

They Are In It Together

Pat and Jerry sat in a friend's newly opened restaurant, Breakwaters, with gusts of winds blowing rain off Lake Michigan. They look like the cute retired couple they are, enjoying their free time and conversation. They deserve their retirement. They've raised seven children between them (three of hers, three of his and one, Samantha, together) with 27 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

They are not strangers to hard work. Jerry began work as a painter at 15 and moved up in his company to become a foreman and job estimator. Pat had a first class welding license and worked as a welder to support her children from a previous marriage before she met Jerry.

In retirement they stay busy with things they love. Pat gardens, makes a huge variety of jams and jellies and is active in her church community. Jerry is building Pat a library in their longtime home in the pretty lakeside town of Algoma. Pat loves to write, and Jerry is building her the library she wants in their northeastern Wisconsin home.

But here, their story takes an interesting turn. Pat and Jerry had to leave our interview shortly before three in the afternoon to pick up five of their grandchildren who have lived with them for several years and who have been the focus of

their household for quite awhile. They went from empty nesters to a houseful of seven in a very short time.

Jerry and Pat's daughter, Samantha, isn't available to take care of her own children because of emotional illness and legal issues. She goes in and out of the prison system.

Samantha

They tell me about Samantha. She is bright and intelligent. She doesn't abuse alcohol or drugs. But she does suffer from some emotional illnesses. She is in and out of the prison system because of non-violent crimes. Stealing is her downfall.

Her other great challenge is taking care of her five children. Pat says, "She is a good concerned person until the mental health issues and legal issues take hold of her, and she messes up. She has skills, but a lot of other things get in her way."

Full Time Parenting

It became a full time commitment for Jerry and Pat when Samantha had her fourth child. Pat and Jerry had been taking the children on and off since they were born. But they saw what was happening to Samantha's children. They raised Samantha's fourth and fifth children from infancy. Shortly after, they welcome another of the children and soon had all of them ranging in age from birth to six.



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They did this long before social services were involved. Jerry was still working at the time. With their own money and energy, children from infancy to six became the focus of their lives.

As the courts became involved, they took legal responsibility of the children under kinship laws. At the encouragement of their workers, they moved to foster care.

Jerry had a good income, but foster care provided them with economic and support services so that they didn't have to worry about meeting the needs of the children.

Grandchildren Doing Well

According to the kids' social worker, the oldest kids are all A/B students and the younger ones are also academically successful. Pat and Jerry shuttle the kids to and from doctor, dentist and therapy appointments, as well as the after school activities in which the kids participate, including scouting, and swimming. They also fish a lot.

The DeGraves' calm acceptance is remarkable. They tell a great story about the two-day vacation they decided to take by themselves two years ago. They got to their hotel room, were sitting on the bed, and the subject of raising their grandchildren came up. They had never discussed it before, and one of them said, "so what do you think about what we're doing?" They talked it over. They decided to cut the weekend short because they missed the kids.

Trust and Teamwork

According to the DeGraves and their long time county case manager, Corrine, the three of them work well together. The county trusts Pat and

Jerry to handle the parenting issues, and the DeGraves, in turn, trust Corrine and others to handle court and legal issues which are hard for them to face.

Respite

"They do use respite care to give themselves a break." The children might go for one night on the weekend. Because there are so many of them, they go to different families. Pat and Jerry do not take vacations but do plan fun

outings with their grandchildren.

In fact, the owners of Breakwater, where our interview took place, do respite for Pat and Jerry's grandchildren and also foster adults and other children. They

have become friends. In addition, one of the waitresses at the restaurant is a foster to adopt mom and does some respite for Jerry and Pat as well. We joked about the small support group they already established on an informal basis.

Keeping Connections

How do they handle their relationship with Samantha? They do it carefully and with love. Pat says, "we hate what she has done, but not her. We love her."

When Samantha was recently released from prison, they did what they could to help her adjust. They helped her get set up with her parole officers. Jerry painted the apartment she was moving into, and Pat made curtains. It didn't last long. But this couple continue to love Samantha as they can.

Pat thinks that Samantha may unconsciously want to be in prison, because it offers her a controlled environment. And Pat is willing to go

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to counseling with Samantha when she is released. Pat acknowledges that counseling only helps if the person seeking help wants it. This time Pat has a gut feeling that Samantha is more willing to work with a therapist.

