

# Standard Journal

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## When grandparents fill roles of mom and dad

As families gather for the holidays, grandparents all over the upper valley will be enjoying their visiting grandchildren -- seeing how much they've grown from their last visit and feeding off their youthful energy and enthusiasm before the children leave again for their own homes.

But in many upper valley homes the grandchildren never leave for home. Their grandparents' homes are their homes.

Their grandparents have become their parents.



For a plethora of reasons -- drug, alcohol and mental health issues or incarceration -- many parents have been unable or unwilling to raise their kids.

Rather than letting strangers raise their kin, many grandparents have stepped up -- often by legally securing custody -- to take care of their grandkids.

Social service agencies see their actions as a huge savings for taxpayers, who otherwise would be footing the bill for foster care.

But that savings comes with more than a financial toll for the families themselves. They pay an emotional and sometime physical toll, too, as all three generations adjust to the situation.

Two upper valley grandparent families agreed to share their personal experiences about the joys and trials of being parents again to their own children's children to give others insight and encouragement if faced with the same issues.

### The Petersons

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Lenny Peterson says one thing bothers him the most about being a grandparent raising his oldest son's children.

"I can't be a grandpa," the retired St. Anthony city employee says. "I have to be a dad. I can't spoil them and then send them home."

Instead, he and his wife, Louisa Peterson, are raising Brayleigh, 6, and her sister, Ashlynn, 5.

The children had often spent Christmases and other stretches of time with their grandma and grandpa as their parents dealt with alcohol and related issues.

But more than two years ago the problems came to a head, and the children needed the stability and positive atmosphere their parents couldn't provide as they divorced and were in and out of jail.

The Petersons have had permanent custody of the girls for two years.

Their home is cozy and filled with the decorations of Christmas. After introductions to the reporter, Brayleigh quickly points out a decoration on the Christmas tree that she made herself. Ashlynn proudly writes her name in the reporter's tablet -- just like her sister did. They giggle and show off like other children ripe with a holiday buzz.

As the girls run off into another room to play, the Petersons explain how this adjusted family is getting along.

"They've come a long way," Louisa says of the kids. "We've come a long way. We go camping and sledding. We've had to step up and start this raising-kids thing all over again. We have a whole new perspective on why people should have kids when they are young."

After the children's mother signed papers terminating her parental rights and their son agreed to their having permanent custody, the Peterson's first challenge was to teach the girls positive aspects of living and to give them a routine they had not had before.

"They needed to be in a stable home," Louisa says. For her and her husband, the challenge was initially about adjusting to having kids back in the house and revisiting things like parent-teacher conferences that they had thought were behind them.

As the children have grown up, the Petersons have learned in little pieces about the children's former lifestyle -- things they saw that kids probably shouldn't have to see. They have had to have talks with the girls much earlier than anticipated.

But problems have been minimal.

"Basically they are good kids," Louisa says. "They are my babies, and I love them."

Eventually they may allow their son, who is in jail right now, slowly back into the girls' lives. But there's no doubt their decision will be based on what's best for the children.

## **The Hobbs**

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Jim and Judy Hobbs are raising their grandson because Jim's daughter Jennifer was a meth and other drugs abuser whose drug use came before her taking care of her son.

She's clean of drugs now and has been for four years, Jim says. But the Hobbs have no intention of allowing their grandson Arric to spend more than a few hours with her.

Since a call in the middle of the night from Jennifer's ex-boyfriend saying Arric had been abandoned in a drug house, they have been the boy's strongest protector and advocate.

"We always knew there was crap going on we didn't like," Jim says of his daughter's lifestyle. But until that call on March 26 eight years ago from a man in Inglewood, Colo., they didn't know Jennifer, now 33, was on methamphetamine.

"Once you get that call, you do what you have to do," Jim says. It turned out the 6-year-old had been left by his mother at a new boyfriend's house while she left to find drugs.

"We went to get him, to get him out of there. We had no idea it would trigger what it did."

At first the child was afraid of the dark and of thunder.

Arric was familiar with his grandparents, having spent months at a time with them while his mother was having relationship or other problems.

"He never did seem to miss his mother," Jim says.

When it became clear caring for Arric would be long-term, Judy and Jim decided to pursue termination of parental rights of his parents.

"It took about a year," Jim says. Arric's biological father lived in Montana. He signed documents allowing the termination without a court hearing, stipulating that Arric keep his last name of Frye. During a court

hearing in Fremont County to finalize the custody arrangement, the only person in the room with a dry eye was Jennifer, Jim says.

"It sounded like an act of God," Jim says of "termination of parental rights." And when they were granted custody of Arric, the couple took their responsibility as seriously as if God were involved.

"He (Arric) knows everything," Jim says of his now-14-year-old grandson. "Some days it's harder than others."

He attended public school until fifth grade, when the Hobbs put him in a private school for three years. Through seven years, as the Hobbs both worked, Arric received excellent and loving day care from the Owen and Laurie Hirchi family in St. Anthony, "a normal, good LDS family," Hobbs says.

Now he's back in public school, Arric doesn't have a long bus ride to Menan to school, and he has friends in his neighborhood.

"He's a good kid and really smart," Jim says. "We're keeping a handle on things, watching his grades, making sure he stays on track."

This fall the family attended an Idaho Meth Project presentation in Idaho Falls where former meth users described the damage the drug can do to lives. The presentation kept Arric's attention, and Jim says he thinks it may have helped him understand what the drug did to his mother and her judgment.

"We keep reassuring him that she's better now," he says. The family talks with Jennifer a lot, and she paid a visit last month. But if she asked to take Arric for a long break to where she lives now with a new husband and his children, it likely wouldn't happen.

"We've worked so hard on this," Jim says.

"I take a lot of blame for his mother," he says. "I'm trying to make up for that with him."

He says his wife, Judy, deserves so much credit for how well the family works.

"Without her, it would not have happened," Jim says.

She has stood by his decisions and joined him even on visits to Jennifer to help her get her life in order.

"Once in a while I wonder if Arric might have had a better life some other way," Jim says. "But there is also the chance it could be a lot worse."

His advice to grandparents and parents: "Watch your kids. Keep up good communications. Keep your kids out of harm's way. Drugs are available, even right here in Rexburg.

"Parents and grandparents need to stay more involved with their kids."

#### **Online resources:**

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-- [info.ag.uidaho.edu/grandparents/](http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/grandparents/) (University of Idaho Extension information)

-- [www.eicap.org/grg](http://www.eicap.org/grg) (Eastern Idaho Community Action Partnership) or call 522-5391

-- [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org) (Generations United)

-- [www.Idahokincarecoalition.org](http://www.Idahokincarecoalition.org)

-- [www.idahohealth.org](http://www.idahohealth.org) (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare)

-- [www.grandparentagain.com](http://www.grandparentagain.com) (Grandparents Again)

JOYCE EDLEFSEN

jedlefsen@uvsj.com

IN PHOTO:

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Grandparents Lenny and Louisa Peterson bookend their grandchildren, Brayleigh, left, and Ashlynn on the couch in a living room filled with the trappings of a traditional Christmas. The Petersons shared their experiences in raising the girls.