

Cruising to Galiano

BRIONY PENN

The restorative powers of nature help immigrants as well as grandparents and their grandchildren.

There's a different type of grandparent on the island these days—they play games, but it's unlikely golf or bridge, and instead of Alaskan cruises with their peers, it will be a ferry ride to Galiano for an overnight camp.

These are the grandparents-raising-grandchildren and they are heading for the newly-established Galiano Restorative Learning Centre. According to Ken Millard, the driving force behind the Centre, providing a place to relax and play on beaches, lakes and in forests, prepare home-grown food, and sleep out under the stars with other families is one of the main goals of the new Centre as a project of the Galiano Conservancy Association.

The Conservancy, which has long been one of the leading-edge organizations of the land trust movement since its inception in 1989, is taking restorative learning up a new notch to reach out to people who aren't the usual crowd in the conservation community. Having accumulated an extensive network of protected lands, the Conservancy has been slowly expanding their school and university programs in ecological restoration, nature immersion and community gardens to "troubled youth" from the cities, new immigrants and now grandparents-raising-grandchildren. With the recent purchase of 76 hectares of old-growth forest that connects their shoreline parcels of land, the Conservancy is moving ahead to establish its Restorative Learning Centre which can offer more overnight opportunities for these groups, researchers and local community members. This summer, for the first time, the Centre offered nights under the stars for grandparents.

Sandy Halverson, who is the program coordinator for the Parent Support Services Society of BC, the non-profit that set up the Grandparent program, had just got back from one of the overnights and was ecstatic: "The whole experience was amazing. It was such a treat to see people connecting not just with the beautiful place, but with one another. They were so delighted to find other families like them."

Raising grandchildren, according to Halverson, is very isolating. For the grandparents, their peer group has fallen away, disinclined to support them as they wade back into diapers instead of the golf course. For the children, they feel stigmatized for having grandparents



raising them. The costs of raising a second family on just a retirement income also make it a struggle. "For many of the families, it was the only holiday of the year," Halverson notes. The program, offered for free, provides a place where children can explore outside all day, develop basic skills and get away from electronic devices. Millard, a senior himself, describes how these experiences are reminiscent for the elder participants of growing up two generations ago—heading outside in the morning and coming back for a meal at night. Halverson agrees: "The counsellors are fabulous and really connect the families to the place and community tasks of restoring the land, gathering food and sharing it—even recycling becomes very real and fun."

These types of families are on the rise. Census Canada reported around 10,000 kids raised by grandparents in BC in 2006 when long forms still captured that data. "No one is collecting that information anymore but we sure see increasing demand," says Halverson. "We have had waiting lists for both trips this summer!"

The other new program with waiting lists is for immigrants recently arrived in Victoria. Haizia Liu, settlement counsellor for the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society, was equally excited about the Galiano program. "We had so much fun looking at all the sea stars and ocean creatures. The seniors were just like kids!" The first two trips ran this summer: one group of parents with children

and another with seniors, mostly from mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong. For many of the immigrants, this was their first time immersed in nature, as they had come from big cities.

For Millard, the new programs have been rewarding in a whole different way as cultural traditions are shared. At the end of one long happy day by the sea and in the forest, the group expressed their thanks to him under the old trees through traditional dances and songs that demonstrated the ancient connections of their own cultures to nature. Millard says "providing access and opportunities in nature lets people reconnect not just to forest and the sea but to their culture and the best part of themselves."

The purchase of the new parcel for the Centre was supported by funding from the Nature Conservancy of Canada; Mountain Equipment Co-op; a bequest from the Dr. Betty Kleiman estate via the Land Conservancy of BC; strong support from the Galiano Conservancy membership; and a loan from Vancity Credit Union. The project still has to raise the last \$200,000 in matching funds from its original \$2 million but Millard is confident he'll find it. "The benefits to Victorians are too great to let this opportunity go." To support the acquisition project contact Ken Millard at the address below. Small donations are also gratefully received by the partner organizations to help them provide the programs to inner city youth, families and immigrants.

Contact information: Sandy Halverson at Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, 250-468-9658 or parent@telus.net; Haizia Liu at Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society, 250-361-9433 or haixia@vircs.bc.ca; Ken Millard at Galiano Restorative Centre, 250-593-2424 or conservancy@galianoconservancy.ca. See www.galianoconservancy.ca.



Briony Penn PhD is a naturalist, journalist, artist and award-winning environmental educator. She is the author of *The Kids Book of Geography* (Kids Can Press) and a *A Year on the Wild Side*.