

The Challenges of Navigating the Sandwich Generation with Vanessa Grigoriadis

Introduction and Guest Welcome

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona, and on the pod today I have a fellow podcaster. So excited to welcome Vanessa Grigoriadis, who is here to share some wisdom as we like to do on the podcast.

Welcome, Vanessa.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Thank you so much for having me.

Candace Dellacona: So we will go into a little about how we met, because I think one of the things that we found that we had in common is that you and I are searching for a platform or have found a platform, but we are really doing our best to try to provide resources to people like us.

Those who are in the middle as the title of my podcast denotes that we're in the sandwich generation. We found ourselves in the middle, and you are the perfect person because you are the host of the relatively newly launched, So My Parents Are Old podcast.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: That's right.

Candace Dellacona: And so we're so happy to have you here. Before we get into the podcast and how you started, I wanna know a little bit about you, who you are, how you got into this podcast world. So let's take it from the top.

Vanessa's Background and Upbringing

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Sure. So I'm from New York City. I'm from the Upper West Side. My dad was a professor, my mom is an artist and I grew up I'm Greek American. My father was actually from Istanbul and he was Greek from Istanbul. So he came here to go to Lehigh University and he had a engineering degree, then became a computer scientist. I lived a very typical upper West side life where things are about academic achievement. I played violin for a long time. My father also played violin and socialists, intellectuals,

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Yeah.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: at the same time accruing all sorts of things and accruing money. And, definitely on the hoarder spectrum, they were there on the hoarder spectrum a bit. But they, were people who lived a professional life and a personal life for many years. And then, both got sick and I'm their only child. So the life of a fancy free intellectual living in a Woody Allen Paradise, at some point there's like a record scratch and it's like, oh yeah, it's not just about dinner reservations and getting a gold star at work. And a lot of recognition and feeling like you're contributing to the culture because I was a magazine writer for a million years. What a great job. It's also about family duty, family responsibility, and particularly financial responsibility, which has been really hard for me because of the relationship I had with my parents financially and the relationship they had to finances, which was very complicated.

Candace Dellacona: And to be fair, most family has its own lore as it's related to money, and it's super complicated. I've yet to meet someone that doesn't have a sort of unique connection to money and how their parents may have treated it, how it's different for them. But let's go back a little. So you know, you really are the product of the American dream in many ways. Your dad came here as an immigrant and obviously was a very bright person. You point out that as the quote unquote kid, our job for quite some

time is to make our parents proud and work hard and find our own path, which you did with great success as a writer.

Having had a lot of accolades in that part of your professional life. And the record scratch, I think is the perfect visual for most of us because I think that's exactly how it goes down for the people in the sandwich generation where we are cruising along in our own lives until we're not.

Until other people tap us on the shoulder and say, we need help or they're not tapping us on the shoulder, and we're the ones that have to scratch our own record and say, wait a minute, things are amiss. So what was that moment for you, Vanessa, where you're forging your own path, making your own dinner reservations, as they say, and making your own plans?

When did all of that change?

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah, so I, okay.

Career Highlights and Personal Life

Vanessa Grigoriadis: I started at New York Magazine as an assistant in, the late nineties. I was like, I wasn't Carrie Bradshaw. I didn't write about my sex life, but I really had this life where I was just like tap, tap, tap on my laptop in bed. And it was a very lucrative career at that point. Getting, invites to a play to a, black tie gala.

Everybody's so happy to see me. I was really in the mix. I wrote also a lot about celebrities. So I've interviewed, Madonna, Lady Gaga did her first interview. I spent four days with Taylor Swift for her first Rolling Stone cover. I'm known, I did the first like Monica Lewinsky interview after, Bill Clinton.

It was like me and Diane Sawyer. I was the print. Diane Sawyer got the tv. Like I really was a bold face name kind of reporter and being in media is very consuming. It's a really exciting job, but it's a one that's very hard to put to bed at night and sometimes you're working at night as well. And I had a baby that was much desired, right? And quite late. I had my first baby, I think I was like 36, 37. And my parents had me a bit older, so they were then in their seventies and they were over the moon. So happy about this tiny little baby girl Olympia after my heritage.

