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SPECIAL WOMEN'S ISSUE

Single Moms

Early Images
of the Filipina

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"Good Day New York"



Only You: Mary Ann Gomez (left) got the love and security she wanted from her daughter Jaezzel.



Fil-Am Single Mothers

Most Filipino Americans take pride in their die-hard commitment to family. Yet, the Filipino American community has more single women heads of households with children under 18 than any other Asian American group.

Confirming a family-centered outlook, Filipinos ranked second in the number of families (287,539) and accounted for the highest number of married-couple families (225,127) among Asian Americans, according to the 1990 U.S. Census. But the 21,634 Filipino American women who are single parents with kids under 18 outnumber their counterparts among other Asian Americans.

Conservative pundits describe female single parenthood as a "social problem." But don't tell that to Fil-Am single mothers whose current status may have resulted from an unplanned pregnancy, a divorce (more than 50 percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce), or separation, or, perhaps, widowhood. Playing both mother and father to their children, they're among the hardest-working parents around, with can-do attitudes that turn them into wizards in time management and household finance. Sometimes, it's more than they can handle.

"What's hard is doing it by yourself," explains immigration lawyer Joy Mandanas, 34. "Even though my parents and family are there for me to talk to, they don't live in Greenville (South Carolina). Sometimes I feel if my daughter's father was around, then it wouldn't just be me."

Her daughter Victoria's father chose not to be part of her life even before she was born, according to Mandanas. As the de facto breadwinner, Mandanas had to go back to work four months after giving birth to Victoria. Despite the urgent need for steady income, however, Mandanas' maternal side kicked in. She missed Victoria and wanted to care for her full-time. So Mandanas quit her job at the nonprofit Georgia Legal Services and moved in with her parents in Columbia, South Carolina. Her parents gave her emotional as well as financial support while she cared for Victoria, until her daughter was eligible for day care, and she could work again.

WE ARE
FAMILY

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang



Juggler: *Marlina Gonzalez has had to make special arrangements in child care for her daughter Diwa (left).*

Guilt and Pride

Mandanas has made sacrifices for both her career and child. "Two years ago, one of my clients requested that I be in Canada for a whole week," she says. "My first thought was child care. So I had to make arrangements to take her to my parents in order to catch the plane to Canada."

Because Victoria, 7, goes to a private school that doesn't provide bus transportation, she must often stay after school to wait for her mother to pick her up. "I feel guilty often times because she's in her school longer than I'm at work," Mandanas says. "I feel guilty that her days are so long."

In the long run, Mandanas believes her efforts will be rewarded. "You can take credit that you're raising somebody who's going to be a contributor to society," she says. "You just take pride in the accomplishment if your child turns out okay."

Millie Guillermo-Gardner, 43, is very proud indeed that both her old-



Expanding Brood: *Millie Guillermo-Gardner is extremely proud of her children, whom she has raised alone.*

est daughters, Renee and Michelle, graduated with degrees in psychology and early childhood education, respectively, after putting themselves through college.

"The pride I get from watching and seeing my kids' achievements—I don't miss not being able to share it with their dad," she explains. "I might have made some mistakes. I mean my kids could've gone on the deep end, but my kids—God—I'm just so proud of them."

Trouble with Men

Although her daughters' Filipino father has lost contact with them, Guillermo-Gardner says they've grown up very independent as a result. Her tempestuous marriage began in 1972 when she was 17. Guillermo-Gardner was the "dutiful wife" who remained with her husband even when he turned physically abusive, a secret she kept from her family. When he became violent with their children, however, she called it quits and divorced him in 1975.

In 1981, she married an African American with whom she had daughter Rhyanna, 13, and son Max, 19. (She also has another son, 18-month-old Marcello, from a recent relationship.) Because of a drug addiction which her husband sought treatment for in 1984, he was often absent



Supportive: *The parents of Joy Mandanas (with mother Consolacion) let her quit her job and care for Victoria full time.*

from the marriage.

Guillermo-Gardner permanently parted company with him in 1996.

"It was a lot of pressure, what with my two girls, and we had a son right away," she explains. "While he was always able to find jobs, they came and went. It was up to me to be the provider."

Her first husband was ordered in 1975 to pay Guillermo-Gardner \$50 a month in child support. But in 1980, he denied paternity of one of his daughters and requested to reduce his monthly child support payment to \$25. She promptly stopped asking child support from him. With her second husband, they both settled on child support that he could afford for their under-age daughter.

Her parents have helped her find ways to support her family. San Francisco native Guillermo-Gardner currently lives with them and works from their home as an independent contractor in database management.

Help from Folks

Help from parents is often a plus, confirms Marlina Gonzalez, executive director of Asian American Renaissance and assistant curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Sometimes, when she goes on business trips, she either arranges for her mom in New York to stay with her daughter Diwa, 10, or she drops her daughter off with her mother and picks Diwa up later.

