longer able. We take a look at this important social issue.

By Diane R. Paylor
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Raising children is a journey filled with many firsts: the first smile, the first words, the first steps. The first birthday, however, is a milestone.

“We are so excited to celebrate our little princess turning one,” read the evite sent by *Today’s Woman* Publisher Tawana Bain, for the first birthday party of her granddaughter Alyjia. Tawana arrives for the momentous occasion in a long, flowy, yellow dress. She greets the guests already assembling and surveys the room to make sure every detail is in place. Wearing a stunning pink and gold dress befitting a princess – and sucking her thumb – the guest of honor arrives shortly after Tawana in the arms of her bee costume-wearing nanny. It’s a nod to Alyjia’s favorite cartoon series, *Masha and the Bear*.

Toddlers are known to march to the beat of their own drum. Clearly unimpressed by the gathering held in her honor, Princess Alyjia makes her displeasure known. She cries loudly when put down on the floor, wails bitterly when presented with a slice of her birthday cake, and screams angrily when placed upon the white wicker peacock chair for a photo op.

Tawana takes the turn of events in stride. “Nothing I expected to happen today went according to plan,” she laughs as Alyjia, now content and sporting a lipstick kiss on her cheek, perches on her lap and quietly plays with a birthday card.

Not many hosts are able to maintain Tawana’s sense of humor when plans go awry. It’s a skill honed by the experience and perspective acquired as the mother of two grown children. Tawana is back on the journey. Like the three million other grandparents in the country, Tawana is parenting again as the full-time caretaker of her granddaughter.

Studies show that children being raised in multigenerational homes with at least one grandparent present has actually been on the rise. According to the Pew Research Center, in March 2021 there were 59.7 million people in the United States living in multigenerational households as compared to 58.4 million in 2019. Economic reasons such as the higher cost of living, housing costs and housing shortages can be attributed to the increase with the 2020

COVID-19 pandemic playing a role as well.

There aren’t just economic reasons for multigenerational living. In a 2021 survey conducted by Generations United, a D.C.-based advocacy organization, one of the top reasons indicated for multigenerational living was childcare.

While multigenerational households are a bona fide part of the village needed to raise a child, in situations where a parent is unable to care for their child(ren), a grandparent like Tawana (or another relative) often steps in to become the primary caretaker not just out of love, but necessity.

Ana Beltran, Director of Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network, a federally-funded technical assistance center, cites the 1996 Welfare Reform Act as a legislative precedent in considering who children should be placed with after being removed from a parent’s care. “We could point to a number of things,” Ana says. “But as part of welfare reform – and I’m putting it in quotes because I don’t really think it was reformed – there was a federal preference inserted for placing children with relatives and all states followed suit.”

The underlying research supporting this preference shows that although the separation is undeniably difficult, children removed from their parents and placed in the care of their grandparents, other relatives or close family friends (now termed “kinship care” or “grandfamilies”), fare better.



Tawana Bain and her granddaughter Alyjia enjoy the 1-year-old's birthday festivities. PHOTO BY BABACAR SAMBE

“They have better outcomes across the board,” Ana says. “They have more stability, are more connected to culture, siblings... a lot of commonsense stuff. There’s also research that shows that the children have better mental health outcomes, better behavioral health outcomes and just feel loved.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the foremost authority on child welfare issues, estimates “2.6 million children are being raised in kinship care/granfamilies.” In Kentucky, 77,000 children are being raised by kin with no parent present and over 51,000 grandparents like Tawana are raising their grandchildren.

“There’s a notion that these families aren’t long term and aren’t legally permanent,” Ana says. “But that’s not what the data shows. A lot of these families go on for a very long time and a lot of the grandparents or other relatives adopt the grandchildren or get guardianship.”

The reasons behind the formation of grandfamilies run the gamut. Leading the way more recently is the drug epidemic and opioid addiction. “Every drug epidemic that we could think of has caused an uptick

in these families,” Ana says. “Crack, meth, and now opioids. Opioids have given [the drug epidemic] a white face because it has impacted more of the white population and they’ve seen more death of people of childrearing age.”

Ana cautions pointing solely to opioids as the primary cause for the continued growth of grandfamilies/kinship care because it doesn’t represent the whole picture.

“There’s ongoing alcohol issues so it’s not just one single drug epidemic,” she says. Other equally as impactful factors that contribute to why children are with grandparents or other family members are military deployment, incarceration, mental illness, physical illness and death.

The reason notwithstanding, it’s important to note that grandfamilies/kinship care fall into two categories - those who are child welfare involved and those who are not.

Some of the biggest issues grandparent caregivers face – particularly those who are caring for children who are not child welfare involved – concern the basics of care like enrolling the children in school, getting medical care and paying for it. “There’s a

lot of inequity in the financial support for these families,” says Ana. “These are folks that didn’t expect to raise another child or didn’t expect to raise ‘this’ child. How are they expected to take care of another child without extra income?”

She adds the difficulties extend beyond the financial need. About one-third of the foster care system is made up children placed with relatives and those children are the legal custody of the state, therefore grandparent caretakers are able to handle school enrollment and the like.

But, Ana explains, “For every one child in foster care with a relative or kin there are 18 outside of foster care with a relative or kin.” So those grandparent caregivers outside of the foster care system often run into stumbling blocks in maintaining the care of their grandchildren because the parent still has legal custody.

With over 45% of all grandparent caregivers of grandchildren being age 60 or old and approximately 25% with disabilities, adding to the complications is the breakdown in their social circle. “What happens is a lot of these older caregivers

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get socially isolated because their peer group is not raising children and they don’t want little kids around,” Ana explains.

In an effort to find solutions for the issues facing grandfamilies and in direct response to the soaring numbers of families impacted by the opioid crisis, Congress passed The Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act in 2018. Under this legislation the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren was created with the purpose of identifying best practices to help grandparents and older relative caregivers meet the socio-economic needs of the children in their care as well as helping grandparent caregivers maintain their own physical, mental and emotional well-being.

The council developed and released an initial report that was delivered to Congress in November 2021. The report outlined recommendations for better support of grandparent caregivers. “What the Advisory Council did was look at the whole universe of families – those that are child welfare involved and those who aren’t – to see how we can better support them,” Ana says. “Our role at the technical assistance center is not so much guidelines but trying to elevate promising practices that people are doing so others can copy it.”

Hopefully, with proper government-provided supports in place, these grandfamilies can not only survive, but thrive. There is historical and cultural evidence that this is possible. Ana points out that grandparents raising their grandchildren is not a new phenomenon; in many cultures, it is customary for members of the extended family to live together under one roof. These arrangements are part of a longstanding practice for indigenous, Native American, Asian and Latino families. Referencing the oft-quoted African proverb – “It takes a village to raise a child” – Ana says, “There is a really strong cultural tradition for having an extended network and caring for one’s own.” ■