And did I think everything seemed normal during that period of time? Not really. I was like, these people are getting old. But I didn't think past that point, particularly because my father then retired when he was almost 80 and there was a lot of paperwork and they had a flood in their house and like different things were always happening that put off the conversation about what does the end look like for you guys? Where are the passwords to your accounts? What are even your accounts? What is the financial situation? Because you guys are living in the same apartment that you had since like 1960, yet you seem to have money to pay for everything. So it was like this always this very mixed message with them where they drove secondhand cars, but there was money that was squirreled away. They had both been part of 1968 Columbia. They got, my mom went to Columbia. She, was very anti-war and they just, they both were also younger children, which is really interesting. They were younger in their own families and, I don't know, was there a little arrested development?

Who knows what, but it was basically, we were not one of those families where people talked openly about money or said, this is amazing. My ex stock is doing so great at the dinner table. That was all considered to be very gosh. And I got pregnant again with a boy and I had him in June.

The Turning Point: Parents' Health Decline

Vanessa Grigoriadis: And then at the end of August, my father was diagnosed with bone cancer. I mean, it was insane. It was everywhere in his body. And he passed away in the beginning of January.

Candace Dellacona: Right.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: During that period of time, we got the will in order. There's a few different things that we got in order, but he did not wanna talk to me about what was going on. When he was diagnosed, he had had an accident and he was then in a wheelchair and he never even turned on his computer again. So he was not in a place to sit down and say, Vanessa, let me tell you. How I've structured our finances and what you need to know. And indeed, my mother did the taxes, even though it was a more of a typical, gendered relationship where he did deal with a lot of the finances, she did the taxes with him, they took their taxes very seriously.

Like they really were very organized in that way. But. This is where my key mistake came in. After he passed away. Obviously I was totally heartbroken as was my mother. I found an estate attorney through my network of contacts of young professionals in New York City, who was lovely, who my mom worked with, and I went to a few meetings. I signed all the forms. I did whatever it was that they wanted me to do, but I did not take any ownership in that process.

Navigating Financial and Caregiving Challenges

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Simultaneously knowing that my mother was like in her late seventies, I had said when my dad was sick, she's acting pretty weird. Are people noticing that? She's acting pretty weird? And everybody was like, it's grief, I don't know what you're talking about. It's grief. And so I was like, sweet. You guys did everything. Seems good. Okay, cool. I've got two kids, by the way. You know a baby.

Candace Dellacona: You're in the thick of it. You're literally the thick of

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah, I have a full-time job. Very stressful. I'd started my own company then in 2019 a podcast company, because magazines seem to be falling apart, so I was in the thick of starting a new company, having two kids. I live in a very isolated part of Brooklyn and Red Hook.

I was just not thinking that I had to set everything up, set up for success for me and my mom.

And I wasn't, I didn't need any of her money, right? I was like, you knock yourself out, do whatever you're gonna do. Whatever you want. Great. Like I'm not after any of money goes to you and the will, and then it goes to me, and that's perfect.

Candace Dellacona: There was a, an expected trajectory. But before you go on, I think one of two of the things that you said are interesting. Which was the roles. And I think as adult children we get really stuck before we make that first step and what our role is in the family unit.

So you are the only child. Your parents' attention were probably very much on you throughout your life. So it's, it is a role reversal to turn around and look at your parents who you know, in your case, you had two very capable, educated adults who had always done a fantastic job. Who are we to step in?

So number one role, number two, ownership. And that is something that, I talk about with my clients all of the time, and then their adult children, which does go back to role playing because you went through the motions of what you were supposed to do, and let's point out you were grieving, which is enormous. And there, there is so much of grief as part of what we're talking about in the sandwich generation for various reasons. Grieving what our role used to be, what it's becoming, losing the parent that we love. All of the

things related to grief and you going in and checking the box. You are someone who is a researcher, a writer.

You have resources, you have all of the things, and yet you are just trying to survive in all of that. And so not maybe noticing signs. And I think that's where you're going to talk about what happened with your mom next is something so universal for all of us. And those out there listening.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Right. I think what's unique about my story is I could have had these conversations and for whatever reason, emotionally, as you say, I didn't feel. Comfortable doing it. It's not one of those stories where there were like a million brothers and sisters and somebody knew something and then the other ones didn't, and it becomes like a big mess. What I want people to know is that you're always better off dealing with this earlier and more fully right? Because all that happens if you put it off is more aggravation, more headaches, more paperwork, more administrative burden, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I appreciate you saying of course there's different roles and they're very hard to break out of, but I think my mom would've been open to talking some of that. But then as she got sicker, 'cause she did develop some memory loss, then she did clamp down and say, I've got everything under control.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Yeah.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: And she had a fall about four years ago. It's coming up on four years, and that was the fall that changed everything.

