

A Bond of Kinship



When Gramma Becomes the Mom

“They also have to grieve the loss of their grandma, because I can’t be a grandma,” Mauck says of her relationship with Bree. “I’ve had to learn to redefine my role as grandparent to my other grandchildren and as caretaker to Bree.”

By Rachel Sapin, staff writer

AURORA

Mickey Mauck imagined her retirement would lead her somewhere exotic, like New Zealand or Australia. Instead, after a long career as a counselor at several metro-area colleges and later leading a nonprofit, Mauck and her husband Don purchased a home in Aurora’s Dam West neighborhood — one that would be closer to their grandchild’s school and friends.

“I’ve become somewhat of an expert on kinship care in the state of Colorado,” says Mauck, who has been a kinship provider for her 13-year-old granddaughter Bree for more than seven years now. Mauck is also a family peer support specialist at Aurora Mental Health who helps local kinship families.

Standing in her bedroom today Bree is simply a teenager. She has posters of her favorite show “The Walking Dead” hanging on her purple walls, while Spiderman memorabilia floods her desk.





Mickey Mauck drops her granddaughter Bree off at school Monday in Aurora.

Mauck, a family peer support specialist at Aurora Mental Health, is caregiver for her granddaughter after years of court battles regarding who would care for her. Bree, who has been living with her grandmother off and on since she was 6 months old, is seen Thursday at her home in Aurora.

"I enjoy living with my grandma the most. I'm most comfortable with her," Bree says.

Bree also has her grandmother hooked on the Walking Dead show. "I binge-watched Walking Dead for two months," Mauck says. "At the apocalypse, the bad people turn into good people and the good people turn into bad people. The relationships you have to form to survive are a little like us."

Bree was first removed from her parents' care at 6 months. She was taken away from them when they could no longer care for her due to drug addiction and incarceration. She was ultimately placed with the Maucks by Arapahoe County social services, but before that the family endured years of court battles and Bree hopping between households.

About a year and a half ago, Bree decided she did not want to remain in contact with her father, but she still visits her mother. "We have escape plans," Mauck explains, for when Bree ever becomes uncomfortable in a situation with a family member.

Kinship care is broadly defined as the full-time nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents, by relatives, godparents, stepparents, or other adults who have a kinship bond with a child. Mauck says kinship is much different from adoption because with adoption comes a sense of choice. But in both situations children must grieve the loss of their biological parents.

"They also have to grieve the loss of their grandma, because I can't be a grandma," Mauck says of her relationship with Bree. "I've had to learn to redefine my role as grandparent to my other grandchildren and as caretaker to Bree."

Like adoption, becoming a legal guardian as a relative can be expensive. Mauck says she spent nearly \$8,000 on a lawyer to gain full custody of Bree — money she said she could have been put towards her granddaughter's college funds. Instead, it was used to get Bree back from the foster care system. Mauck, who now has Allocation of Parental Responsibilities (APR) for Bree and is also her official guardian, first gained temporary custody of Bree when her granddaughter was 6 months old.

Mauck said the initial family plan created by social services for Bree involved multiple visitations and appointments each week, whether it was to see Bree's mother or father, her other grandparents or lawyers, and court-appointed social workers. "It was a nightmare. She (Bree) spent most of her time in the car," Mauck remembers.

"Then we had to deal with the emotions when she came back home." Mauck says those would often involve screaming fits when Bree was younger. "I learned to wrap her in a blanket, swaddle her and hold her until it went out of her," Mauck says.

Because that family plan emphasized reunifying Bree with her parents, Bree lived with her mother and father for short intervals. Mauck says she would often pick up the slack when one or the other parent fell back into harmful habits.

It was an event when Bree was 9 years old and living with her father that led the Maucks to take full custody of her. While the Maucks were out of town, Bree's father was arrested. This time social services sent Bree directly to foster care. It was a little over a month before the Maucks could even get Bree back. And it took six to eight more months to again gain custody.

"It was scary because no one really told me what was going on," Bree remembers. "By that time, my dad was in jail, my aunt told me that. They just took me away and I had no clue why."

Mauck remembers contacting the judge on the case for weeks, pleading for her granddaughter to be returned to her. "I got support letters from our minister, from her teachers, social workers, therapists," Mauck remembers. "We flooded the court with letters."

When Bree was allowed to again live with her grandparents, Mauck was required to take Bree to court-ordered therapy. Mauck soon became friends with Bree's therapists, and was later recommended for a program called Peer University through Aurora Mental Health. "Bree got me my job. I thought I was retired," Mauck says.

In Colorado 39 percent of grandparents who live with their children are caring for them, says Jeannie Berzinkas, a kinship care coordinator with the Colorado Department of Human Services. "There are 67,568 grandchildren, just grandchildren, being cared for by 35,716 grandparents," she says, citing data from the 2010-2014 American Community Survey.

According to the National Kinship Alliance, across the country one in 10 children live with a grandparent. Four in 10 of these children are being raised by that grandparent, and one in five of those families are living below the poverty line. Berzinkas says what many kinship providers such as grandparents don't realize is, even if they don't formally adopt their grandkids, they can still qualify for the state's financial support for parents, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). She adds that Adams and Arapahoe counties participate in kinship support intervention programs that can help grandparents buy everything from baby formula to bunk beds.

Mauck says support services for kinship families at Aurora Mental Health are also growing. On the second and fourth Monday night of each month she and Bree participate in an adoption support group at Aurora Mental. She is also part of the Kinship Alliance in Colorado, a group of 50-60 professionals who work in kinship families across the state. This fall, she is also working to host Aurora's first "Relatives Raising Children" conference.