

## Testimony of Judy Mills

Hello everyone. My name is Judy Mills. I am the wife of 33 years to Deacon Thom Mills, and the mother of Nick and Tim Mills, ages 29 and 27 respectively. I am the full-time director and teacher at St. Valentine Preschool, in Bethel Park, PA. My husband and I have been residents of Bethel Park for 28 years.

Thom and I officially became “Empty Nesters” 2 months ago. This was postponed by 8 years after our youngest son left home, when we moved my father into an assisted living facility 15 minutes from our home. Let me share with you a little history of our family dynamics over the past 29 years.

When my sons were young teenagers, my mother passed away, leaving my father in an apartment in Bethel Park not 5 minutes from our home. They had moved there 8 years before her passing, so that they could be closer to our family. So we have technically been members of “The Sandwich Generation” for 22 years, since my mother’s health went downhill quickly after the move to Bethel Park. Dad lost his life-line, my mom, in 2001, and I knew that I would be running 2 households for quite some time. When he was age 70, we moved my father in with our family. He had his own bedroom and full bathroom on the first floor of our home, complete with TV and a recliner. Quite comfortable arrangements!

Dad’s first years with our family blessed us by his helpfulness in household responsibilities. (For ex. – picking up some items at the store for dinner, cleaning his own bathroom and bedroom, dropping our sons off at sports practices or jobs.) Unfortunately, he also tended to add to the drama of raising 2 teenage boys! We began to see, as time went on, that our social life was starting to suffer – no time, no money, no space to invite friends over to our home, without feeling that Dad was the authoritative figure and we had become the teenagers with a curfew!

As the years went by, family members’ roles began to change quite dramatically, and the parent who helped us now became the one who needed our help. Many days we felt as if there were not enough hours in the day to juggle our responsibilities of caring for 3 generations of family. (For ex. – homework and school projects, family events, meal preparations, laundry, chores, etc.)

As my father’s health and mind began to fail, more of our parenting was directed towards Dad than our sons. Again we saw major role reversals in our family. Now our sons began to help care for Dad, including driving him places after we had to take his car keys away for safety reasons.

Living as an extended family has presented unique blessings and challenges for all of us. During the difficult times, we have prayed together, laughed together, and cried together. This experience has drawn our family closer together, and made our sons realize how much we have sacrificed for them and for Dad.

We were met with financial challenges, even after our sons moved out. We faced higher food bills (Dad's appetite never declined!) , higher cable bills (too many sports channels!), and even higher utility bills since Dad was home most of the day. Needless to say, these are the things that we have seen decrease over the past 2 months since we have moved dad to assisted living. But we are not responsibility-free yet! We still visit Dad at his assisted-living home, clean all of his laundry, pay all of his bills, manage his affairs with his new dwelling, and take him to all doctor appointments, at least 4 a month. And the biggest blessing for Thom and I is that we realize that moving Dad out of our home was the best arrangement for him, as his health and mind continue to deteriorate, and really don't feel guilty or selfish, and haven't lost our sense of humor! We realize that assisted living can provide more than we could give him at this point in our lives. (For ex. - social interaction with peers, meals on time, supervised care 24/7 for safety reasons.)

Over these "Sandwich Generation" years, Thom was often one step ahead of the latest corporate takeover, employer bankruptcy, or merger, none of which helped us prepare for retirement, and Dad's ongoing medical and housing requirements pretty much guarantee that we won't be seeing any inheritance. The dream of carefree retirement, for us, seems very distant.

We have learned a few ways to help other caregivers like ourselves to balance more than one generation of family at a time. Some of these ways include pulling together as extended family to help with care and morale, attending caregiver support groups, sharing with and asking for help from our Church family, and picking up the slack for each other when we have reached our breaking point. We have been on the learning and teaching ends of the importance of family unity and love. We would not change anything that we have done, nor do we regret the decisions that we have made. We hope that we have shown to our sons through role-modeling that "charity begins at home." In today's individualistic culture we cannot think of a more importance lesson to leave to our sons and their future families.

In closing, I thank you for this opportunity to share my story. It is my hope to be of some help to others about to embark on this journey.

Mrs. Judy Mills

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