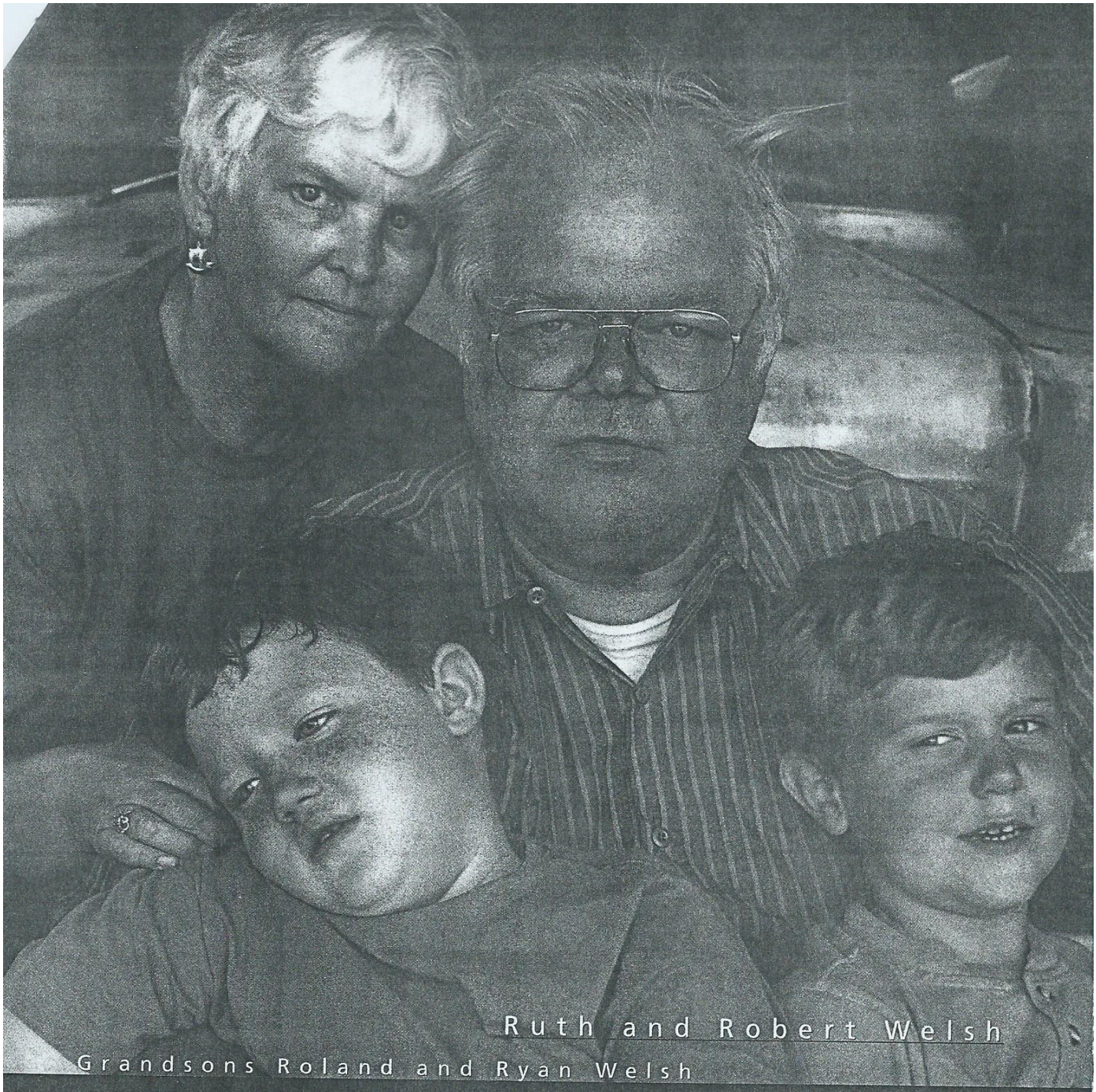
GRANDPARENTS as PARENTS

The number of grandparents raising grandchildren has risen 40 percent in the past decade; some 3.2 million children nationwide currently live with their grandparents or other relative caregivers. The most prevailing reason for this trend is substance abuse by the children's parents, and other factors impacting parental responsibility include incarceration, teen pregnancy, unemployment and criminal or delinquent behavior. ❋ At a time when they thought they'd be enjoying the golden years of retirement and winding down, grandparents raising their children's children must overcome critical financial and legal challenges as they strive to provide a balanced family atmosphere for their grandchildren. Meet three Sacramento families.

