A Survival Course for the Sandwich Generation

Carol Abaya Learned the Hard Way What It's Like to Care for Elderly Parents. She Wants to Make It Easier for Others.

By GEORGE JAMES

RED BANK

A red bank, Carol Abaya covered an assisted living community in Indonesia, the seizure of power by Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and racial riots in Paris.

But none of this was as tough as stepping in to care for her elderly parents.

"I was not prepared personally to handle the emotional stress that I felt when I had to suddenly take everything from my parents," said Ms. Abaya.

Her mother was 85, her father 90. Ms. Abaya, who is also a real estate broker, operated her mother's real estate company for the next year and the household as well, commuting more than an hour each way between her home in Marlboro and theirs in Englewood, disrupting both her personal life and her own public relations business.

Her parents had always been very independent, which made the situation more difficult. And as the days passed into months, Ms. Abaya found herself looking for any and all advice. But she found none.

The experience so affected Mrs. Abaya that she has devoted her life to helping middle-age adults, many with growing families, make the adjustments to essentially becoming parents to their aging parents.

For them, and herself, she published a magazine called The Sandwich Generation: You and Your Aging Parents, out of her home in Marlboro for six years until she ended publication in early 1999.

Since then she has written an advice column called The Sandwich Generation, for the Globe Syndicate. It appears in several newspapers nationwide, including The North Jersey Herald News, a daily paper in Passaic County.

She has spoken to numerous groups, including the American Society on Aging and the Assisted Living Federation of America and in 1997 testified on tax care credits for the elderly before the House Ways and Means Committee. And she has been featured in Kiplinger's Retirement Report and in New Choices, a Reader's Digest magazine, and also appeared on many radio and television talk shows.

She is a member of the advisory committee for the elderly when a person Gerontology Certificate Program of the Rutgers University School of Social Work. In 1996, she was honored by the Women's Bureau of the Federal Department of Labor.

One evening last month, she addressed about 46 people in Navesink House, a non-profit retirement home here.

"Her message is very necessary," said Tom McGee, a 70-year-old insurance agent from Oceanport. "As we get older, there are issues that need to be addressed, and most of us are oblivious to them until it happens to us in our own families."

Ms. Abaya tries to help middle adults understand the emotions not only of parents, but also of the elderly and their own feelings as well. She asks the audience to do an exercise.

"Imagine that you're being sent to an isolated island where you'll have to spend the rest of your life," she told them. "You can only take five people or things along, and you must choose which ones."

As the exercise progressed, they were forced to whittle the number to three. When finished, they asked them, "How did you feel when you had to start narrowing down your entire life to three people or things?"

Guilt, frustration, pain, cordless, anger and fear of the future, they answered.

These are the feelings, Ms. Abaya told them, that many people have as they grow older and begin losing their spouses, siblings, close friends, children and even their homes, not to mention the ability to do things for themselves.

"One of the challenges of being a sandwich generation is to understand the feelings of aging parents," she said, "and to deal with them in a way that the dignity of the older person is preserved."

But she added, using herself as an example, no one is ever really prepared for such a task.

She was born one of two daughters to Samuel Goldstein, whose hardware store was a fixture in Englewood, and Sarah K. Goldstein, who operated a real estate office there for more than 46 years.

Ms. Abaya received a bachelor's degree in 1959 from the University of Wisconsin and a master's from New York University a few years later, both in international relations.

Her first reporting job was with The Morning Call, a daily newspaper in Paterson, where in 1964 she got to cover a race anderson, where in 1964 she got to cover a race
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Mrs. Goldstein was hospitalized for two months. When she came out, she was bedridden, and Ms. Abaya's father went into the hospital with internal bleeding. He was no sooner home than her mother entered the hospital again.

At one point, Ms. Abaya employed four people around the clock to care for the household.

She discovered her parents had no long-term care insurance and she had no clue about their financial resources. The lesson taught her that families have to discuss such matters and children need durable power of attorney for emergencies.

"It was physically exhausting," she said. "Many nights I cried myself to sleep, and I was walking around with a migraine all the time."

When her mother was well enough to take back her business in 1992, Ms. Abaya started The Sandwich Generation as a quarterly magazine.

She saw it as an extension of her mission as a journalist: to provide accurate and unbiased information so people could better make decisions.

And as her parents became more frail, she stepped in more and more.

But she also used her experiences to feed her magazine topics like acquiring long-term care insurance, getting a parent to stop driving, shopping for a doctor and nurturing the spirit.

The magazine, which grew to have a circulation of about 30,000 nationwide, ceased publication early last year because it was losing money. "And," she said, "I was getting tired."

But she continues the work through her column, reassuring people they are not alone in feeling guilt and frustration in dealing with aging parents.

Her father died in 1991 at age 94, and her mother in 1997 at 91.

"My role," Ms. Abaya told her audience in Navesink, "was to protect their health and welfare, to make sure that their daily needs were met and appropriate care was provided. I also did everything possible to nurture them emotionally as they aged and lost capabilities and became frailer. I didn't always succeed. My mother claimed I was being too protective, and she didn't like to admit she needed help."

"But," she added, "my objective was to help them — particularly my mother, who fought getting old until the day of her death — maintain their independence and control of their own lives as much as possible."