Thankfully, I used that fall to get her in-home help that she had needed for at least a couple of years and was refusing to take as a lot of people have experienced. You're like, mom, dad, can I get you a housekeeper? And they're like, absolutely not. We would not pay for that. And it was like, are you aware that you're about to use your entire life savings?

Candace Dellacona: Exactly

Vanessa Grigoriadis: to take care of yourself. Maybe just get a housekeeper so you can spend a couple of years not bending over so you fall over, pull your back or whatever, 'cause people feel invisible and old people are difficult and we all know all the reasons why these things are happening.

But it is like a slow motion train wreck. And then of course a memory loss itself is like a slow motion train wreck. So I basically, as her only child was just handed this whole basket of, gifts, which is like, now it's time for you to figure out how to care for your mom.

What's the best for her? Does she stay in her apartment? Does she leave?

She is in her apartment, who should be taking care of her? So I spent at least two years figuring out who the best aides were. And knock on wood, they stay. 'cause she likes them and I love them and they're allowing me to have the life to sit here and talk to you right now. And so I'm a big believer that there are incredible home care aides out there, and it's just a matter of you finding them and you just gotta keep working at it until you find the right people.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

But let's go back to the basket, right? So you like a

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Of dreadful gifts. Yeah.

Candace Dellacona: and record scratch moment probably started when your dad got diagnosed because, I think what happens to all of us is that we expect the fall, which did eventually happen with your mom, but if you look back now, it's probably pretty clear for you to see that your role started changing upon your dad's diagnosis.

And then you had these sort of like micro movements that slowly pushed you in the direction into the position that you're in now. And I think a lot of us myself included, turn around and say, wait, how did I get here. Now with the benefit of time and, being able to look back in this sort of macro view, it's pretty clear.

And so you found yourself pretty quickly from not having any sort of active role to taking on care for your mom with this memory impairment that I think a lot of people deal with. And the trick of memory impairment too is that for a certain amount of time, the in between the purgatory where the client, the parent has some capacity, but maybe not enough requisite capacity to manage their whole lives. And then where do we step in as the adult child, how do we be respectful in such a way that respects their agency and who they are as people while keeping them safe and keeping yourself sane. And the basket is the perfect analogy.

'cause you're handed this basket of figure this out. Do the finances, figure out the care, deal with the doctors, run your own life. And that sort of brought us to our common ground, which is what you hope to do and what you are doing with your podcast.

Creating a Supportive Community

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah. I felt like there needed to be a forum for people to talk about this because I found it to be one of the most life-changing and loneliest experiences I've ever had. Because I am a bit older of a parent to my children and because my parents also got married when they were older.

We are, the ultimate examples of my mom is 83. I am midlife. I have a 9-year-old and a 13-year-old. There's big gaps here. I have found that I'm very alone in this because most of the friends that I have who are through, my kids, they're a bit younger than me and they haven't experienced this yet.

And even a lot of my friends from, way back, their parents are still okay in their eighties. Maybe because they're of a certain socioeconomic bracket, and I'm not saying a parent hasn't died here or there, but I'm not seeing a lot of people who are involved in daily, long-term care for a parent in my specific little cohort of friends. I think, and even if I did, and to be frank, I have a friend, a friend's wife whose dad just went through the 80th street residence and he just passed away. So now he's ahead of my mom. And like I have talked to her, it's hard for her.

Her dad has just passed away. It's difficult when you are talking to people whose parents have memory loss, you start having the conversation and then somebody says okay, my mom is much further along than your mom now, so it's a sort of a weird conversation sometimes anyway. But not having siblings, turns out to suck. Turns out to not be ideal. We got all the presence as kids, but now not ideal. And I know that people fight with their brothers and sisters and I'm sure that there is nothing like the pain and the anger, like the fiery core of anger that you can feel towards somebody who says, I'm doing so much. I call mom on Sunday and I send her things on Amazon. I get all that, but it's also hard to just be me in my brain trying to put all these things together. And one other thing to know about me is I'm a perfectionist, so everything I do, I want to have done it perfectly. Like a lot of women, I think, who are professional in midlife, like I want it to be perfect.

And then you know that there's just too many things to do to really make them perfect. But I just felt like I wasn't able to have these conversations with the number of people I wanted to talk to about it.

