

Forget the Career. My Parents Need Me at Home.

By JANE GROSS

WASHINGTON, Mich. - Until last February, Mary Ellen Geist was the archetypal career woman, a radio news anchor with a six-figure salary and a suitcase always packed for the next adventure, whether a third-world coup, a weekend of wine tasting or a job in a bigger market.

But now, Ms. Geist, 49, has a life that would be unrecognizable to colleagues and friends in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York City. She has returned to her family home near Detroit to care for her parents, one lost to dementia and the other to sorrow.

Ms. Geist sleeps in the dormered bedroom of her childhood and survives without urban amenities like white balsamic vinegar. She starts her days reminding her father, Woody, a sweet-tempered 78-year-old who once owned an auto parts company, how to spoon cereal from his bowl.

Then, in a Mercedes C230 that she calls the "last remnant of my other life," she takes him to adult day care, begging her mother to use her time alone to get a massage or take a painting class.

"Nobody asked me to do this, and it wasn't about guilt," Ms. Geist said. "I lived a very selfish life. I'd gotten plenty of recognition. But all I did was work, and it was getting old. I knew I could make a difference here. And it's expanded my heart and given me a chance to reclaim something I'd lost."

In another era, the task of caring for elderly parents often fell to the unmarried daughter who never left home and never worked for a living. But now, in a 21st-century twist on the 19th-century spinster, career women like Ms. Geist who have made their mark in the world are returning home to care for parents in old age.

They are embracing a filial role that few could have imagined in their futures and are doing so by choice. In fact, sociologists are beginning to give the phenomenon a name: the Daughter Track, a late-in-life version of the Mommy Track, a career downsizing popular with younger women.

Women, now as always, bear a disproportionate burden for elder care and often leave jobs, either temporarily or permanently, when the double duty becomes overwhelming, according to recent studies of family care-giving, women in the workplace and retirement patterns. Although there is no precise count of how many women have walked away from careers to care for their parents, more of them than ever are financially independent, unmarried or childless, which makes it more feasible than it might be for women with families at home. And never have more parents needed adult children to care for them,

what with long life expectancy and disabling conditions like Alzheimer's disease.

Increasingly, employers are recognizing this burden.

"Smart corporations are paying attention" to the challenges that caring for elderly parents presents, said Meryle Mahrer-Kaplan, vice president of advisory services at Catalyst, which has more than 300 corporate members interested in the issues of women in the workplace. "It's so pressing because you can't plan for it, you can't put it off, and it's not a good-news activity. It weighs people down."

Despite a growing number of men helping aging relatives, women account for 71 percent of those devoting 40 or more hours a week to the task, according to the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP in a 2004 study. Among those with the greatest burden of care, regardless of sex, 88 percent either take leaves of absence, quit or retire.

"It is a safe assumption," based on an array of research, "that women are more likely to put their careers on hold or end them because of care-giving responsibilities," said Carol Levine, director of the Families and Health Care Project at the United Hospital Fund and an adviser to the National Alliance for Caregiving.

One study she cites, by Phyllis Moen, now a sociologist at the University of Minnesota, tracked 5,113 respondents as they made retirement decisions. Among those who retired sooner than planned, the most common reason among women was care giving and among men the offer of a buyout.

Middle-aged women may see leaving a high-powered career as an opportunity, not a sacrifice, many experts say, which distinguishes the Daughter Track from the Mommy Track. Arlie Hochschild, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who has written extensively about the postfeminist conflict between work and family, said women in their 50's who had "proved what they set out to prove" were often drawn to "new sources of satisfaction" but were reluctant to admit an ebbing of ambition. The needs of ailing parents, Ms. Hochschild said, can offer "cultural shelter" - an excuse "to pull away and look inward."

That was the case for Rikki Grubb, a 58-year-old Harvard-educated lawyer, who walked away from a partnership at Morrison & Foerster in San Francisco in 1993 because of her father's dementia, her mother's inability to manage the situation and her own struggle to juggle her parents' needs, her career and her own family.

Ms. Grubb said many colleagues "expressed a sort of envy" when she quit. They too were tired of the "gut-it-out culture" of their profession.

Ms. Grubb's father died in 1997. Her mother, 85, now has Alzheimer's disease. But she is in a nursing home, so Ms. Grubb recently resumed work part time, "off the fast track" as a consultant for nonprofits. She acknowledged the luxury of having money saved during her 20-year legal career and

benefits because her husband is a university professor.

Cathy Maupin, 49, did some serious numbers crunching before quitting her job a few months back as executive director of a California nonprofit, anticipating a move home to the rural Midwest to care for her widowed father, who is in the early stages of dementia. After 25 years of earning a decent salary with no children to support, Ms. Maupin knew she "could take at least a year off and not worry about it," pay for her own health insurance and avoid the cost and strain of traveling back and forth between San Francisco and Rolla, Mo., as she did every few weeks while her mother was dying of lung cancer.

