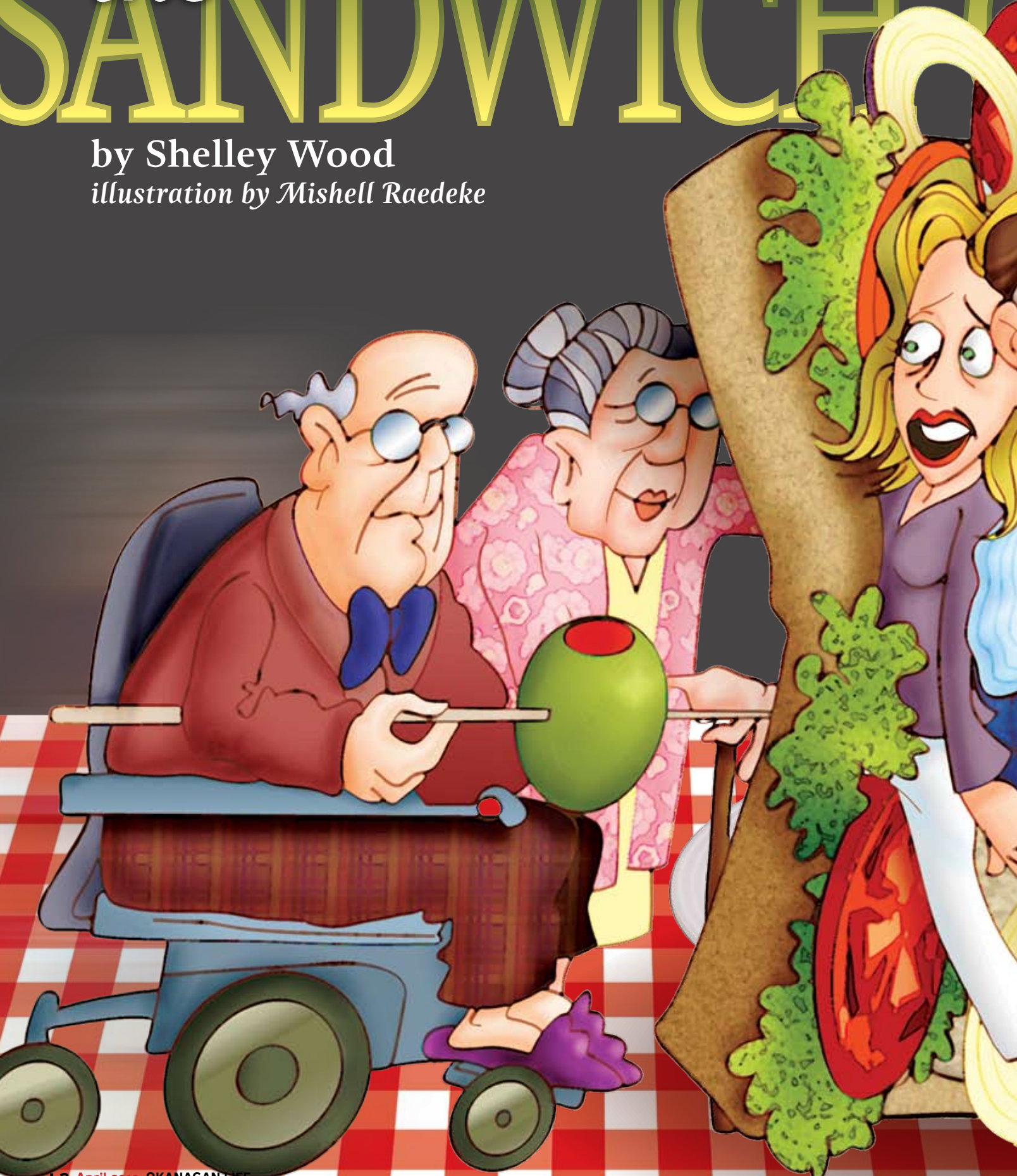


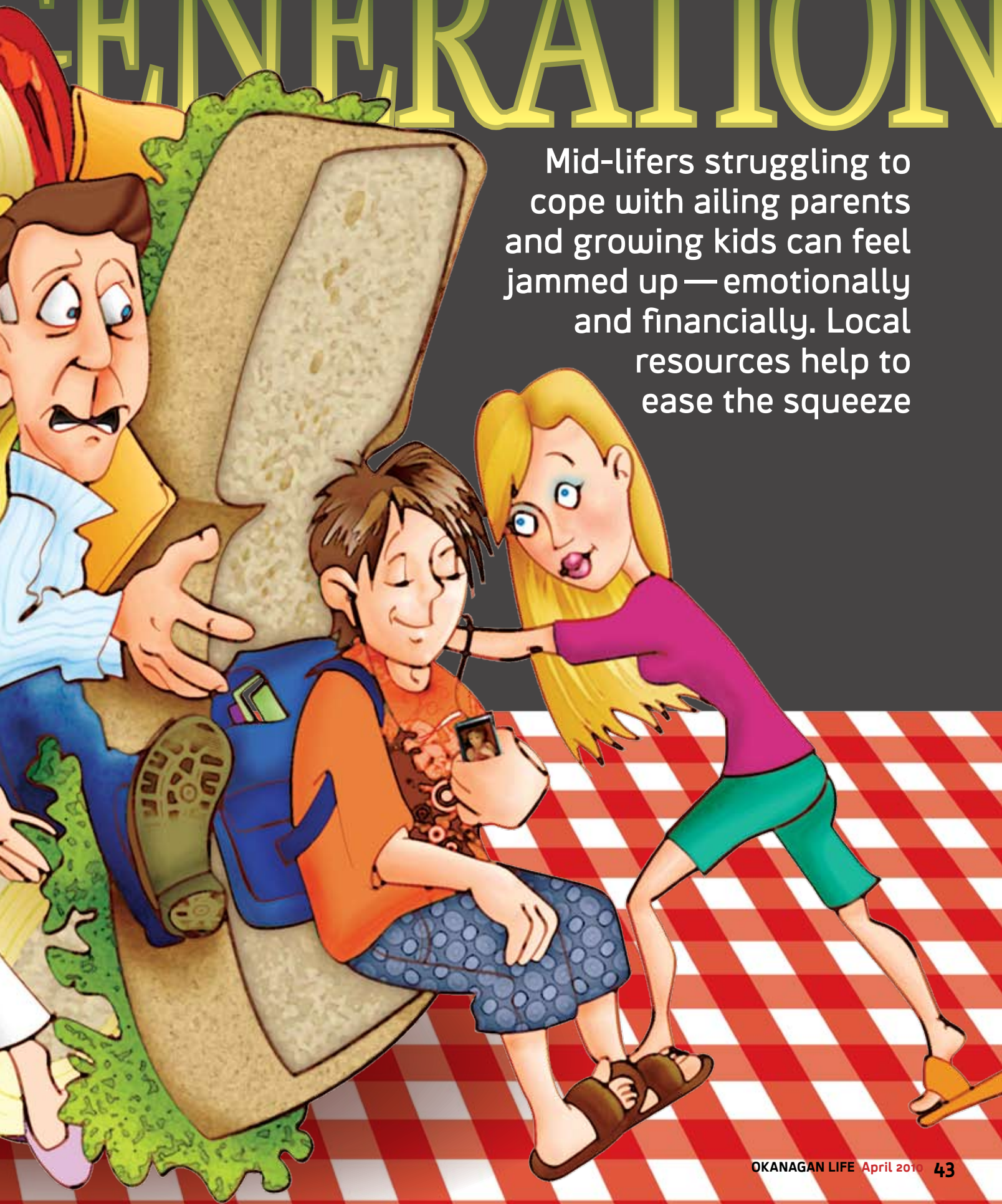
the SANDWICH

by Shelley Wood
illustration by Mishell Raedeke



GENERATION

Mid-lifers struggling to cope with ailing parents and growing kids can feel jammed up — emotionally and financially. Local resources help to ease the squeeze





“I would like to tell you a story...

...about what it's like to be a person in her early 40s who has a family, a job, a very busy and active life, and suddenly that person has parents who need way more help and assistance than they ever needed before. It is actually my story.”

LaRue Hayes, president of the Interior Alzheimer's Support Society is pacing nimbly back and forth in front of the podium, smartly dressed in heels, black slacks and an appliqué sweater with swatches of black and gold. No longer 40, her hair is coloured a funky combination of rosy-red, with a white twist.

Her story chronicles the time, decades ago, when she and her husband moved their family back to Alberta from Kelowna after her otherwise healthy father suffered a stroke. His subsequent mood changes, institutionalization, worsening dementia, and

the strain it put on his wife, children and grandchildren are an increasingly common scenario in households across Canada. Though she didn't know it at the time, her father's illness made LaRue a member of the Sandwich Generation.

