

susan greene

Greene: Grandpa camps out in kids' lives

By Susan Greene
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Robert Kahn's heart broke when his grandson moved to Denver.

The retired ad executive had been in the delivery room when his daughter gave birth. When her sitter didn't show up, he volunteered as the full-time nanny. Nothing made him happier than hanging out with Jake, the only child of his only child.

Kahn had a list of plans for his retirement in Chicago. But he was so sad and lonely when Jake, then 4, moved with his mom and dad to Denver last July that he packed up and followed a month later.

"I'd always been in his life and couldn't accept being a plane ride away," he said.

Kahn is new enough to town that few here recognize his name. But scores of Denver kids

and their parents know "Uncle Bob" from his name tag. That's because Kahn not only followed Jake to Denver but also went to work at his day camp.

"I used to say at the end of the day nobody would care whether I sold advertising or not," said the former Tribune Co. adman who, at 67, spends his days in the summer sun swarmed by adoring campers. "Now I never feel that way about my job."

There's a Yiddish term, "bashert," that loosely means "destined," as if by divine intervention.

It was evident that the term applied to Kahn's first morning on the job at Dream Big Day Camp. That's when he reached through the window of our car to shake hands with my 5-year-old.

"Hi. I'm Bob. You can call me Uncle Bob," he said with a level of enthusiasm that, frankly, creeped me out at 8:30 a.m.

Nine weeks later, Kahn has become somewhat of a folk hero in a camp whose staffers are mostly one-third his age.

He has memorized the names of all the kids in each of the summer's three sessions. He has convinced many that he's 100 years old because "it sounds more interesting than 67." It's a bonus in his new line of work that he can converse about the characters in "Cars."

There are also rumors that Kahn is a Jedi master.

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Jake doesn't seem to realize how lucky he is to have a grandfather who, when Jake was into trucks at age 4, took him to truck stops to meet real truckers and drove him during his train phase at age 3 to sit for hours at railroad junctions.

About camp, their latest adventure, Jake is just bummed that his "Grampio" has been assigned to lead an older group called the Cardinals, not his own tribe of Orioles.

"He isn't in my bunk," Jake laments.

"For my dad, it's not just about how he can have a good relationship with his grandson, but how he can be important to the people who are important to his grandson," says Merit Gest, Jake's mom and Kahn's daughter.

Kahn learned a few things from his own grandfather, a Russian immigrant who earned his high school diploma in his 70s. He also learned from his years as a camper 60 years ago what to avoid as a counselor.

"My camp was run by a phys-ed teacher who wasn't very nice. I wasn't athletic. What I learned there was that I didn't want to fail in front of my peers," he recalls.

After two sessions at Dream Big, Jack Tasker counts Kahn as one of his best buddies.

"If people are just a little bit shy, he's nice and helps them and stuff," says Jack, 7, who happens to be just a little bit shy.

It has been one year this week since Kahn moved to Denver without knowing anyone but his family. He'll end his counseling gig Friday having befriended dozens of families and met all but one of his goals. He has yet to scale the climbing wall, which he has urged so many kids to undertake all summer.

"I still have fears of my own," he admits. "But if any one of the boys asked me to do it, I would in a second."

Susan Greene writes Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Reach her at 303-954-1989 or greeneg@denverpost.com.

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