Her father has not asked her to come home but she can see he needs her. Recently he phoned upset about a "for sale" sign on the front lawn. Ms. Maupin discovered he had unwittingly put the house on the market, and she unscrambled the mess. As he does each time she solves a problem, her father said, "You've saved my life, because I don't know what I'm doing most of the time."

Ms. Maupin said: "That's pretty heavy stuff. I'm in the middle of figuring out what to do. But I know everything else feels incredibly inconsequential."

Ms. Maupin, who has a married sister in Atlanta, is a lesbian and a recovering alcoholic and jokes that it is a good thing her father can no longer remember any of that. The family plan is to move Mr. Maupin to a nursing home in Atlanta when he no longer knows where he is so the care-taking will be shared.

Ms. Geist is sandwiched between two more traditional sisters, both with spouses, children and less demanding careers. Her mother, Rosemary, 77, brags that "Mary Ellen has more awards or trophies than anyone I know." But Mrs. Geist also noted that her middle daughter had spent the least time over the years with the family, busy climbing the ladder of success from a tiny station in rural Michigan to increasingly prestigious positions, on the West Coast and then in New York, at WCBS.

It was there, after four months of crying her way through the workweek and coming home every weekend to help her parents, that Ms. Geist felt the pull of family overpower the push of success. She declined a leave of absence. But Ms. Geist has burned no bridges. Since quitting last year, she has contributed 10 short essays on her father's medical condition, for \$20 each, to a section of the station's Web site about health and aging.

Ms. Geist's future plans are vague. Maybe she will apply for a part-time job at a Detroit radio station, she said. A brief marriage fell victim to her 24/7 work schedule. Seeing her parents' devotion to each other, and hers to them, has led her to wonder "who would take care of me."

When her father is in adult day care, she passes the time at a local Starbucks, a touchstone of big-city life, or at the gym, then picks him up for an afternoon outing. One recent day it was the barbershop. Mr. Geist had no idea why they were there. She explained a half dozen times that he needed a haircut.

"No kidding," he said, as if learning an interesting fact about someone else. Ms. Geist got him settled in the chair, complained that the last cut had accentuated his "weird big head" and then softened criticism of the barber by saying, "I'm new to this dad care."

In the car, she always plays the music her father loves and remembers, even as everything else fades. She and her sisters, Alison and Libby, warbling "Where Is Love?" on a 35-year-old family tape. "Now the Day Is Over," a favorite hymn. Mr. Geist's baritone solo of "Shooby Dooin'," recorded with an a cappella jazz group, the Grunyans, that he continues to sing with after 40 years.

Later, at home in the fading light, Ms. Geist gathers her parents around the piano to rehearse the carols her father will perform at the group's Christmas recital. He wonders what ever happened to the Grunyans. Ms. Geist reminds him she took him to a rehearsal the night before. He calls her "daughter," apparently because he no longer knows her name.

After the singalong, Ms. Geist settles down with her parents for the nightly ritual of wine and the 6 o'clock news. She and her mother explain the day's developments. "Why?" Mr. Geist asks. "Why?"

Her patience answering his incessant questions calms her father and spares her mother. "I'm here to make my dad feel loved and keep my mom from losing her mind," Ms. Geist said.

The monotony of the days is hard for Ms. Geist, as is the loss of independence and privacy. Her mother is paying her a \$22,000-a-year "salary" so she has money in her pocket. She has the second floor of the house to herself, two tiny bedrooms and a bath once shared with her sisters. Mrs. Geist stays downstairs to avoid seeing the unmade bed, just as she did back then.

Ms. Geist says that she tries to remember to pick up after herself but that her mother "gets to it too fast." For her part, Mrs. Geist cannot contain her backseat driving and sometimes asks her daughter when she will be home.

But in the universe of mothers and daughters, they have an easy time of it. Mrs. Geist said that Mary Ellen's career skills made her a more forceful problem solver than either of her sisters.

"She has made our life doable," Mrs. Geist said. "Sometimes I can't believe she's here. It just blows me away."

They comfort each other with white lies. Ms. Geist tells her mother that "I didn't give up anything to be here," but they both know better. Mrs. Geist reminds her daughter that "when you have to go, you'll go," but their eyes tell another story.

Across the dinner table, Mr. Geist seems lost in his soft whistling, the soundtrack of family life. But something in the conversation catches his attention.

"Daughter?" he asked. "Where are you going?"

"No place," she told him and took his hand. "Just home with you."