Candace Dellacona: And so tell me like, so you find Campsite Media that's just remarkable in and of itself, right? Where, we talk about playing these multiple roles in life. And so you're a business owner, you're a parent of young children, you're a grieving daughter, you're also the daughter and advocating for someone who perhaps is not at the same level she once was. What was the transition to saying, all right, now I'm going to create the podcast for the loneliness? That is partly why you know my story, and that is definitely something that struck a nerve when we first had our conversation about how hard it is and how lonely it is, being in the trenches and feeling incredibly isolated. And I think even people with siblings would say the same thing because we all deal with it differently and we all play a role within the family and back to the role playing. Who can do or who can pay for or who can be there. And we all feel like we're failing and there's loneliness in that

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah, I mean we, Campsite Media is a journalism company, first and foremost. So we make a lot of investigative podcasts. We're all magazine writers from like the Times Magazine or New York Magazine, Vanity Fair, GQ, those. Sort of in the, now it's like we make horses and buggies or something in this day and age like to do journalism and really try to do it right is like this thing of oldie times. But, we're all these long form journalists who love digging into a story. And, the podcast business has really changed where now people want their hosts to be talking from a place of lived experience, of authenticity, of what really matters to you. And when I looked, when we decided at the company we need to get into this game, when I looked at myself, I was like, this is what I am really doing and thinking about day in and day out. This is a thing that really needs community and people need an outlet.

Candace Dellacona: Talk authenticity. You're literally in the midst of it. You are in the throw of it.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Exactly. Exactly.

Candace Dellacona: Who better than you.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah. And we've had people, we had a real estate attorney talk about, step up basis and what to do with your parents' home or a friend of mine who's a volunteer hospice person. She talked about that experience. It's an entire ecosystem of people doing incredible work that the media does not cover because it's depressing.

Like it's, let's just be real. It's it's depressing. Nobody wants to think about death. Everybody is really focused on youth in this culture. People are trying to make themselves look, 30 years younger every day when they get up in the morning, that's like their number one thing they're gonna do.

So who wants to really talk about this? But to me it's politically speaking, I'm like, this is the stuff of government. This is what we all need help with, is figuring out care in these arenas specifically happens to be happening with my mom. To me, it happened to me with my kids before, but I just accepted okay, there's no help for that.

The Importance of Addressing Elder Care

Candace Dellacona: I think what you're talking about is so important that we are in the midst of this crisis, right? We have whatever, there are so many different monikers, the silver tsunami, the caregiving crisis, all of these

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Mm-hmm.

Candace Dellacona: You're right that it is a societal problem and we have a government that doesn't help us with the solutions.

So people like you and me and all of the people that we have on these podcasts, we're hoping to provide the resources so that we can, as a society, put our own patchwork, our own quilt together of experts to make it maybe a little easier for people that come behind us. 'cause nobody else is helping us.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah. I think that's what the, that's what the issue is, is you know, the scales fall from your eyes beginning with, oh, Medicare doesn't pay for long term health.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: And once you realize that it's just the beginning

Candace Dellacona: falls apart from there.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: journey that you have to go on, and I'm lucky you know that I am a journalist, so I investigate. I find things out. I like nothing more than to like master a topic. But the amount of paperwork that I then have to do on the other side is just, I was earlier today I am gonna look at this 'cause it happens to be right here. I, am taking power of attorney on a, an account of fidelity as one does.

And then I was planning to transfer some money and they said. But we don't have your standing transfer instructions document, which needs a silver medallion, which is a notary. And I'm like, when we did those forms six weeks ago, that needed to be notarized, did you wanna tell me that there was another form that would need to be notarized before I made changes to the account?

That clearly was what I was trying to do, so it's just like it's form after form, after form, after form. And for high net worth individuals, I get it. There's ways, your investment banker, whoever it is, is gonna glide this path for you. But in truth, it's still a rocky path. Like you're still gonna have to sign stuff and you're still gonna have to deal with much more stuff than you want to deal with. And because of scammers, obviously every bank has created like 17 layers of authentication.

Candace Dellacona: Which we call roadblocks, but No, you're

Vanessa Grigoriadis: There's roadblocks every place you go. So you're basically in this, you are already in a game of Tetris when you're a full-time employee and a mom. You're already just, every 15 minutes is so meaningful to you. You're trying to pack so many things into it, but you add in caring for an older person, which I describe as like having a toddler that doesn't live with you, and then you add the financial piece, which if you as I explained, maybe at too much length earlier, I have all this stuff that is complex psychologically from my parents around finances because they really taught me like the number one thing you need to know about money is to never think about money.

That's the number one thing you need. Well, it turns out you need a lot of money to never think about

Candace Dellacona: You absolutely do and you need to have all the right people to help you with that

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Right, exactly. So it's like now I have a situation where, okay, we've got a good thing going with my mom at home, but are we gonna need Medicaid? Or is she gonna move into a place?

