

Living with an Elderly Parent Series:
Life with Mom

By B.D. Tharp

Sidebar:

Over the past few decades, Americans life expectancy has continued to grow, increasing the number of people living into their 80s and 90s. These changes have affected our economy, our culture, and expectations for elder care and the roles of women.

Americans between the ages of 45-55 are feeling the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents and many still have children living at home. They are known as the “sandwich generation.”

Article:

It was winter in the small town of Erie, Illinois when Gladys had a severe diabetic episode that left her comatose and in the hospital. She was 78 years old. Once she had recovered and was discharged, her daughter Brenda, then 54, brought her home to Kansas. “But Mom wasn’t ready to stay in 2005, so she went back to live in the home she was born in,” Brenda said.

In January 2007 Gladys was back in the hospital with pneumonia. Her health had degraded dramatically, so Brenda told her, “When you come this time you’re staying.” In March Gladys moved into Brenda and Marty’s rural Sedgwick County home. “I thought I was prepared, because she’d been here before,” Brenda says. In fact, a lot more preparation was needed.

“You have to make sure your home is suitable and that your space can accommodate a walker or wheelchair,” Brenda says. Do they need a hospital bed or bed rails?
“Bathroom safety is also important. Do they need grab bars or a shower seat?”

She advises that as a care giver you should thoroughly understand your parent’s finances and be able access them should it be needed for their care. “Developing a good relationship with health care providers is crucial and always keep medical supplies on hand,” she adds.

“It’s wonderful for my daughter to do this. I never wanted to go to a nursing home,” Gladys said. “It’s so comfortable here, but I hope it’s not too much for her. I wish I could help her more.” Gladys misses her friends from the tiny berg she lived in. “I lived right on Main Street and there were always people walking by, and they’d stop to visit. Out here it’s too quiet.”

While Gladys finds the country too sedate, Brenda finds solace from the stress of daily direct care giving by walking the land with her husband. “I long for more carefree time with him, but right now it just isn’t feasible. I’m blessed to have his full support,” Brenda said.

Marty's philosophy is to be patient, understanding and supportive of Brenda. "Things are different, but manageable," he says. "We're willing to do what needs to be done. It's better to keep everyone together."

Like Brenda and Marty, many boomers are adjusting their own lives around the needs of an aging parent. In a recent AARP Survey 30 percent of the participants stated that accommodating parents' needs has led to changes in the timing of vacations, and 20 percent have altered their place of residence or retirement savings plans. And nearly one-fifth has reduced their work hours to make time for a family member's care.

"I'm lucky that my employer allows me flexible work hours, and the option of working from home," Brenda says. "Respite opportunities are hard to come by. Most are 9-5, Monday through Friday. So there's no help with dinner or a movie out unless you private pay and that's very expensive."

"Durable power of attorney, medical power of attorney, and a living will are important tools," she says. Make sure you evaluate and collect insurance policies and are aware of any retirement resources like IRA's, stocks, or annuities that could help cover your parents' expenses. "It's more of a drain financially than I expected. Despite having Medicare Part D coverage, 80% of Mom's Social Security goes to pay for medications."

According to the AARP approximately 15 percent of the sandwich generation reports that providing elder care places stress on their relationships with spouses, siblings, work associations and their own children. The survey also shows that the majority of caregivers look first to faith then family to help them cope. It also reports that the majority feels an obligation to care for their parents.

In Brenda's own words "...they [my parents] made sacrifices for me all through my life; it is my turn to pay them back as best I can."

For those of you who are providing care to an elderly parent or who may be preparing to do so, here are some resources that may be helpful:

Independent Living Resource Center, www.ilrcks.org
Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, www.cpaaa.org
Senior Services, Inc., www.seniorservicesofwichita.org
Kansas Assistive Technology Cooperative, www.katco.net
MERN (Medical Equipment Recycling Network), www.ilrcks.org/services.php
Kansas Dept. of Social & Rehabilitation Services, www.srskansas.org
Medicare, www.medicare.gov
Social Security Administration, www.ssa.gov
Food & Drug Administration, www.fda.gov
Kansas Health Foundation, www.kansashealth.org
Information Network of Kansas, www.accesskansas.org