Like Guillermo-Gardner, Gonzalez feels she was a single mother even during her marriage. Her Thai ex-husband, a filmmaker who now lives in his home country, was often traveling for his job. "Now that it's official, you get really creative," she says. "There are times when I get wistful for my own childhood."

Gonzalez grew up in Manila with an extended family. "My mom had house help," she explains. "We lived in a compound, and my grandmother actually housed sometimes two families, my aunts, uncles and cousins. I grew up without having to come home to an empty house. When I have to do this creative juggling of time, I long for my mother's lifestyle."

Her independent nature, however, has kept her from returning to her comfortable past. "I chose to live in a city away from my own family maybe because it's a contrast to my own childhood. It's the price you pay for having your own space," Gonzalez explains.

A Reasonable Option

Single parenthood, first noted as a widespread phenomenon among young and poor minority women, has actually become a reasonable option for women who desire children and can afford having them. Single mothers are in a way the vanguards of a new social reality, in which women are more integrated in the work force and enjoying unprecedented independence.

For Mary Ann Gomez, 30, going ahead with her pregnancy even though her boyfriend wanted her to get an abortion meant something undefinable. "It's the feeling of having someone who would care for you and only love you—that security I couldn't get from my mother or anyone else. I wanted someone to be there for me," she explains.

While her daughter Jaezzel, 6, has given her mother the love and support that she craved for, caring for her was more than Gomez expected.

"I gotta think for two instead of just myself," she says. "I have to budget everything. I want to offer her much more than I ever got and get her the things that she likes, but not necessarily spoil her."

Gomez has had to literally do it alone. "I had to pretty much prove to my-

self, my peers and family that I can do it regardless, if they're going to be around or not."

Gomez's mother in particular felt having a child out of wedlock was a disgrace to the family and wanted her to marry her daughter's father. "It just didn't feel right," Gomez recalls. "Why stay with someone who won't straighten out

Single mothers are in a way the vanguards of a new social reality.

or take care of his family?"

Gomez was also laid off from her job before becoming aware of her pregnancy and was on unemployment for a year. Two months after she gave birth, she found work. Later, she was advised to request the baby's father, who was barely supporting himself, to get Jaezzel on his health-care plan. "My social worker would ask me, 'Why don't you ask him for child support? Why don't you sue him for this?'" Gomez says. "The way I see it is, why bother? If he knows she's his child and if anything had to come from him, he has to do it on his own, not because he's forced to do it."

After such bad experiences with men, it's not surprising that many single mothers aren't inclined to start a new relationship. Some of them don't even have the time.

"It's difficult to even meet anybody," says Mandanas. "The only time I'm not with my child, I'm at work in a client-development function. You're looking for clients. You're not looking for a mate. I really don't have many opportunities at this point, not that I won't ever."

When they do meet someone, they're certainly more careful. While Guillermo-Gardner met her second husband a year after her divorce, they were friends first for five years before tying the knot.

Gonzalez is dating a divorcé who shares custody of his daughter with his ex-wife. He helps Gonzalez make sense of

her ex-husband's situation by giving her his perspective as a divorced father. "He said he gets accused by his ex-wife of being the 'fun dad,'" she says. "Women are under the impression that when single fathers have their kids, all they think of is to have fun with them and don't go into the reality of things. But they deal with it, too."

Closer Relationships

Do children benefit from a single-parent family? According to single Fil-Am moms, they've developed closer and more communicative relationships with their children. Guillermo-Gardner says, "My son, who's 19, was very close to his father when he was 10. When my ex-husband went into rehab for the first time, there was a lot of anger, pain and guilt involved. From then on, my son was just pushed aside. There were a lot of things I had to deal with from my son. Because of that, my son and I have gotten really close. We respect each other in different ways."

Gonzalez no longer hides problems from her daughter as she did during her rocky marriage. "I feel closer to her than I ever felt before," she says, adding that their heated arguments are more like the kind between sisters than parent and child.

"A lot of the honesty that she shares with me about her feelings I wasn't able to talk about with my mom. Because we're going through the same period of adjustment, she pours out emotions to me. Sometimes I find myself reprimanding her for what she's feeling. The other day, she said, 'Mom, it's not fair that you can be angry. But when I show you I'm angry, you tell me not to be angry. That's not okay. I have a right to be angry, too.'"

Perhaps women view single parenthood as a temporary condition, and even the most independent single moms haven't given up on attaining all the trappings of a traditional family. Be that as it may, the lessons from relationships that didn't work and from the trials of single parenthood become indelible.

"It's not complete," admits Gomez. "It's still in my head that a family has got to have a daddy, mommy and kids. And I want a boy so bad. But this time around I want to do it right." ■