

## **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Connect Through Nature**

It was a grand day. The sun was shining, the water reflecting and the beach dazzling. After a year of discussing, months of planning and weeks of organizing, the Galiano Conservancy Association finally joined with Parent Support Services Society of BC and many dedicated volunteers to provide an opportunity for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren to visit Galiano Island. It was simply one day at the beach, but loaded with hopes of grandeur.

I must admit, I was quite new to the idea of grandparents filling a parent role and hadn't given much thought to the difficulties of trying to raise a grandchild. What immediately struck me was how these two very different generations managed to connect with each other. I have very fond childhood memories of bird watching, gardening, and walks with grandma. I now watch the same interactions with my mom and my niece and realize the sacred space that is created between them in nature. It is the one place, whether it is a sunset or a fallen leaf, where all people can relate to each other and agree on its merits.

According to the Canadian Census in 2006, there are 9,940 grandchildren being raised by their grandparents in British Columbia. There are many facets that can cause the nuclear family to 'breakdown', from mental health and medical issues, to addictions and accidents, or a lack of skill or willingness on the part of the parents to take the responsibility for their children. Once it has occurred, the children are cared for by other relatives or become a ward of the state.

Grandparents face enormous struggles in coming to the decision to take their grandchildren: Can I do it again? How will I afford it, and still have anything for my retirement? What if my health will not allow me to continue parenting these children until they are adults? Other challenges include children with fetal alcohol syndrome disease, abandonment issues, behaviour problems due to abuses suffered in their young lives, or living without proper nutrition, kindness and care.

No matter what the situation, it is always possible for the miracle of nature to bring light to the lives and hearts of many. The Galiano Conservancy Association offers the From the Forest to the Sea Watershed Education Program allowing people (especially youth) to experience a natural and rural setting where they can study ecosystems from the ocean, to salmon streams, to the forest, to wetlands. Bursaries are provided to alleviate costs for people in need. It is surprising, but there are children that have never been to a beach let alone held a sea cucumber. It is a marvellous transformation to watch a child open up to the wonders of nature.

Such a transformation happened when a group of grandparents and their grandchildren arrived on Galiano for a one day adventure. We all piled into the local shuttle bus and headed for Montague Harbour Provincial Marine Park, a stunning place with shell beaches (middens) as white as snow, a mature forest, a saltwater lagoon and sea life that makes science turn on its axis. The excitement was as high as the afternoon sun as the kids ran off to the shore to see what they could find. They had only just met but joined in

a kinship of circumstance. An itinerary had been carefully planned but was quickly tossed in favour of a more loose exploration. For some, focus was difficult but their attention was grasped by the life around them.

And as for the grandparents, it was a time to relax. To sit on the beach, enjoy the day, and allow us to guide the kids in their adventures. The struggles that these folks had gone through, to fight for their grandchildren and to balance their lives, was truly inspiring. They do it simply for family, for love, and for the sake of the children.

It helped me realize that even though I am not a parent, I have the responsibility to be a role model for a younger generation. It is for the children and for the future that we reconnect people with nature and with themselves. The Galiano Conservancy Association hopes to inspire and expand this program by joining Grandparent Raising Grandchildren support circles and nature groups province wide. These are grand dreams, but it needs to start somewhere and it has already begun.

If you are interested in joining us on Galiano for a nature program or creating one in your area, do not hesitate to call 250-539-2424 or email [education@galianoconservancy.ca](mailto:education@galianoconservancy.ca).

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