



## North Shore News Column.

### Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

#### Modern family open to change

New census stats suggest units anything but traditional

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News October 7, 2012

ACROSS the country, millions of Canadians will enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving dinner this weekend.

North Americans have been enjoying the same Thanksgiving feast for hundreds of years. The menu for Thanksgiving dinner may be resistant to change but the composition of many of the families that will gather to celebrate Thanksgiving, clearly, is not.

That's my takeaway from the latest release of data on families and living arrangements from the 2011 Canadian census. Unconventional is the word that best describes the family unit in Canada these days.

The traditional family - a married couple with children - now make up less than one-third of families and in 2011 there were more than 1.5 million lone parent families in Canada.

We haven't seen numbers like that since the early part of the 20th century - 1921 to be exact - when high mortality rates left one-tenth of the population without one of their parents.

Today, lone parent families are created by divorce and separation rather than through widowhood.

Other trends include a spike in the number of same sex and common law unions, homes without children and step families right across the country.

The growth in the total number of seniors in Canada is up, from approximately 3.9 million in 2001 to about 4.9 million in 2012. Most seniors continue to live alone or with their partner but there has been a 38 per cent increase in the number of seniors living in collective dwellings over the last decade.

Back in the early 1980s, we coined the phrase "sandwich generation" for those people who have to care for both children and their parents. Today, more than one-quarter of Canadians aged 45-64 have children living with them and also perform some sort of elder care. Twenty five per cent of the sandwich generation are caring for two or more seniors. Grey divorce is adding to the stress levels of people caring for their parents while raising children. If your parents' divorce and one or both of them remarries, as a caregiver, you could find yourself responsible for not just two seniors but three or four.

I'm seeing another variation of the sandwich generation in my own work, that I call Sandwich Generation 2.

What makes this model different is the fact that the children have left home. The players are a senior caring for a parent(s) and their spouse or partner. To illustrate, picture a woman in her 70s as a caregiver to both her mother who is now in her 90s and her husband who may be in declining health. Or, a man in his 60s or 70s caring for his wife and his own parents, or two seniors both in their 80s caring for each other and their severely disabled adult son.

We're not just dealing with the elderly here. I know of more than one instance where a person with a fulfilling career has had to retire early because they were unable to balance the responsibilities of caring for a wife or husband and parent and their job.

There are numerous variations on this caregiving model. What is shared in common here is that seniors, many of whom are facing their own health challenges, are in the role of providing care to other seniors. It's a model, I think, that we have fallen into.

I doubt we would set up this care model by design. To be clear, I'm not seeing this phenomenon in the census data just yet, at least not in numbers to be statistically relevant, but given our demographics, I'm convinced it's only a matter of time until we do.

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