

African-Americans are twice as likely to be caregivers to older loved ones

Written by Pharaoh Martin, NNPA National Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - There's an adage that tells us that we are once an adult but twice a child. That is because many in their "golden years" will be spent in the care of others. In fact, a new study suggests that almost a third of the country's adult population play a caregiver role to somebody over the age of 50, a disparate number of those caregivers being African American.

Kiona Daniels is one such individual. She has cared - not just for one - but for two grandmothers.

"I had to learn at a very young age how to manage things that kids my age had nothing to do with," said Daniels, who is 35.

The study, published by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, found that a significant majority of the nation's 65.7 million caregivers are working women and that African Americans are almost twice as likely to be a caregiver than other ethnicity. They are also more likely to be single and have an annual household income of less than \$50,000, adding an extra hardship in tough economic times.

So while other young adults were figuring out what classes to take, Daniels, then living in her hometown of Mobile, AL, was trying to figure out a care plan for her elderly grandmother - while still picking her classes.

When Daniel was 16 and her mother died in a horrific car accident, she was left with the responsibility of caring for Arline Boyd, her 91-year-old great grandmother. Daniels cared for her nine years until she passed in 2002. Then she began caring for her grandmother. Both situations exemplify the life of a caregiver.

In addition to being a full-time student and caregiver Daniels has had to work three part-time jobs in order to make ends meet. Her week day, while caring for Boyd, would start at four in the morning.

Boyd was bed-ridden, due to medical problems, so Daniels would have to bathe and feed her, in addition to changing her under garments and dealing with her wounds from bed sores that she developed from being constantly hospitalized. If Daniels had to run an errand such as pay a

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bill or do some grocery shopping she would have a friend watch her great grandmother or pay a neighbor to do so.

"I really don't know how I did it. I was very stressed for a really long time. I was one of the most stressed out 20-year-olds you've probably ever would've met," said Daniels, a resident of Suitland, MD.

Taking care of Boyd was 80 percent of her day and work and everything else was secondary to that. When Boyd finally passed, Daniels said she didn't know what to do with herself because she didn't know who she was outside of being a caregiver. When that responsibility was gone Daniels said she went into a deep depression. Her grieving was compounded by the fact that she felt lost. She had long dreaded the possibility of this feeling.

"It has an emotional impact on you watching someone you love get older and wonder what type of impact that that's going to have on yourself," Daniels said.

She didn't have much time to dwell on herself because, like her great grandmother, her grandmother Ella Daniels was in need of care assistance. Daniels moved to the Washington, D.C. area to care for her grandmother, who is now 94 - and to work on Capitol Hill as a staffer for a congressman.

Fortunately, Daniel's grandmother is still mobile and in better health, so she doesn't have to perform the same medical and physical-related tasks that she had to perform with her great grandmother. But because of her age she's slowing down considerably. For now, she handles her grandmother's day-to-day needs and her financial matters. She also has full power of attorney.

But there is very little outside help for people in Daniels' position.

"There is really no built-in assistance for a caregiver who is single unless the [care recipient] invested in some sort of insurance prior to them aging," Daniels said. "For somebody like myself that is something I will definitely do when I get into my fifties because that's a policy that could help care for me at my older age."

Still, being a caregiver has taken a tremendous toll on Daniel's personal life. Every decision that she's made since she was 16, including where she went to college, hinged on how it would affect her responsibility to her grandmothers. She's given up scholarships and left a job at CNN because she wasn't able to care for her grandmother as needed.

"It wasn't an option to leave them. It was to either put them in a nursing home and live my life independently or go home to support them and be their caregiver," Daniels said.

The financial burden is very difficult, especially now that Daniels is unemployed. While her grandmother receives Social Security, Daniels also has household expenses and her own financial obligations, such as a mortgage for a home that she still owns in Alabama.

Like much of America, she simply struggles to make ends meet. "We've been very blessed in

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the fact that I'm able to kind of pay my bills the best way that I can even though I'm not working.”