Jerry and Pat support their grandchildren's relationship with their mother. They make it clear that they are "grandma" and "grandpa" and the kids call them that. Pat planted a shade garden at their house for Samantha and the kids to care for together when Samantha is released.

As for Samantha seeing the kids, for her first 90 days out of prison, she had supervised visits. She is loving with her children during these visits.

In the past, Pat tried bringing all five to visit Samantha in prison but it turned out to be a disaster. The kids were upset and found the visit really difficult. It was hard for Pat to get the kids there, and to help them deal with the emotional upheaval. They scheduled regular phone calls with Samantha after that. She said the bills got big, but it was manageable, worked for all of them, and worth it.

Holidays

It's fun to hear about their holidays. Pat and Jerry's case manager told me stories about their huge holidays. Jerry, a former cook in the coast guard, plays a big part in the preparation along with Pat. She made a 27 pound turkey last year for Thanksgiving. Along with his potato salad, Jerry prepared several other

dishes. They fed nearly 25 people.

Children, grandchildren, ex-spouses of their children, some with their new spouses or friends, and their children are included in the feasts. The DeGraves also invited friends and people from their church who needed a place to go. Each Christmas, Pat makes all of her own cookies, pies and candy. She made 40 pounds of fudge this past holiday season.



Shade garden and shoes

Interests

This isn't the limit of their interests and activities. Pat and Jerry have a big garden. They pickle vegetables and make all their jams.

Pat is also a rug weaver. They now have a regular booth at the Sturgeon Bay Farmers' Market. Pat talked about the period she did not find time to get to her loom. She found herself crying one day when she looked at it. She is now back to her weaving. They sell what she makes with pride.

Jerry does a lot of the cooking and also builds things. He plans to build Pat a new library room addition to their house. He built bunk beds when the kids moved in. Jerry lets Pat do most of the talking, but opens up with stories and interesting tidbits after a while. As a man who has had several major surgeries in the past year, he faces the future with optimism and hope.

How do they stay calm? They laughed and said, "by drinking lots of cups of coffee." And true to form, we all drank a lot of coffee at our interview.

Advice

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Pat and Jerry provided some good advice for those are anticipating becoming the caretakers of relative's children or who are already in the midst of it. Here are some of their suggestions.

- Take your relatives' kids because you want to. Pat and Jerry acknowledge that some grandparents do not have it in them and that's okay. They suggest that relative caregivers support and love their grandchildren as much as they can.
- Look beyond the surface. Pat recognizes that not all children in care show anger. But for those who do, Pat quotes her father who said that a coin has two sides. If you see the angry side of someone, flip the coin and you often find a sad side.
- You will have good and bad moments.
- Establish good relationships with the children's doctors, mental health therapists, and their teachers and school staff. Stay in regular contact.
- Work with the social workers. You may feel that your personal life has been invaded for the first six months. You lose your privacy, but you get it back. Expect it to settle down after that.
- Have lots of patience.
- Take advantage of respite.
- Give children a routine ASAP, and give age-appropriate chores.
- Go to worship if that is part of your life. Pat and Jerry's church is a great support for them.
- Never be afraid to see a mental health therapist or to bring the kids to them. You need someone to sit down with you and the children and listen.
- Take time for yourself either together or apart. Pat will sometimes go for a drive alone and sometimes they will go for a drive together. They also have their rug making, woodworking and farmers' market.
- Joke about things. Pat says if you lose your sense of humor, you lose yourself. But be very serious about what you do.
- Don't say anything negative about the absent parent.
- Families don't just happen—you make them happen.
- Remember that these relatives in care are not your son or daughter—they are one of a kind and not their parents.
- Some people think that when you start all of this, your "normal" life ends. But it goes on. Enjoy it.
- Keep the children together.

From all accounts, the DeGraves are doing an outstanding job. They are a remarkable couple—optimistic, flexible and devoted to each other, their kids and these grandchildren.

Countless others out there have stepped in to raise and love grandchildren or children of relatives when their parents could not. People like them are the foundation of society, so let's celebrate that there are many people like them. We all have a lot to learn from the Pats and Jerrys of the world.

