



They don't call it 'grand' for nothing

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By Donna Vickroy

Connie Saviano never met her own grandparents. Her parents had already left Italy and moved to the United States when she was born.

"I always regretted not knowing them," Saviano said, "which is why I'm glad to be able to be a grandparent today."



Connie Saviano, a resident of Smith Village, holds photos of her great-grandchildren Alexis, Peter and George Marinopoulos (left photo) and her grandson Peter Marinopoulos in the center of the right photo.

(Matthew Grotto/SouthtownStar)

Saviano, 82, has six grandchildren and seven great grandchildren. Grandparenting is very different from parenting, she said.

"Grandchildren are so much fun. You can have fun with them and not be responsible. It's a very good feeling and I'm thankful to have them."

Her grandson, Peter Marinopoulos, lives about five minutes from her and visits at least once a week, often bringing along his own three children.

"We go out to breakfast or grocery shopping," she said. "The little ones come here for lunch."

Marinopoulos found Saviano her home in the Smith Village retirement community in Chicago's Beverly community. He wanted her to live near him.

Today is National Grandparents Day. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed the first Sunday after Labor Day as a time to remember and celebrate grandparents. The idea originated with Marian McQuade, a housewife in Fayette County, West Virginia, who wanted people to reach out to lonely seniors in nursing homes. She also encouraged children to tap the wisdom and heritage of their grandparents.

In that spirit, we asked seniors across the Southland to tell us about the special bond they share with their grandchildren. And we asked grandchildren to tell us their fondest memories of their grandparents.

Like Connie Saviano, Elsie Aleck did not know her grandparents. Her parents had left behind their parents and many friends when they emigrated from Austria to America.

Because Aleck's husband worked in the travel business, she was able to visit Austria and at least meet some of her parents' friends.

Aleck's eight children, however, knew her husband's parents quite well. They grew up next door to them in Homewood. Though there were five acres between them, the families were regulars at each other's homes.

"It was wonderful. Grandma and Grandpa were everything to them," she said. "And to us. They'd come here and stay with our children whenever my husband and I traveled."

Today, Aleck is 83. She lives in the Smith Crossing retirement community in Orland Park. Her husband has since passed, but she gets the royal treatment from her 17 grandchildren.

"They're so kind to me. I walk with a cane so they always hold on to me. They always boost me into their vans. They take me out for my birthdays. They're very nice to me. I'm very lucky. I've had a fortunate life."

Nell Sutkus also doesn't remember her grandparents, who lived in Europe while she was growing up here.

"But I remember the day my daughter delivered her first baby, my first grandchild. Oh, how I cried," said Sutkus, a long-time volunteer at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Evergreen Park. "That was one of the happiest days."

That first grandbaby, Jason, died at age 24 in an accident.

Sutkus has eight grandchildren. Needless to say, she did a lot of babysitting.

"Each one was precious to me. They liked me to sing, 'You Are My Sunshine,' " she recalled.

Jackie Kolze is celebrating Grandparents Day for the first time this year. Her daughter and son-in-law welcomed baby Toby in July.

"I had heard from friends and relatives about the experience of becoming a grandparent and while I believed all they had to say, until I was blessed enough to live through it I didn't really understand. I have held my own son and daughter when they were born but I am amazed at how different it is with a grandchild," said Kolze, who is a technical associate for Community High School District 218.

"When I hold him I am overwhelmed with the parts of him that remind me so much of the loved ones who are a part of our lives in the present and the past. To see and feel the next generation develop and grow is something that I now cherish so much more than I did with my own two babies," she said.

"Perhaps that is because I am not so 'responsible' as you are as a parent. I simply get to just 'show up' and love him. Or maybe it is because I am so much older and life in general seems more precious. Either way, I am thrilled after many years of waiting to celebrate my first Grandparents Day."

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