



The Sandwich Generation:



Caught in Between

By Henry Tam

You finally find the missing shoe strategically hidden under your kid's backpack as you rush him to school. After dropping him and his siblings off, you drive over to your mother's place to check on her and pay some of her bills and get a little yard work done. Then you head to your local Alliance meeting to plan next weekend's fundraiser. Back to school to pick up the kids and drive them to karate and soccer. You finally head home to have the kids help stuff fundraiser invitations and call the in-laws to check on them.

This is a typical day of life for a person caught in the “sandwich generation.”

People who care for their children and aging parents are part of the sandwich generation. The Pew Research Center, nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world, reports that nearly 10 million boomers are now raising kids or supporting an adult child while financially supporting an aging parent. And just over one of every eight Americans aged 40 to 60 is raising *both* a child *and* caring for a parent. These Americans find themselves in the parental and supportive role for two generations of their families, their own children and their own parents.

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Nurturing Roles

Having to care for children and aging parents has always been an issue Alliance families have faced. According to *Loving Care: How do Alliance members cope with aging parents?* which appeared in the May 2005 issue of *AMA Alliance Today*, “The tables turned for Marcee Claflin. For years she played the role of daughter while her parents cared and nurtured her into adulthood, but when their health began to decline, she assumed a new role — caregiver.” Today's members are no exception.

Alliance member Mary Meyers of Houston was in the sandwich position when she cared for her two daughters and father-in-law. Although her two daughters are grown now, she understands how



it feels to be part of the sandwich generation. “My kids were probably 4 and 6 when [my husband’s] father went into a nursing home and we went every day to check on him and see that things were going all right...but the kids would say ‘Oh, do we have to go to the nursing home?’” Meyers said. When Meyers’ father-in-law passed away, she started caring for her mother-in-law who moved to be within a mile of where they lived.

While the sandwich generation is generally thought of as providing support to aging parents and young children, the clear focus of the definition should be the key supportive role of the sandwiched person. Alliance member Susan Owen of Knoxville, Tenn., was thrown into the sandwich generation when her 23-year-old daughter suffered traumatic brain injury in a tragic car accident nearly two and a half years ago. Owen cares for her daughter every day, taking her to therapy and occasionally provides weeklong respite care for her 85-year-old father-in-law. “I think when people think of the sandwich generation, they think of [caring for] children who are young and healthy [as well as] the care of an elderly parent, but ours is so different because Caroline was a junior in college when

she had her accident,” Owen said. Now, Owen cares for her daughter every day; taking it little by little, in hopes of helping her daughter recover walking and speech skills.

Taking on new responsibilities will seem overwhelming initially for the person in a sandwich situation, and even those around them. Owen said the biggest hurdle for her initially was just “time adjustment; leaving one life behind and picking another one up, and it certainly wasn’t a choice, but you deal with what you are given.” For Meyers, caring for her in-laws affected her children. “When we had [my husband’s] father in the nursing home, my children remember that as a not so fun time because our time was really divided. The time that they wanted to play or do something fun, we would have to go to the nursing home,” Meyers said.

Coping

Meyers didn’t have to add a full-time job to her list of responsibilities, so she was able to manage the time crunch. “I tried to [visit my father-in-law] when [the girls] were in school. They were in early elementary school so I would do [most of the] running [then]. I’ve

been fortunate that [my husband's] income has always allowed me to stay home with my kids and his parents, because I couldn't have done it as much as I did if I worked full time."

Even the older generation helped ease Meyers' load at times, when she did take her daughters with her. "I took them to the nursing home to see [my husband's] father all the time, and they happily went to see his mother, because she was a good grandmother. She liked to have them around and do things with them and they would spend the night," she said.

Meyers was still able to juggle a lot when she was sandwiched in. "When we were taking care of [my husband's] father in the nursing home, I was president of the PTA, working for volunteer organizations and trying to get that done so that the family didn't know that I wasn't [busy] entirely," she said.

Fostering Family Connections

Being part of the sandwich generation isn't always a choice, but Meyers suggests using it as an opportunity to teach. "Use it as a teaching tool for your kids, to learn that the older generation is valuable and can't be discarded because they have reached a time when they are not so much fun. I think it's good for children to know that not everything is fun, that you still have to do it and it's worthwhile in the long run. Some day you are going to think that I did this for my grandfather and I was there when he needed me," she said. Responsibility can bring a lot of stress and can differ from family to family. Owen noted the best advice given to her because her situation is really unique, "there is no concrete thing, so take a deep breath, pray a lot and have somebody you can talk to."

While those in the sandwich generation may appear trapped with added responsibility over two generations of a family, it also shows the strong family ties that span generations. Instead of looking at the responsibilities as a burden, look at your responsibilities as a value system you are passing on from generation to generation. "I taught them as my mother taught me, because she had her mother-in-law close by her [when] we were young; it's just what you do, you take care of them. She was wonderful to her mother-in-law, and when people say 'you are so nice to take care of your mother-in-law, most people wouldn't do that,' well I say 'you learn from the master, my mother did that when we were little.' She made it important to us to take care of those older members of the family; go get grandma, bring her over for dinner every night." She stresses the family values aspect of

being part of the sandwich generation. "I can only hope that we are giving an example to our kids so somebody takes care of us," Meyers said.

Owen now views her supportive role for her daughter's current life as a blessing; after her daughter woke up from a lengthy coma. Owen stays positive about the partial care she gives to her father-in-law as well. "I refuse to think negatively about those grandparents whom we help care for. He is not here full time, and we refuse to think negatively about Caroline. If you let those thoughts creep in, they multiply, not only having a drain on yourself, [but that] becomes a mental drain." Instead, Owen said, "there is no end to what [Caroline] can do."

It is no surprise that Meyers' mother-in-law is 97 years old. She is currently in independent living about a mile away from where Meyers and her husband live. "We go over at night to get her to bed and go in the morning to get her up." Meyers also recently returned from a four-



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hour drive visiting her father. She isn't currently in a sandwich situation, but will soon be sandwiched again since her daughter is moving back closer to Meyers and bringing along her new grandson and babysitting duties. "I guess in the long run, it's worth it because I feel good about the time I have given to my elderly relatives."