

You step up for them and Duet will step up for you

JANELLE TAPPHORN

SPECIAL TO ARIZONA REPUBLIC
USA TODAY NETWORK

You don't know the meaning of the word "advocate" until you've met Victoria Gray.

At 66, Victoria Gray and her husband, Gentry, 81, know all about advocacy. They have been championing displaced kids for more than two decades. From three biological children and seven grandchildren of their own to 41 foster children, they have stepped up to parent and reparent whenever the need arose.

"Just knowing that we could provide safety and stability for them was our reward," Victoria says.

Affectionately known as Nana and Papa by their two sets of twin grandkids, they began their journey of fostering and adoption back in 1992.

Their oldest son and his wife, both struggling with substance abuse and addiction, had abandoned their child, who was born with severe medical issues.

When Child Protective Services placed the baby in foster care, Victoria and Gentry knew they had to act. They stepped up immediately to become foster parents.

After five years of fostering, and the addition of a second grandbaby, also with severe medical issues, they were able to formally adopt in 1997. Now recognized formally as foster parents, Victoria and Gentry continued to provide their unconditional love and care for 41 other foster children.

However, their journey was far from over. At the cusp of realizing their dreams of world travel and the proverbial "golden years," Victoria and Gentry found themselves once again navigating the challenges of guardianship and parenting when in 2007 their daughter ran into her own trouble, leaving her son and two sets of twins in their care.

"God had other plans for us, I guess. It was just a lot of kids and a lot of work," Victoria says.

Enter Duet. In 2010, when a Duet brochure distributed at her grandkids' school found its way into Victoria's hands, the support they had been missing finally surfaced.

"Duet really saved us!" she says.

From free-of-charge support groups and workshops to respite and legal guidance, Duet helped Victoria and Gentry connect with a community of kinship caregivers.



Clockwise from left: Alexis, Alexander, Deanthony, Victoria and Gentry Gray.

FRANKIE WHEELER

When family dynamics are unique and constantly changing, Duet steps up to help families find new ways to overcome the struggles and find stability when the biological parent can no longer care for a child.

Victoria says, "Wow! Nobody ever told us about this! Prior to Duet, we were just hitting brick walls with people not responding or returning our phone calls. I found there were a lot of resources and help available from Duet."

Victoria's appreciation and heart for service manifested in a new direction when she began to volunteer at Duet.

She says, "Duet has really given me a voice! Duet taught me that I could speak up and I could ask questions."

She is now a member of the Arizona Grandparent Ambassadors organization and the Arizona Kinship Coalition and works full-time for Aid to Adoption of Special Kids.

In August, she helped advocate the passage of additional economic assistance under Gov. Doug Ducey's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families legislation and recently won the 2017 Generations United Grandfamily Award out of Washington, D.C.

"So, that start with Duet has led to a whole new avenue for me," Victoria says. "It was so hard for my husband and I. We just don't want to see people go through that alone."

Victoria and Gentry's grandkids now volunteer with them at Duet.

Janelle Tapphorn works at Duet: Partners In Health & Aging.