The term embraces adults typically in their 30s to 50s who have dependent children at home, but are also caring for aging parents. These days, the sandwiches are increasingly more layered and pressed, with many adult children juggling kids at home with full-time jobs, and both their parents and even grandparents still alive.

DOUBLE-DECKER DILEMMA

“I like the concept of the double-decker sandwich,” says UBC Okanagan associate professor Mary Ann Murphy. Mary Ann holds a cross-appointment on aging in the schools of social work and sociology. More and more, she says, a range of shifting demographics is creating a perfect storm for families,

PHOTOS BY LYDIA ROSS

policy makers and nonprofit organizations trying to optimize care for the oldest members of society.

Topping the list of problems, says Mary Ann, is the increasing number of women (traditionally the primary caregivers for aging parents) entering the workforce. "This puts a double and triple strain on working women, who we know are already doing the lion's share of the work in the home. And it presents problems for the future, as more women are preoccupied with work and unable to provide family caregiving, turning to volunteers to provide that care."

People are also starting families later and kids tend to stay home well into their 20s, meaning that adult children often have kids still at home at the same time that their aging parents start to need more help. Family sizes are also shrinking "dramatically," Mary Ann points out.

In the past, large families meant adult children could share the financial and emotional duties of looking after their parents; today, many couples have just one child or none at all. Add to that higher rates of divorce, more non-married "cohabitation" and greater numbers of single parents, and you have an erosion of the fundamental family structures that once provided support for older family members.

Simultaneously, government funding for seniors programs and housing have been hobbled or cut while men and women are living much longer than ever before, often in different cities or countries from other family members.

JUGGLING ACT

Mary Ann herself lives with her parents, both of whom have recently become more frail. "I understand the aspirations of every family member who wants to keep their parents at home and to live life with the most dignity and with the support of their family around them. The

challenge is to balance all needs, including your own."

For Liz Nagy life was turned inside out a year ago when her mom, who lived independently in Kelowna, was hospitalized after becoming run down and malnourished. Liz had no idea that her mother had subsisted for weeks on pudding and bananas.

Discharged from hospital to an assisted living facility, Liz's mother, Chris, regained so much strength authorities deemed her "too healthy" for assisted living and she was permitted to return home. Within months, her health deteriorated, landing her in hospital a second time where further tests uncovered severe heart problems necessitating a series of invasive procedures in Vancouver. Once more discharged from care into her own home, Chris was clearly not looking after herself and Liz finally made the difficult decision to bring her mother to live with her family.

"I think it was hardest for my daughter," Liz says now. Her teenage daughter, Karen, had taken over her brother's room when he moved out, and had a bathroom to herself until her grandmother moved in. "It kind of cramps her style," she laughs.

In the course of trying to find the right solution for her mother, Liz switched jobs, taking a part-time position that enabled her enough spare time to get home and cook meals and run her mother to appointments. She had to give up soccer after dislocating her shoulder while catching her mom during a fall.

LARUE HAYES, PRESIDENT OF THE INTERIOR ALZHEIMER'S SUPPORT SOCIETY, LOOKS THROUGH FAMILY PHOTOS WITH HER SON AND GRANDDAUGHTER AND RECALLS HER EXPERIENCE AS A MEMBER OF THE SANDWICH GENERATION



Chris is healthy now and independent in spirit, if not in body. Liz says, "She looks really good... She knits up a storm and does her puzzle books; she can use the toilet and bath on her own," most of the time. "She's pretty on the ball."

But her mom is not self-sufficient. "Every morning I wake up and hand her tea and toast, I pack her lunch and I'm always home to make dinner. So I serve her and I give her her pills every day, because if you leave her on her own, she doesn't do it. She can't do laundry, she can't wash her own >>>

UBC OKANAGAN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MARY ANN MURPHY, AN EXPERT ON THE SUBJECT OF AGING, PROVIDES INSIGHT ON SANDWICH GENERATION STRESSORS

dishes properly, she can't clean her bath, she can't make her bed."

That means Liz has had to make the difficult decision to admit her mother to a respite home when she goes out of town, something Chris hates.

Government funding permits 30 days per year of respite care, "to go on vacation or to just have a break," says Liz. "But she gets annoyed with me, like I'm putting her in doggy kennel. But it is the only way I can go away and not have to worry about her."

