

WE TRY TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN
 ALL ABOUT OUR CHILDREN TEACH US
 WHAT LIFE IS ALL ABOUT

A sign on the wall of the classroom at the Early Childhood Center in Proctor expresses a philosophy to grandparents that come there that they should always be open to learning about life from their grandchildren.

Parenting, again

Community educators support grandparents caring for the next generation

BY JESSICA MORGAN

In today's digital age, many grandparents play a major role in raising the next generation.

More than an estimated 71,000 children in Minnesota live under the primary care of a grandparent or another older relative, which is 40 percent more than in 1990, according to the Minnesota Board of Aging

"I retire when I'm 55 and will still have a kid in school," said Shelly Anderson, one of the grandparents participating in the "Parenting, Again" program, catered to families in situations similar to Anderson's. "It's not the way I pictured things going. You can be angry about it, or you can strive on and do what you can."

Grandparents need assistance knowing "how to parent today's children with today's technology and discipline," or "what is appropriate now versus what was appropriate when they grew up," said Kristal Berg, Proctor School District's director of community education.

Recognizing the unique needs of children whose parents are absent for reasons such as substance abuse, abandonment, incarceration, mental health issues, divorce or poverty is what lead Berg and other local educators to develop the program, which is now in its third year. "We're out in the community every day listening to concerns," she described of her and her colleagues.

Meeting once a month, "Parenting, Again" gives caregivers access to relevant speakers, a free meal and childcare for their children. Sessions are catered to the needs of each group, which change from year to year. Instead of creating a full agenda ahead of time, "Parenting, Again" facilitators learn about participants' needs first, since the age and circumstances vary from family to family. "It's not some canned program where session one, we do this and session two, we do that. It's really catered to that group," said Nancy Litman, Proctor

School District director of early childcare.

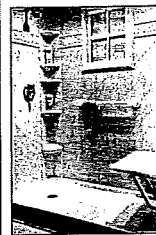
Litman has aided in the program's growth and funding by writing grant proposals. With her help, the program received funding from the Southern St. Louis County Family Service Collaborative.

One of the ways that the grant builds upon the program's existing elements is paying for more in-depth programming with childcare staff Rachel Carroll and Barbara Johnson. Funds also help continue to bring speakers to the sessions.

On Dec. 13, Terri Port Wright, an attorney who works with Child Protection and Family Law in Cloquet attends the program to answer legal questions. Bringing in legal professionals "can really come in handy in helping them navigate the system, which is frustrating for young people, but difficult for grandparents," said Judy Kreag, who facilitates the Hermantown program.

While some children in the program are adopted by their grandparent, "some were told it would be better if they became a foster home so that they get income. Some become a foster home because of their age or other outstanding circumstances."

BATHTUB REFINISHING & REPAIR

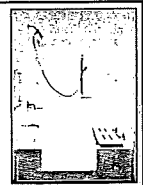


- Repair Cracked/Weak Tub & Shower Floors
- Refinish Countertops To a Stone Finish

Install Acrylic Bathtubs, Wall Liners & Shower Pans.

Convert existing tub to easy step-in shower.

