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Caregivers are a generation in the middle

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Most Americans recognize July as the month when the nation shoots off fireworks and gathers at parades and patriotic ceremonies to celebrate Independence Day.

Far fewer probably know that July is also the month designated to honor those whose lives have more to do with dependency.

It's National Sandwich Generation Month, a time to celebrate the growing numbers of men and women – and most are women – handling the dual responsibilities of caring for aging parents while still having children at home. Many also have full-time or part-time jobs.

"I knew that," Maria Zakich of Anaheim says with a smile, "because I'm the turkey in between."

Zakich, 49, is fairly typical of the sandwich generation.

She is helping to care for her parents, Roger and Grace Rousset, 90 and 86, while welcoming home one daughter from college and seeing another off to a four-year university this fall. She also helps out at her husband's company and does some occasional work as a hairstylist.

According to a recent survey by Pew Research Center, the adults with children and a living parent age 65 or older who define the sandwich generation are more likely to be:

- Middle-aged, between 40 and 59
- Married
- Hispanic, rather than white or black

- Affluent, with an annual household income of \$100,000 or more

And almost half of the middle-aged adults – 4 in 10 – say both their parents and their adult children rely on them for emotional support.

Zakich's parents are able to still live in their own home in Newport Beach, partly because one of Zakich's six siblings, brother Paul Rousset, moved from his home in the desert to stay with them. And her other brothers and sisters help out when and where they can.

Zakich spends a lot of hands-on time with her parents. She takes them to doctor appointments, where she often is needed to translate complicated medical issues into Spanish, the language her parents grew up speaking in Argentina. She handles their finances. She does her mother's hair.

Her in-laws recently moved to a senior center, and she visits her mother-in-law there to do her hair, too.

Grace Rousset has difficulty walking, so three afternoons a week Zakich goes with her mother to the Rehabilitation Institute of Southern California in Orange, where they exercise together in the pool. Mostly her mother walks in the water and socializes with other adults in the pool, prompting her husband to joke that she does more talking than walking.

Zakich has been providing some level of care to her parents for 10 years, while raising daughters Lauren, 22, and Emily, 18. But she says the past three years have been busier.

Being part of the "sandwich generation" is a juggling act that comes with challenges and rewards. Not just for the caregiver, but for the aging parent and for the children at home.

Zakich, her mother and her oldest daughter each offered their perspectives on a day last week when they visited the pool at the rehabilitation center.

Q. What was unexpected?

Grace Rousset: I didn't expect to be doing this and bothering her so much.

Maria Zakich: You're not bothering me. I probably didn't think this far in advance where I would be and my mom would be. We just do what we do.

Like being here with her now, actually doing water therapy, exercising with her as often, you just don't think that that's ever going to be something that you're going to need to do.

Lauren Zakich: When I was younger, I needed more help than my grandma did and now it's the other way around.

I guess what I least expected was how much care and attention she (her mother) would need for my grandma as opposed to me becoming older and her having more time for herself.

Q. What do people of your own generation need to know?

Grace: All my life I thought that what we're supposed to take care of first is the spirit. If you take care of your spirit first, God will give you the natural things to be fine, to be loved.

Maria: Our parents are living longer, we're living longer. Be there for them. Do what you can. Just be aware of all the associations out there that are helping the elderly, that are helping us help them. It's so important to be available for the elderly, whether they're your parents or not.

Lauren: We should be aware that maybe our parents will need help. They're going to be fully supportive of our generation. I know that as soon as I have children, I'll be helping my kids out and then as soon as my kids are able to go to college or might be in high school with their own car, that I might be using my resources for my mom or my dad.

Q. How do you see your role?

Grace (smiling): I obey. It's the only thing that I can do at this age.

Maria: (smiling back): If we allowed her to, she would stay in bed most of the day. But she doesn't fight us. She knows that we're all trying to help her. We've joked about I'm now her parent and she's my child.

I need to stay strong myself. I try to take advantage of being here (in the pool), as well. Keeping myself fit and keeping myself healthy in every way. That gives me the strength – because it's hard to watch them get older.

I get emotional thinking of how difficult it is for them, too, to lose some control. So I need to be patient that she's frustrated. They have their moments, but she doesn't act out.

Lauren: I find myself being less reliant on my parents' time and attention and finding myself more understanding of my mom's commitment to her mom. She apparently did a pretty good job of balancing the work effort because I never felt that I didn't get enough attention or enough help.

Q. What's most challenging?

Grace: I can do almost nothing at home, and I want to do for my husband. He is a wonderful person. We have 65 years (of marriage) and he always, always has been the same – a very good man.

I wish I can get better. I want to come back to my normal life.

Maria: My mom has high hopes of getting better. She wants to be able to do the stairs herself, the laundry, the cooking. She's been doing less and less. She doesn't like that because that was always her main purpose and job. She took care of all of us.

For me, it's just to see them decline in any way, to see that she walks less. It's more challenging emotionally than it is anything else ... just knowing that she's in so much pain oftentimes and doesn't feel well and doesn't want to keep going.

Sometimes she'll say, "I am done." That's challenging for me to hear, though I can only imagine.

Lauren: Probably seeing how much work it is for my mom to have to devote that much time to them.

Now that I'm home and currently seeking a job, I notice Mom's not around as much in the house because she's often driving them to their doctor appointments or taking them to exercise centers.

But at least I know that my grandparents are alive and well.

Q. What's most rewarding?

Grace: I get to see her. We get to talk. My husband says, you don't exercise your legs (at the pool), you exercise your tongue.

Sometimes I tell her, go and swim. So she'll stay around. She makes some friends here, too.

Maria: They (her parents) thank me constantly, but I enjoy it. Yes, it can get tiring. And yes, it interferes with work and it can interfere with my home life. But at the same time, I can't imagine it any other way.

They feel that they're asking a lot of us, and maybe it is. I don't even know if it is. This is just what we do.

Lauren: Some people don't have their grandparents alive anymore. Me getting older and having my grandparents still alive is really great. It's rewarding being able to still have them to talk to.

And realizing that I'm not needing as much help, so Mom can devote most of her time to helping them. I'm becoming more independent myself.

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Caregiver resources

There are a variety of resources in the community available to those caring for older adults, including adult day care centers, support groups, and health and education services.

Here are some places in Orange County to turn to:

- Council on Aging, 714-479-0107 or coaoc.org
- Community SeniorServ (north and central Orange County), 714-220-0224 or communityseniorserv.com
- Age Well Senior Services (south Orange County), 949-855-8033 or agewellseniorservices.org
- Rehabilitation Institute of Southern California, 714-633-7400 or rio-rehab.com
- Caregiver Resource Center, 800-543-8312 or caregiveroc.org
- Office on Aging (county government agency), 800-510-2020 or officeonaging.ocgov.com