By Sigrid Bathen

Photography by Cari Lazansky



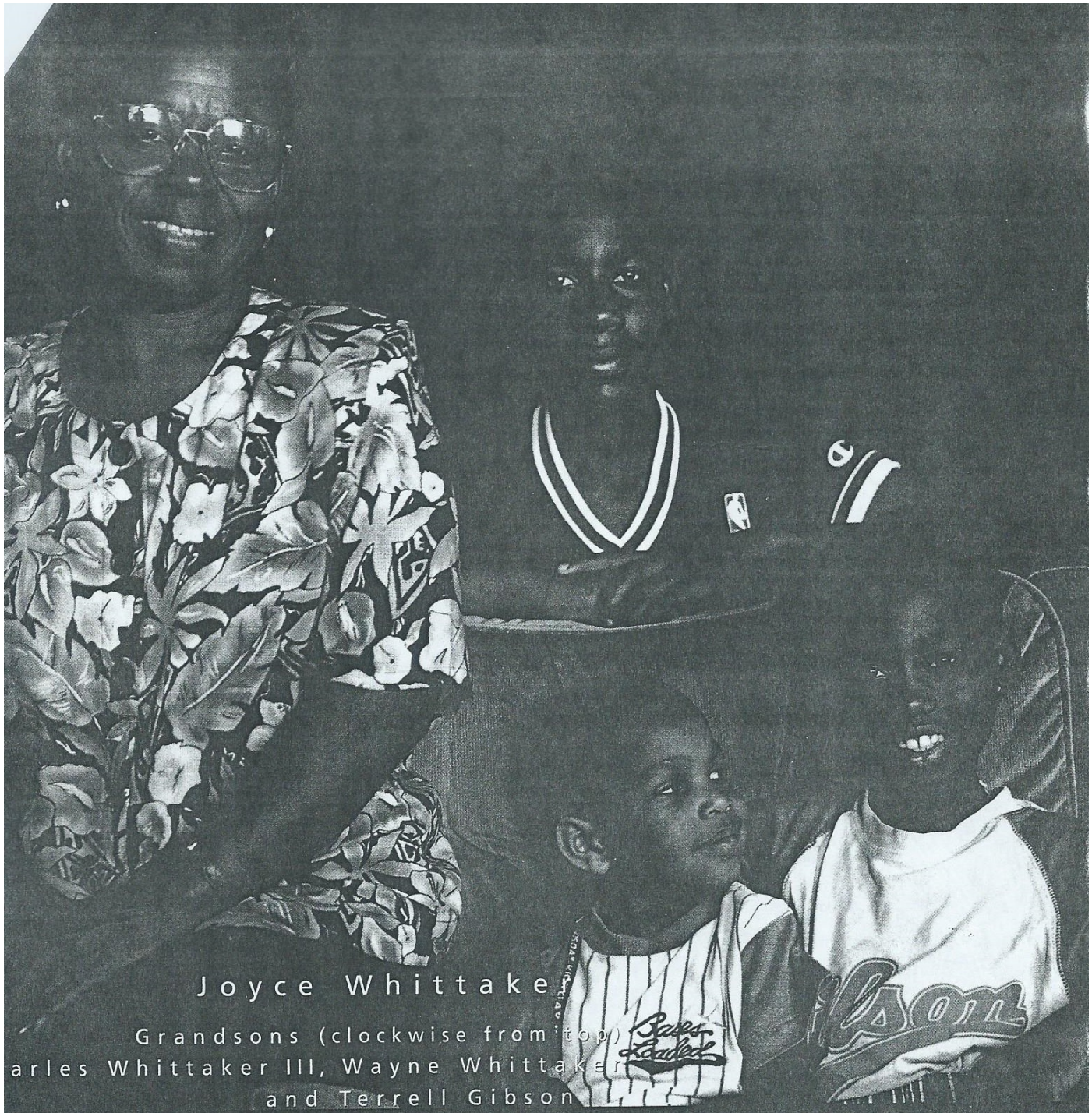
Ruth and Robert Welsh

Grandsons Roland and Ryan Welsh

Roland, 6, and Ryan, 4, have lived with their grandparents in Rio Linda since they were born to the Welshes' son and his wife, both of whom have problems with drugs. The boys' parents were taken in by the Welshes seven years ago, when they were homeless and living in their car. They pay rent and "help out," says Ruth Welsh, 54. "They're here, but I do most of the work."

Robert Welsh, 55, owns an automobile transmission company in Sacramento, and the couple has three other grown children and four more grandchildren. Ruth worked in a legal photocopying business downtown, but quit work three years ago to care for the boys. She is active in the North Sacramento Grandparents Support Group, one of many area support groups for the growing legions of grandparents raising grandchildren.

The Welshes regularly schedule camping trips and outings to San Francisco to visit Fisherman's Wharf, the zoo or the beach. Roland, who has a learning disability, recently participated in the Special Junior Olympics. Ryan enjoys Nintendo. Both boys love riding their bicycles. Ruth says she hopes to purchase a computer for them soon, and plans to take a computer class so she can learn, too.



Joyce Whittaker

Grandsons (clockwise from top) Charles Whittaker III, Wayne Whittaker and Terrell Gibson

When Joyce Whittaker retired from Pacific Bell six years ago, she hadn't planned to start another career. But last June, at age 58, she graduated from American River College with an associate's degree in gerontology. She plans to go on for her bachelor's degree at CSUS, and continue her volunteer work with seniors.

She and her husband, retired McClellan Air Force Base Staff Sgt. Charles Whittaker, 61, and their grandsons' other grandmother, Marva Mosley, have cared for the three boys, now 12, 9 and 5, for the last nine years. Both parents of the boys have served jail time on drug charges, but Joyce says the children's mother has made a major turnaround and is currently working on a degree in early childhood education at Sacramento City College, and caring for the two youngest boys. The Whittakers' son (the boys' father) is in a drug rehab program.