- Grab Bars

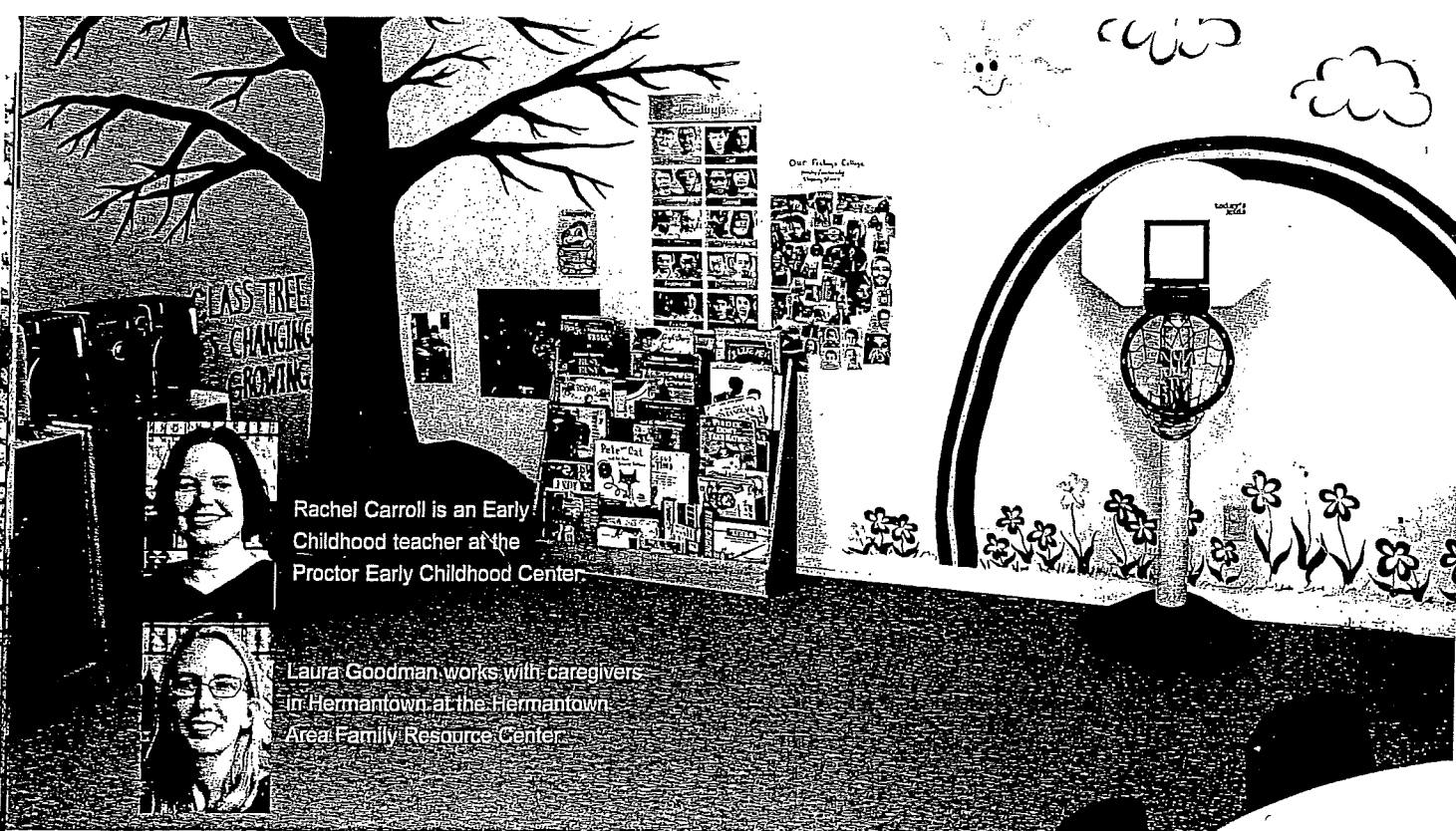


Veteran Owned by Russ Stark & Family, Serving the Northland Since 1989.

(218) 384-4175

www.surfacepecialists.com





Rachel Carroll is an Early Childhood teacher at the Proctor Early Childhood Center.

Laura Goodman works with caregivers in Hermantown at the Hermantown Area Family Resource Center.

Local artist Barb Ahlberg painted a mural on the wall for children involved in the grandparents program.

PHOTOS BY JESSICA MORGAN

Another area that grandparents request assistance is with education. "When my daughter was in school, you called the teacher and talked to them. In today's world, it's all online," said Anderson, who valued getting someone's support on navigating how technology and education intersect. "It's a lot less personal and something that you don't even think of. You don't think that 'I need to go online every day and look at their assignments.' You have to be more on top of watching your own stuff (because) teachers aren't going to call you and tell you when your kids are failing."

While the majority of the speakers in the "Parenting, Again" program are geared toward resources and education, "it's not just a program, but a support group," Anderson said. "It's nice to see what other people have to say and to know that other people are dealing with the same issues."

"Some weeks when we go in to do check-in, it takes almost the whole time," Kreag said. Since Kreag is both a facilitator and grandparent, her own reflections have led her to incorporate stress-relieving activities into the program such as journaling,

meditation and art therapy. "I'm most concerned about self-care. On the days that I have (my grandkids) for 11 hours I'm just fried, but (the participants) have them all the time." While Kreag said meditation is "kind of foreign" to a lot of people, she found that participants embraced meditative practices and even returned to a session to show her a phone application for practicing and tracking meditating daily.

One of the activities Kreag does with the group about stress is to have participants write down five things they do for self-care. "I was really surprised because I thought they would think, 'what is that?' But they had a lot of answers." To name a few, she shared, "They walk, they read, or they try to find child care so that they can go out together as a couple."

Describing the juggling act associated with parenting grandkids, Anderson said, "It's hard. You want your kids to be involved in things, but that means you're running to soccer and karate." Getting to attend the program itself can be difficult for participants because they then need to find a day that you can actually go to another place."

But reflecting on how the program has helped her, Anderson said, "I just wish that more people can make the time to go," and "I look at it this way: They provide dinner. So I think, 'well, tonight I don't have to cook dinner! That's one thing off my plate! All I need to do is show up.'"

Open to new participants any time, the program runs on Tuesdays 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Hermantown Area Family Resource Center on Feb. 12, March 12, April 9 and May 14 with Goodman. Kreag runs the Thursday program at the Proctor Early Childhood Center on Jan. 10, Feb. 14, March 14, April 11 and May 16 from 5:30-7:30 p.m.

For more information or to register, call (218) 729-9563 (Hermantown) or (218) 628-6293 (Proctor).

Jessica Morgan is a Duluth freelance writer and musician. She grew up in Pennsylvania, where she lived with both her grandparents and great-grandparents in elementary school. The bulk of her creative writing and poetry feature stories about her grandmother, Jane.