

This article is posted with permission from the Virginian Review newspaper in Covington. It was published in the Jan. 16 edition of the newspaper.

Living the Good Life

By Sarah Hundley

“God put us here to prepare this place for the next generation. That’s our job. Raising children and helping the community, that’s preparing for the next generation.” – Dikembe Mutombo

Each of us makes a difference in someone’s life every day, but no one can make the difference that you will. Whose life will you touch today?

Sandy Ballard looks back on the years raising her granddaughter Amber (whom she and her husband Bud later legally adopted as their daughter) and credits a community full of support, and Amber herself, for turning a life-altering challenge into an out-an-out blessing. Without this support, the Ballard’s efforts to raise a second family in their later years would have been much more difficult. Now she wants to return the favor.

In the late 1980’s after raising three children and retiring from a career in the Coast Guard, Bud and Sandy Ballard were dusting off their suitcases and dreams of traveling to see the statesmissed in their travels with the Coast Guard. But when their 24-year-old daughter came home one day to tell them she was pregnant, their luggage and these plans were put back into storage. The Ballards knew that their daughter was not yet ready to raise a child. Though Sandy was dismayed to learn of the pregnancy, her daughter returned home to live with Sandy and Bud so they could help support her. Despite a troubled pregnancy and the premature birth of their granddaughter, a very tiny Amber was born (at 31 weeks) and in perfect health. Three months after their granddaughter was born however, their daughter levied another blow when she announced that she would be moving to Florida. Without another thought for those pocketed retirement plans, Bud and Sandy asked that Amber stay with them until such day as their daughter was ready to resume responsibility for her daughter. That day did not come, but Sandy and Bud never looked back.

More and more older Americans in the U.S. today find themselves charged with the responsibility of raising their children's children. Looking back, Sandy Ballard describes the experience of raising Amber as "the biggest blessing we ever shared" and states that "though I am sure we taught her 'life lessons', the lessons she taught us are so special." Unfortunately, for many of the older Americans who step up for a second round of parenting, this sacrifice creates great hardship. Fortunately for the Ballard family, Sandy was able to go back to school where she earned a nursing degree, though admittedly not a path that she had ever envisioned for herself. Her income, coupled with that from Bud's second career as a teacher, afforded them the financial means to raise a child in later life. Many aging parents are not so fortunate. Lack of resources, support and limited finances, not to mention familial jealousies, resentments and legal constraints are but a few of the road blocks that threaten to derail these "Grandfamilies" and leave them feeling isolated and desperate.

In 2013 2.7 million aging adults in the U.S. took their grandchildren into their homes to raise; 21% of these families lived in poverty. According to the last (2010) census data available, approximately 136,000 children in Virginia lived with a grandparent in a home where the biological parents were not present; 16% of these children lived in poverty. Today, approximately 1 in 12 children live under the care of a grandparent. In rural areas, such as the Alleghany Highlands, those numbers can be even higher. Many of these Grandfamilies are unaware of (or unable to tap into) resources that are available. To start, several federal and state agencies offer public benefits programs that can help with income, food, healthcare, home energy, and other needs for those who are eligible. Children are often eligible for public benefits even if their caregivers do not have legal guardianship or custody. Sandy Ballard wants to make sure that the families facing this challenge do not face it alone in our area.

Sandy along with several other local community members and professionals are starting a Kinship Care support group. In many communities throughout Virginia, "Kinship Care" groups are successfully helping struggling families to get the support and assistance they need. The groups often meet on a weekly basis and offer a safe place to share their challenges; they can be invaluable when trying to navigate the web of local available resources. Beginning Tuesday, February 2, the first Kinship Care group for Alleghany highlands area families will be held at 10:00 a.m. at Covington Baptist Church located at 280 W. Riverside St. The mission statement of this Alleghany Highlands Kinship Care Support Group is "Growing together by supporting one another." Though Sandy

is primarily starting this group for people who are raising the children of family members, ALL people who are caring for extended family members in their homes and feel they could use the support are encouraged to attend.

Recommended resources for parents raising grandchildren:

➤ Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family by, Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown

➤ GAP (Grandparents as Parents) www.grandparentsasparents.org

➤ AARP.org/grandparents (click on www.aarp.org/quicklink)

➤ Department of Social

Services: <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/benefit/tanf/index.cgi>

➤ Grandfactssheet.org