



## The Sandwich Generation

*More people taking care of their parents as well as own children*

By Kathi Gunio

I was reminded of a conversation recently I had with my friend, Linda.

Linda was living in Kissimmee, Fla. at the time, with her three children and parents—all in the same house. Linda told me it was the best scenario offered to her while she recovered from her divorce.

Her parents' house was big, she could help with cooking, her kids could help with the chores, and she would be able to have live-in childcare for her kids.

But a few years into the living arrangement, the matter of who was taking care of who changed when Linda's 72 year-old father was diagnosed with lung cancer.

In addition to transporting her kids to their school concerts and after-school baseball practices, Linda was now taking her father to all of his appointments. Her mother never learned how to drive and her father was too uncomfortable and weak to

do so. When Linda's mother hurt her back in the interim, Linda suddenly found herself being caregiver to not only her own children, but her father and mother as well.

"Everybody wants a piece of me," I recall her telling me, laughing ironically as she did so. "I feel like I'm a sandwich."

She was. Linda had become a member of what society refers to as the "Sandwich Generation." It's a term that was coined by author Dorothy Miller in 1981 in her book, "The Sandwich Generation: Adult Children of the Aging."

Simply put, the term refers to an individual who is "sandwiched" between and taking care of members from two generations—that of their kids and elderly parents. It is a term that Merriam-Webster officially added to its dictionary in July 2006.

However, Carol Abaya, a nationally recognized expert and journalist on aging and elder care

issues and the Sandwich Generation, took the term even farther, and breaks the sandwich down as follows:

### **What's on the menu**

- Traditional sandwich: those sandwiched between aging parents who need care and their own children.

- Club sandwich: the most popular sandwich with those in their 50s or 60s sandwiched between aging parents, adult children and grandchildren. Many are in their 30s and 40s, with young children, aging parents and grandparents.

- Open faced: anyone else involved in elder care.

Whatever way you look at it, or whatever sandwich you may consider yourself, being part of any of these "sandwiches" is not easy. In addition to the trials and tribulations of raising one's own children, members of the Sandwich Generation also struggle to provide the necessary care and needs for an aging loved one. Taking on both these endeavors is one of the most difficult balancing acts to perform.

Ironically, this balancing act is one that occurs in more American homes than you might expect. It has been estimated that approximately 16 million Americans—more than all the people living in New England—are feeling the squeeze of being sandwiched between two generations.

Broken down, that means approximately one out of every eight Americans between the ages of 40–65 is raising a child as well as caring for an aging parent (or parents) and the number is on the rise. According to a CBS News report in 2009, in 25 years, that number will increase to an overwhelming 60 million Americans or one in every four. My friend Linda had become one of those statistics. Just a few short months ago, so did my husband and his family.

It's why I remembered that conversation I had with my friend Linda because I found myself in that same position.

My father-in-law's health suddenly began to decline, and in the midst of taking care of our four kids (two of whom are out on their own),



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we found ourselves unexpectedly taking care of Dad.

We drove dad to his doctor's appointments, and accompanied him to several tests. When Dad insisted on staying home, his children abided by those wishes. Everyone wanted to make Dad feel as comfortable as possible. It did not make things any easier.

## Family needs to step up

We all had kids. Jobs. Houses. But since my mother-in-law had passed away six years ago, there was no one to be with Dad 24/7. The responsibility to provide him with care fell on the family, whether we chose to provide direct care ourselves, or sought the services of someone else to do so. There was no doubt about it: We were a club sandwich, and were definitely "sandwiched" in.

To be honest, it can become a burden. While taking care of our kids is our understandable obligation, no one is ever really prepared to

take care of a parent. Whether it's finding an appropriate residence—assisted living center, long term care facility, or hospice—it is something of which we baby boomers were not thinking. Scheduling a parent's doctor's appointment around our child's wasn't either. However, the reality is that our parents will age and people are living longer.

Therefore, when the tables are turned so to speak, providing care to an aging parent, while admirable, can be tough. It can also be frustrating, sorrowful and stressful. But no one should take it on alone, and no one has to.

The good thing about being sandwiched is that there are excellent services to ease the burden. Whether or not you choose to do in-home care, or place your parent in another facility, in Monroe County alone, there is an extensive list of agencies, programs, and services available to members of the Sandwich Generation.

These programs and services

will not only help you in the care of your elder parent, but there are also programs to help you and your children stay focused on day-to-day issues while adding to the care of an aging parent.

These days, all one needs to do is simply Google "elder care," or ask a friend or co-worker. Chances are he or she has probably been where you're going. Knowing that can be comforting, too.

It can also be comforting, rewarding, and satisfying providing care to your aging parent. During the last week of Dad's life, my husband was there around the clock, positioning Dad so he could look out the window; making Dad comfortable by placing the pillows just right in bed; sharing conversations with Dad that are now sacred; and seeing to it that Dad had his favorite Scotch nearby (even if he didn't drink it).

I was so proud of my husband, who wouldn't have changed those seven days for anything.

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