Joyce credits the joint effort with Marva as critical to their grandsons' future. "She and I have really been strong together," says Joyce. "We share the finances so that neither is overburdened."

Charles plays the trumpet and Wayne plays the flute in the school band at John Still Middle School, and both boys sing in the St. Andrews African Methodist Episcopal Church choir. The boys are also members of the St. Hope Academy. Of her grandsons' activities, Joyce says, "When they participate, I participate. Keeps me busy."

Georgiana White and Jim Perrine

Granddaughter Geneva Perrine

Geneva Perrine, 7, has been officially adopted by her grandparents, Georgiana White, who manages the University Archives at California State University, Sacramento, and Jim Perrine, a biologist and state research analyst, both 53. Geneva's case generated national media attention—and a dramatic parental abduction hunt when Geneva's mother (Georgiana and Jim's daughter) kidnapped the child in violation of a court order when Geneva was 18 months old. Geneva's mother, once a star athlete at St. Francis High School in Sacramento, had descended into methamphetamine addiction with Geneva's father, a heroin addict. Geneva was found in Taos, N.M., reunited with her grandparents, and her mother jailed. Geneva's father is currently in a San Francisco Bay Area drug rehabilitation program after serving time in prison. Georgiana says that her daughter, now 33, has kicked the habit and is living in Sacramento with her two younger children, struggling to get her life back on track. "She's talking like the girl who came out of St. Francis High School [again]," says Georgiana. "We are very hopeful."

Geneva is a very active youngster. She is involved in creative dance and ballet, and recently advanced from Gymnastics I to Gymnastics IV. She attended tennis camp this summer, and her grandparents say she also loves swimming.