

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

How the opioid crisis is changing the American family

BY SANDRA SOBIERAJ WESTFALL & ALEXANDRA ROCKEY FLEMING

Raising three daughters just outside of Phoenix, Ronda and Bob Loon thought they did everything right. Bob, a businessman, made time to volunteer in his girls' classrooms and coach their sports teams. "Never missed a game," he says. Ronda, a stay-at-home mom, was a constant at school events and planned her kids' sleepovers and birthday parties. But once their youngest daughter, Michaela, graduated high school, they couldn't keep her from falling for "bad guys" or the drugs they sometimes offered her. By age 19, Michaela had become a single mom to son Ryder and addicted to meth and heroin. "In the blink of an eye, things changed," says Ronda. With both of the boy's parents in and out of rehab, it's "Grammy" and "Pop" who Ryder, now 4, snuggles with in bed at night—"he sleeps with his hand on one of us, a security thing," says Ronda, 57—while she and Bob, 54, worry about starting fresh as parents to a preschooler. "We think about how old we'll be when Ryder starts school and whether Bob will be physically able to coach Ryder's sports teams," admits Ronda. "It's like he's



Pop's Little Helper
Ronda says she and Bob now "can't imagine life" without Ryder in their care.

Ronda and Bob Loon with grandson Ryder.





Don and Beth Murray (below) with grandsons Darrell and Jaxon (left).

Full House

The Murrays are now raising six grandchildren in a house meant for the family of five they once were. "Finding the room and the food are the hardest things. The boys will eat you out of house and home," says Beth. "But I volunteered to take them, so we manage."



being punished because we're old," says Bob. "God meant for young people to have children."

The Loons are two in a growing club that no one wants to join: parents of the casualties of America's opioid epidemic who are stepping up to raise the children—their grandchildren—that addicts leave behind whether because they are in the throes of addiction, struggling through rehab, in jail or dead. More than 258,000 children are in today's foster-care system due to alcohol or drug use by parents, and of those, 1 in 3 children is living with relatives, often grandparents. And their numbers have grown as the opioid crisis has, rising 4.8 percent between 2006 and '16. For many, taking on a whole new lifetime of responsibility—often for children bearing the physical and mental wounds of exposure to drugs and alcohol—can be overwhelming. "We pray a lot," says Madison Heights, Mich., homemaker Pamela Wentzel, 60. Wentzel is now "Mom" to her 5-year-old grandson Jackson, who suffers severe behavioral and developmental problems related to his mother's opioid use while pregnant. "We have to depend on God to get us through this," says Wentzel, "because we can't do it on our own strength."



Grandparents, even though older and sometimes on fixed incomes, offer the children of addicts a far better shot at a future than non-relative foster parents, says Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, a Washington, D.C.-based

family advocacy group. "Grandparents provide this protective web of love and roots and hope," says Butts, "whereas children who come into the foster-care system or into the care of law enforcement lose that sense of connection with their family and who they are and who loves them." The problem, she says, is the lack of institutional support for grandparents who step up. Although Congress, for 2018 and '19, provided \$40 million to state programs assisting grandparents and other "kinship" caregivers, Butts says much more is needed: "Grandparents are the safety net for the children as welfare and law-enforcement officials move on to other aspects of the opioid crisis."

Jacqueline Elm, of Kalispell, Mont., came face-to-face with that cruel reality in 2003 when she pushed her way into the home where her daughter Heather's two toddlers were staying with their dad. Jacqueline found her grandson Caleb, then 4, and granddaughter Fury, not yet 2, shut alone in a bedroom. Fury's legs were covered in dog bites. Neither the father nor Heather, whose opioid and heroin use Jacqueline traces to her daughter's use of migraine medication, were with the children. "I took them both and drove to a CPS counseling facility," she says. "They handed me some blankets and some paperwork and said, 'Here you go.'"

Just like that the now-59-year-old mother of five adult children was starting again with two little ones, who, due to drug exposure in the womb,



Gary and Cathy Overfield with grandson Dominic.

'He Saw a Pretty Ugly Part of Life'

Before moving in with his grandparents when he was almost 10, Dominic (center) witnessed his mom's descent into drug addiction, says Cathy Overfield. "He saw drug deals and drug use. As he reminisces now, he'll say, 'I could've turned out to be one of the kids on the street or like So-and-So who we watched get arrested.'"



Felicia Crenshaw and granddaughter Madison.



'Unless You Walk in Our Shoes, You Can't Judge Us'

Crenshaw says her daughter Taylor (center inset, with Madison) was tortured by her addiction and just couldn't escape. After she fatally OD'd in 2016, "the comments I got were, 'Why didn't you stop her? Shame on you,'" Crenshaw recalls. "Now, when I look at Madison, I see so much hope."

struggle with anxiety, mental health issues, learning disabilities and speech deficits—and were joined soon enough by a baby sister, Ella. "We have drained our retirement savings to raise these children," Jacqueline says. To keep up with the bills, her husband, Stephen, 76, a retired Air Force colonel, worked at Lowe's until recently, when he started to need a wheelchair. "He worked," Jacqueline says, "until he couldn't work anymore."



