

# The New York Times

## A Place for Grandparents Who Are Parents Again

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Published: May 21, 2005

Eleven years ago, Annie Barnes, 62, found herself raising her two grandchildren after their father was murdered and their mother disappeared. Both children had been born premature and with serious health problems -- the younger, a girl, weighed two and a half pounds; the other, a boy, was born with syphilis and addicted to heroin and crack.

But the little boy, Alonzo Poinsett, now 12, and his sister, Shakela, 10, are doing well today, and they will soon join their grandmother in an ambitious new housing experiment -- a 51-unit apartment building in the South Bronx that is the first public development in the United States designed and built exclusively for grandparents raising grandchildren.

The six-story project, called the GrandParentFamily Apartments, will open within the next few weeks; it already has a waiting list of more than 100 families. The development, on Prospect Avenue, will have three full-time social workers, support groups, parenting classes and, for the children, tutoring, a full-time youth coordinator and organized activities in the afternoons and evenings.

The generational skip in the population means that the units will have some unusual features: emergency pull cords in the bedrooms and bathrooms, shower thermostats to keep the water from getting too hot, a community center for the older residents and their friends and a youth lounge.

It is an attempt to better serve a growing population that is often thrown together by bad luck and usually lacks a strong support system. The \$12.8 million project was financed by Presbyterian Senior Services, the West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing and the city's Housing Authority.

"This is an important group of people that often gets ignored," said David Taylor, executive director of Presbyterian Senior Services, "and what I hope is that this becomes a demonstration project, a place that encourages other places to do the same thing."

While it is not uncommon for grandparents to raise grandchildren, advocates for the elderly who study the issue say the number of households headed by grandparents is growing.

A 1991 study by the city estimated that there were 14,000 grandparent-headed homes in New York City. By 2000 there were 84,000 such families in the city, according to the United States Census. The national trend is difficult to track because the Census Bureau only began recording information about households headed by grandparents in the 2000 census; it identified 2.4 million families with 4.4 million children in their households.

Because these families are often impoverished, the GrandParentFamily Apartments, in the poorest Congressional district in the country, are reserved for families with a median income of about \$25,100; a typical monthly rent is about \$300. Nearly all the adults moving into the building are grandmothers.

The children moving in with them have often lost their parents to illness, murder, prison, drug abuse or mental illness. Some children never knew their parents or scarcely remember them because they have been gone so long. The grandparents must have legal custody of their grandchildren to be eligible for an apartment.

The process of gaining custody can be a long and trying process in Family Court. Typically, judges take custody from parents only when

the parent has a history of abusing or neglecting a child, abusing drugs or is in jail so often that the child goes uncared for.

For the grandparents, raising children again can be as traumatic as it is for the children to be without their parents.

Some wonder where they went wrong with their own children. Many are depressed and struggling financially because they did not expect to have to raise a second generation. And all have found that the dreams they had for old age had to be abandoned.

But a home at the GrandParentFamily Apartments at least helps.

"I've always had the feeling I was alone in the world, and for once there's some help," said Sarah Saddler, 73, who is taking care of three of her youngest daughter's four children, Ashlee, 17; Courtney, 15; and Kerry, 12, who is autistic. Ms. Saddler had three of her own children, and raised her eldest daughter's three children after she died from complications of diabetes in 1990 at age 37.

Ms. Saddler would not say why her youngest daughter could no longer care for the children, but she alluded to mental illness.

For more than a year, Ms. Saddler has lived with her daughter and her four children in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment in the Bronx. Clothes are stored in plastic bags and in suitcases.

"That," said Ms. Saddler raising an eyebrow as her granddaughters giggled, "is not good at all."

The children say being raised by their father is not an option. Asked where he is, the girls say in unison, "Who cares?"

LaVaida Thomas, 67, who will also live in the new project, is raising two of her daughter's five children, Aaron Cousins, 14, and Terrence, 12. Ms. Thomas's daughter lost custody of the children after her youngest was born in 2003 with traces of cocaine in her bloodstream.

She also wants to adopt the three other children, who are in foster care.

"I've always said I would keep my kids together if I can," said Ms. Thomas, who has problems with her heart and has had three strokes. "The same goes for the grandkids. So I said, 'Let me live until I can see them half-way grown.'"

She said living in her new home with people her own age would provide the support system she has lacked since her husband died five years ago.

"We'll have things in common," said Ms. Thomas, who has six children of her own. "You'll talk a little bit."

Annie Barnes, who got custody of her two grandchildren after her son was fatally stabbed in 1994, has been looking forward to the move for months.

"These are my son's children," said Ms. Barnes, who added that she had envisioned her retirement as being filled with travel. She did not know, she said, what happened to her son's girlfriend, the children's mother.

Her grandchildren know little about their parents and as Ms. Barnes speaks they listen intently, though Shakela covers her ears with her hands when the talk becomes too graphic.

For years, Shakela, who is in fourth grade, has shared a room with Alonzo, who is a year ahead of her in school, but stands nearly a foot taller.

They recently visited their new three-bedroom apartment for the first time. The children dashed through the front door past their grandmother, running from room to room. They tested the bathroom faucets, the light switches and surveyed the views from the bedroom windows.

"I'm going to put my bed in there," Alonzo said excitedly. "I'm going to hook up my PlayStation 2. Put the clothes in the closet. Put the computer in my room." Shakela said she wanted to decorate her room with her dolls and cutouts of Sponge Bob Squarepants and Bratz.

Ms. Barnes looked from one child to the other, and smiled. "They are mines now," she said. Shakela glanced at her grandmother and smiled back. "We're hers."