The worst thing for Liz is knowing that it bothers her mom just as much as it bothers her. Probably more. "What's hard for me more than anything is that she was always so independent and didn't want help from anybody. And now she literally can't do anything for herself."

GUILT TRIP

The loss of independence and the sadness and frustration it brings to seniors and their caregivers is the taboo topic underpinning the complex relationships that define the sandwich generation. On the one hand are the seniors who are often too proud to admit they need help with basic tasks or who genuinely don't think they need any assistance. Few even want to discuss how they feel about

JO-ANN KEITH HAS MADE IT HER BUSINESS TO HELP SANDWICHERS CARE FOR AGING PARENTS

their changed circumstances or that they might be a source of stress for their offspring.

Then there are the adult children who, in some cases, are unwilling to come to terms with the idea that their parents are no longer independent.

That's part of what prompted Jo-Ann Keith to start her Caring4U senior's support business last year, after watching what happens to families when an aging loved one starts to require more assistance.

"It can be intensely difficult for adult children to care for their

aging family members," she says. "Guilt, frustration, resentment are common issues when the demands are prolonged and even more so when family members disagree on what care is required. And it's terribly sad to watch someone you love and care for, who used to be competent and strong, start to go downhill and become dependent."

Factor in all the unrealized plans for the future, loss of personal time, freedom or relationships you previously shared with others, she says: "Even the perfect caregiver will feel guilt and frustration



“even the perfect caregiver will feel guilt and frustration... then guilty for feeling those emotions!”

DON'T FORGET THE KIDS

- > Be honest with your children. Explain your caregiving role and why it sometimes seems like you don't have enough time for them.
- > Encourage them to be open about how this makes them feel and to ask questions.
- > If they want to help, give them small things to do, like read-

- ing or playing games with their grandparent(s). Teenagers can run errands or help out with chores.
- > Take time just for your children. Go fly a kite or have a doll tea party. Help them practice soccer or baseball. Take in a movie

- or two. And be sure to remind them how important they are to you.
- > Your children may not want to help and it's important to allow them to make this decision. You can still teach them to respect their grandparents and other adults. However, they may feel sad, scared or embarrassed by the changes in their grandparents.

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/aging/caregiving/sandwich-generation.cfm>

PHOTO BY LYDIA ROSS

for deeds done or not done, then guilty for feeling those emotions!”

In some cases, seniors themselves call companies like Jo-Ann’s for help, because they’re worried about being a burden on their adult children. More often, though, it’s their children, who may work full time and have kids themselves, who need help with tasks like house-cleaning, grocery shopping or running errands for their parents.

ABOUT THE KIDS

While sandwichers are scrambling to cope with parents, their kids are pushing from the opposite direction with needs of their own. For many of today’s youth, it’s tough to relate to the consequences of their grandparents’ loss of independence just as they are reaching for more freedoms themselves.

Mary Ann points to demographics that hint at possible reasons. These days many children grow up in different cities, sometimes even different countries from their grandparents, so they may not get to watch first hand as their grandparents grow more infirm. In addition, children are increasingly born to mothers in their 30s instead of their 20s, so some kids never even meet their grandparents or don’t know them as active and independent.

In LaRue’s case, all three of her sons were still in their teens when her father had his stroke. She says now that she was proud of how her boys adjusted to the move back to Alberta and to her father’s condition — never complaining when he changed the rules for shuffleboard and pool. Working full time and saddled unexpectedly with her father’s care, LaRue says she made a point of creating consistency and security in her sons’ lives. “They understood that they had something they could count on — and that meant they didn’t need every moment of my time.”

LaRue believes that seeing up close what happened to her father,

how it changed him and how the family rallied around, was important for her children. Later, when one of her sons had a serious accident, the whole family instinctively knew how to deal with it and how to talk about it openly. “They had already seen that sometimes things don’t quite work out the way you want them to and that we all need to pull together.”

LIFELINES

One of the biggest barriers for seniors seeking help on their own is simply finding out about available resources. One of the most important groups in the Okanagan is the local chapter of CARP — originally the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, which has reinvented itself as the Canadian Association for zoomers, boomers and seniors, and those who care for them. The group’s mission is to advocate on behalf of people aged 45-plus on local and national issues affecting seniors, including financial security, access to healthcare and freedom from discrimination.