With two grown daughters struggling with addiction and six grandchildren in need of a stable home, bricklayer Don Murray, 52, commutes 180 miles round-trip to work in Cleveland every day. "We live check to check," says his homemaker wife, Beth, 50. The Loudonville, Ohio, couple's savings for a new car went to three sets of bunk beds. And if one of the kids—who range in age from 4 to 13—volunteers to bring cookies to a school celebration, it can set back the family's whole food budget. "I try to save a little bit for those extras," says Beth. "I don't want them to feel left out." Already the children have been teased and stigmatized, Beth says. "One child said, 'Yeah I heard about your mom, she's a drug addict and should've died.' My grandson came home and burst into tears."

The taunt's truth makes it all the more cruel. "I haven't slept since August of 2015, worrying," says Beth. That was when her daughter Samantha, 28, developed an addiction after taking pain meds for the C-section delivery of her son Jaxon. "Next

'Drug addiction is still considered shameful, so a lot of us suffer in silence'

—FELICIA CRENSHAW

thing I know it's full-blown addiction, and you think, 'That's certain death,'" says Beth. She and Don now have custody of Jaxon, 4, his brother Darrell, 9, and the four children of her older daughter, Heather, 32. Finding support at Nar-Anon meetings with other parents, Beth wants others to understand that addicts aren't bad people. "We were a happy family, active in our kids' lives," she says. "There's no worse feeling than watching your child disappear before your eyes."

That's how it was, too, for Cathy and Gary Overfield, both 64, who took custody of their grandson Dominic in 2012, when he was almost 10. His mother, their daughter Amy, had never even touched alcohol, Cathy says. But when Amy's marriage fell apart, "she fell apart with it." Amy fatally overdosed on opioids in 2015 at age 41.

While grieving her daughter, Cathy also mourns all that Dominic's been deprived. "At 16, he's more mature than some 30-year-old men I know. He saw a pretty ugly part of life, and now he doesn't have grandparents who get to spoil him and cuddle and snuggle," she says. "We have to discipline and check the homework."

Homework duty is still years away—but already a worry—for Felicia Crenshaw who, at 53, is now the only mother her 4-year-old granddaughter Madison has. The child was just 22 months old when her mother, Crenshaw's daughter Taylor, 21, died of an overdose. A neighbor found the baby sitting on Taylor's dead body. "You grieve for the what-ifs," says Crenshaw, a financial professional who no



Jacqueline and Stephen Elm with (from left), Caleb, Ella and Fury. Inset: Stephen teaching Ella to tie her shoe in 2013.



'How Can I Not Let This Happen Again?'

Jacqueline Elm says her parenting style has "changed tremendously." She says she and husband Stephen encourage and support each child's individual passions—Caleb's for mechanics and Fury's for animals—"to tap into their uniqueness, versus just letting them go with their friends."

longer sees retirement in her future. "Peer pressure, bullying, dating, driving a car—I'll be going back through all of that." She also worries about worrying too much. "I do not want Madison to grow up and look back on her life and say, 'All I remember of my Nana is that she was sad a lot and cried a lot.' I want to be a champion for Madison."

Constant fear of relapse by their grown children breeds a tough love necessary to protect their grandchildren. For Beth Murray, that means she

'It's so good for the kids who can say, "Nana's and Grandpa's—that's my safe house"'

—JACQUELINE ELM

stocks at-home urine tests for her daughters, one of whom is still in treatment. The other is a recent program graduate. "I'll pop a drug test on them myself," Beth says. "I have their children here, and I'm not going to jeopardize them for nobody, not even my own children."

Michaela Loon, who spoke to *People* over the summer but has since relapsed and returned to treatment, knows her own parents' tough love. "It sucked having my parents yank Ryder away from me," she says, "but I'm super-grateful for it. It meant he wasn't dragged along in my addiction, seeing horrible things while I was getting high." Her parents now volunteer with a needle-exchange program, and Ronda Loon also runs a website for moms of addicts and has taken a job at a rehab facility. "We went through the anger and the 'How did this happen?'" says Ronda. "Then we asked ourselves, 'How are we going to get through this?' My way was to get involved with helping other addicts."

Nearly 15 years after taking in her daughter's children, Jacqueline Elm too has found new purpose in her unexpected situation. She went back to school for a bachelor's degree in social work and a license in addiction-counseling education, upending what she and Stephen once envisioned for their so-called golden years. "We'll fantasize for a few minutes, 'Oh, we could be lying on the beach with margaritas,' and then we look at each other and go, 'Yeah, how boring,'" says Jacqueline. "What we feel when we see the kids succeeding, safe and laughing—that is everything." ●



Pamela and Stanley Wentzel with grandson Jackson.

'He Needed Support and Love'

The Wentzels took Jackson home when he was 1 month old—born with neonatal abstinence syndrome to their daughter Stephanie—and adopted him in 2016. "Jackson was alone," Pamela says. "I jumped in and said I'll take him."