Is it better for her to move into a place? I know it's better for me, but that question, every question around, and I'll speak to middle class and above, like. How do you manage this person's money so it throws off enough money that they can stay at home with a social security, which doesn't get you far in 20 25, 20 26, plus so now you're, you basically, you're just involved in a enormous math equation,

and the math equation is what do I have to fill in so that she can live in a way that I feel really good about, that I know she'll be cared for. That doesn't require me to quit my job. Another moment when the scales really fell from my eyes is, and I should have called you up, is a friend of mine said, you need to meet this estate attorney. He really helped me and I went and talked to him and he had looked me up beforehand and knew I was, a writer of some note, and he said, Vanessa, I wanna help you because I want my girls to be able to look at somebody like you and for you to still have a job. For you not to have to quit your job so that you have to live in totally the domestic and financial sphere dealing with your parents and dealing with your mom. And I was like, oh my God, I didn't even know we were gonna be, was this conversation gonna go there? Is my life going there? I don't even know who I am if I'm not a professional person,

Candace Dellacona: i, that's such an important point and I can see, how impactful that is and I've been there, Vanessa, where you really lose yourself in the process because it's so much and because we're starved for resources and we are also frustrated and sad and trying to figure out our path and people aren't helping.

And I think even for those who have resources, that feeling of overwhelm is universal. I don't care if you have endless resources, it is still you stepping into someone else's life and trying to figure out what the best thing is for them. And it is such a responsibility, but in many ways, and I don't mean this in a negative way, but it is a burden.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah.

Candace Dellacona: And so what you're doing is so important Vanessa, because you are yet another person in the very small pool of people who are recognizing people like us and trying to make it easier. And creating a podcast like So Your Parents Are Old from a place of humor and bringing in the experts and even bringing in those people who are well known.

That are dealing with these sorts of things. Bradley Cooper made an amazing documentary on caregiving and a lot of people think someone like him wouldn't have to deal with the burden of trying to figure out all of the things you talk about, like a medallion guarantee.

And what Medicare does, but yet here we are and we have to help ourselves and people similarly situated, figure it out. And it is an incredible responsibility. You're killing it if nobody has told you that.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Thank you. I appreciate that. But no, I think people will be talking about this more and more. You can even see the New York Times is starting to run a lot more op-eds about you're aging parents. What is this really like? People are starting to be honest about the amount of money.

What is this? This is \$3,500 a week to take care of this person. I do think, the silver tsunami are just demographically. It's so extraordinary what's about to happen with the boomers aging. And adult children are really gonna have a lot of the same wake up call that I have, and I only wish that you could put together, like you need to put together a YouTube channel that tells everybody what to do.

Because I can imagine from your perspective, it's oh my God, I'm not gonna explain this all again to a new client because you're seriously taking people who are uneducated about this, and they need this help so badly, and they're coming to you and you gotta bring them from like zero to a hundred really quick.

Candace Dellacona: It's true. Yeah. But listen, that's why we're calling it the Survival Guide, right? Because we're trying to create the guide that we didn't have and provide the resources and the people and the information and the data. All of the information that we didn't have so that it makes it easier for the others that come after us.

And hopefully, it will be addressed as a society one day and maybe we will have the government infrastructure that will help pay for things like this. Because I can speak for so many families out there, it's the largest cost after college, which is long-term care. And we don't have great solutions here in the US.

I think that, one of the saving graces is technology, and I've had some amazing people on the podcast to highlight how technology can help and hopefully we'll have some big brains and generations to come that will help us find those solutions. But in the interim, Vanessa, you and me.

Vanessa Grigoriadis: Yeah,

Candace Dellacona: And it's our podcast

Vanessa Grigoriadis: that's right.

Candace Dellacona: we're providing folks with some great information.

Conclusion and Podcast Information

Candace Dellacona: But I'm so happy to have you here today with me. I am a novice podcaster and you certainly are somebody who is entrenched in the world, and I really

Vanessa Grigoriadis: You are doing great. You are doing amazing. I love it. Thank you so much for having me on. I appreciate it.

Candace Dellacona: My pleasure. And so for everyone out there, we'll have all of the information on So Your Parents Are Old. I want you to tune in. I want you to email to Vanessa, give her ideas of people you wanna hear from, because she's definitely listening, so we really appreciate it. All right. Thanks so much.

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Thanks for listening.