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BRIDGING THE GAP



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Haitian caregiving traditions for elders adapt to America's realities

BY J.O. HASELHOEF

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In Dr. Tessa Haspil-Corgan's view, the last years of her mother and grandmother's lives were far different than she expected. Having grown up with Haitian traditions of keeping elders close and caring for them at home, the emergency medicine physician first watched her grandmother care for her own mother, who was diagnosed with cancer at 55. But then, after her mother's death, Haspil-Corgan stepped in to care for her grandmother, who showed signs of Alzheimer's disease.

The doctor and her family decided a nursing home was the safest place for her grandmother. Such are the realities of the aging process and caregiving methods that families in the U.S. have available.

"It wasn't such an issue when we all lived in Haiti, in a neighborhood. The village was raising your kids. We also took care of our elderly as a village," said Haspil-Corgan, an assistant professor at Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine in Miami.

"If your grandmother has Alzheimer's and doesn't know what's going on — there was no electricity for her to leave things on," she added. "There was no cooktop. And if she decides to walk out naked, there's always somebody in the yard who gets a blanket or something to cover her up. So, it's not the same living in the States."

Haitian youngsters learned how to respect their elders and show that respect, which included taking care of them at home when they aged. Now, as adults, the children search for ways to manage families and jobs while caring for their elders. Haitian traditions may no longer apply in the same way. Adult children must rely on paid caregivers, institutions and creative community solutions for managing the health and welfare of their parents.

Even in Haiti, caregiving traditions are changing

Jean Pergaud Ossé, 26, is an out-of-work English teacher and a salesman for Amway in Port-au-Prince. His father, 60, is a pastor and an out-of-work mathematics teacher who lives four hours away on the southern peninsula.

Ossé, the eldest son of his five siblings, is mindful of the responsibility he knows will grow as his father ages. As a result, he is constantly on the lookout for new opportunities. He asked for help getting both his father and himself to the U.S. on the humanitarian parole program.

Though life in Haiti may not have changed in some ways, opportunities to get ahead present themselves differently. And with those opportunities, traditions alter.

"I only have my father. I lost my mother," Ossé said. "I must do everything for him to live a fantastic life. I love him, and I want him to have that."

Outside of Les Cayes, Pierre Oreus, 41, works for an American nonprofit. Oreus is tied to his work, but also to his mother, who has Alzheimer's. As her only child, she's the main reason he stays in Haiti and refuses to move to the U.S.

“I’m staying as long as she’s alive or whatever is necessary to support and take care of her,” he said.

Oreus has tried to accommodate her illness in ways that are true to her desires. She lives in the family compound in a mountain village where she grew up. He pays for a full-time caregiver for her and travels to see her twice a month — a round-trip of almost 12 hours.

Others’ circumstances are not exact to those of Ossé or Oreus, however, every family has a unique and dynamic caregiving situation impacted by specific health, safety, money and time.

“The biggest gift I can give back to those in their 40s and 50s is to teach [adult children] to allow their mothers and their fathers and their grandparents to continue on providing because their lives have been to provide,” Haspil-Corgan said. “Take that away from them — we think we’re helping them — but we’re actually making them depressed.”

The physician, whose patients include mostly those of Haitian background, acknowledges there are times when things must be removed because of medical or mental conditions. But for the most part, we should allow parents to do what they’re used to doing and from which they derive enjoyment.

“Let them cook. Let them do the wash. If they want to hand wash people’s underwear, let them do it,” she said. “It’s what they’re used to.”

Ways of re-creating the Haitian village

Some Haitian families have sought community resources to help in their American surroundings. St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Apopka, Fla., 30 minutes northwest of Orlando, turned to an [online resource](#) based on the book “[Share The Care](#): How to Organize a Group to Care for Someone Who Is Seriously Ill.”

Author and organization founder Sheila Warnock ran into a dilemma finding a caregiver for her mother five hours from where she lived in New York and helping her best friend who was diagnosed with cancer. Warnock placed her mother, who needed 24/7 care, into a nursing home. She gathered her best friend’s friends together, and they divided up the care duties: preparing meals, calling to check in and taking her to doctor appointments. The participants distributed the work and enlisted backups, so there was always someone to keep her life moving forward.

Warnock has adapted the basic “Share The Care” concept to all sorts of caregiving situations: ensuring there’s a continuity for persons who are diagnosed with Alzheimer’s; adjusting for Latino populations that are very family oriented; and even adapting the group to transition the person to a nursing home or hospice.

“Caregivers continue their visits, keeping them engaged,” Warnock said. “That’s critical because emotional well-being and spiritual well-being are needed.”

Programs that emulate attention provided to elders in the Haitian village occasionally appear on the

caregiving horizon through institutions.

For example, [NeighborhoodHELP](#), short for Neighborhood Health Education Learning Program in Miami, is a community-engaged mission in which medical students from Florida International University's Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine visit households in underserved neighborhoods for more than three years. They are part of supervised teams from nursing, physician assistants, social work, education and law. Together, they are tasked with taking comprehensive patient and household histories and developing care plans to improve the health and quality of life of household members.

"It's a real holistic approach that students see every member of the household — from children all the way up to grandparents," said Haspil-Corgan, who has been involved in the medical aspects of the program that began in 2010. "If they're from a Haitian household or a Spanish-speaking household, they make sure that their kids have tutoring services to be able to complete school, especially since parents aren't always able to read."

Key to the delivery of medical services is access to four mobile clinic vans. They go into underserved areas, parking at libraries or other community centers, to address both primary and preventive care, Haspil-Corgan said. The program's objective is to overcome access barriers and connect people to the health system.

Caregiving does not follow a template

After Haspil-Corgan's grandmother gave care to the doctor's mother, Haspil-Corgan thought she should then care for her grandmother and "cocoon" her elder, taking her to New York where she was doing her residency. Her grandmother refused and returned to Haiti.

"You need to be the best doctor that you can be, and I'm in the way," Dr. Haspil-Corgan recalls her grandmother saying to her.

Eventually, the doctor's grandmother, diagnosed with Alzheimer's, started a fire on the cooktop. The family decided it was necessary to bring her to the U.S. and find a nursing home for her.

Like the "Share The Care" model, family members made a calendar to ensure one of them saw the grandmother every day until she died. They wanted to keep up the Haitian traditions as best they could in today's hustle-bustle society, full of a variety of pressures.

"I think there is complete room for us to remain with our ideals and the way we were brought up and keep our elderly safe," Haspil-Corgan said.

"We still care for our elderly," she said. "We still care for our people with reverence."

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J.O. Haselhoeft

midwest@haitiantimes.com

J.O. Haselhoeft is the author of “Give & Take: Doing Our Damnedest NOT to be Another Charity in Haiti.” She co-founded "Yonn Ede Lot" (One Helping Another), a nonprofit that partnered with volunteer groups in La Montagne ("Lamontay"), Haiti from 2007-2013. She writes and lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

[More by J.O. Haselhoeft](#)