Offering more day-to-day help are organizations like the Kelowna Senior’s Outreach Society, a charity that helps connect seniors to local resources ranging from referrals to community services, to visitor programs, income tax advice, housing outreach, computer skills and social opportunities. According to Vi Sorenson, the society serves as a “bridge” for seniors trying to make sense of free services or companies for seniors, in part replacing programs that have lost government funding. The society publishes a guide for seniors



listing different services. “There are a lot of options out there and just knowing about them can be helpful,” she says.

LaRue’s story of her experience with her father was part of a free seminar on the sandwich generation, held at the Kelowna public library on a cold, clear night in January. Jo-Ann was also a speaker, along with Laurie Bartley a financial advisor. Laurie’s talk focused on financial pre- >>>

FINANCIAL ADVISOR
LAURIE BARTLEY
URGES PEOPLE TO
PLAN AHEAD FOR THE
POTENTIALLY HIGH
COSTS OF CARING
FOR AGING PARENTS

paredness and some of the insurance options available, not only for retirement and estate planning, but also ways to set aside funds should you require long-term care.

PLAN AHEAD

"A lot of the older people I talk to say that they worry about being a burden on their families, financially or emotionally," Laurie says. "And they also want to spend time with their families." The younger generation also has concerns such as "where is the money going to come from for the escalating health costs of caring for their parents?"

Most people, she says, tend to think of the high costs of care only after they've had some kind of major health scare, by which time it may be too late to apply for certain types of coverage. "You should apply for the insurance when you're healthy, before anything happens, or there's an increased risk you'll be declined," she says.

The idea of planning ahead is a recurring theme among sandwich generation experts. LaRue reiterates that few people tend to think about what caring for a senior parent will entail until, often abruptly, they find themselves in the position of doing so.

"My mother was 62 and my dad was about 66 when he had his stroke," she says. "None of us is immune to having a stroke, heart attack or a serious accident that can put us in that exact position. But it's very difficult to convince people that they've really got to look at things in advance."

Mary Ann, at UBC Okanagan, believes society can be better prepared to look after an aging population both at a personal level and at the public policy level. She points to Japan, where everyone over the age of 19, if employed, is required to contribute not just to a retirement plan, but also to a long-term-care savings plan. A similar idea was proposed in last year's throne speech in Canada, she says, "but I haven't heard another word about it."

She has some creative ideas of her own, including what she calls a barter system, whereby people in middle age could volunteer to help seniors for a certain number of hours that they could then "cash in" on many years later.

"We are very rich in community here in the Okanagan, so we need to think of more innovative ways to draw on that and keep people inspired to help in their own community and potentially pay it back in advance."

The library talks by LaRue, JoAnn and Laurie are poignant and informative, but tellingly, almost no one turned up at the seminar, perhaps in part due to the lack of preparedness they all referred to when they spoke.

"We're not a planning society," says Mary Ann. "We don't want to think of older age, we equate it with death, and we value youth above all else. And certainly in this recession people are just thinking month to month."

The empty chairs might also speak to another reality. That "sandwichers"—working, parenting and caring for parents in the Okanagan today—simply don't have the time and energy on a cold winter's night to go and hear about just how they can get some help. **OL**

STATS CANADA STUDY— SANDWICH GENERATION

- > Almost 3 in 10 of those aged 45 to 64 with unmarried children under 25 in the home were also caring for a senior.
- > More than 8 in 10 of these sandwiched individuals worked, causing some to reduce or shift their hours or to lose income.
- > Some 15% of sandwiched workers had to reduce their hours, 20% had to change their schedules and 10% lost income.
- > 4 in 10 sandwiched workers incurred extra expenses such as renting medical equipment or purchasing cell phones.
- > Women were more likely than men to be sandwiched. On average, women spent 29 hours a month providing care to seniors, more than twice as many as the 13 hours spent by their male counterparts.
- > The effects of providing care increased with time spent. For example, one-half of those spending more than eight hours per month, or the so-called "high-intensity caregivers," had to change their social activities. Over one-third had to change their work schedule.
- > Sandwiched workers were more likely to feel generally stressed. About 70% of them reported stress, compared with about 61% of workers with no child care or elder care responsibilities.
- > However, the overwhelming majority (95%) felt satisfied with life in general, about the same percentage as those with fewer caregiving responsibilities.

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/040928/tdq040928-eng.htm>