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Putting family first is hard work

As Obama attends to his grandmother, a look at choices many Americans make between jobs and family

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Dr. Demetrius Lopes, 38, is among the new breed of fathers determined not to let a career get in the way of raising a family.

For a neurosurgeon, though, it's not easy. Last [Thanksgiving](#), he got called away just as the turkey hit the table. More recently, the pager vibrated furiously as the curtain went up on his 7-year-old's school play.

In his line of work, "time is brain," said Lopes, explaining why he can't linger for so much as a drumstick or an opening number.

But precisely because the [Rush University](#) Medical Center surgeon has an intimate view of life and death, he has also learned you have to make family a priority. "I often hear, 'I wish I had gone on that trip with my father' or 'I wish I had told him I loved him.' You really learn from that."

Less than two weeks before [Election Day](#), [Barack Obama](#)'s decision to leave the campaign trail Thursday to be with his critically ill grandmother offers another lesson: No one is insulated from work/family conflicts.

For some, the two worlds collide head-on right before an important meeting, derailed by a plaintive, "Mommy, I don't feel so good." In Obama's case, the two-day hiatus came in the homestretch of vying for the most powerful job in the free world.

But being at the bedside of the woman "who poured her heart and soul into me" loomed larger than the swing states of Wisconsin and Iowa. It's a choice that's likely to resonate with the nearly 22 million Americans in the labor force who are responsible for elderly loved ones.

"He loves his grandmother, wants to be with her, so good for him," said Jack Pitney, a political science professor at Claremont McKenna College and a Republican analyst.

It's not the first time juggling family obligations surfaced in this election. [Sarah Palin](#)'s brood, especially her special-needs infant and pregnant daughter, became a hot topic when she became [John McCain](#)'s running mate. [Joe Biden](#) talked about commuting between Wilmington and Washington as a widowed father during his years in the Senate.

Despite all the personal tales, there has been surprisingly little public discourse about the nominees' policies surrounding employment and the home front, said Ellen Galinsky, president of the non-partisan Families and Work Institute in New York.

"But by doing this . . . he's using a megaphone to express that he has the same everyday concerns as many Americans," Galinsky said of Obama. "It's not you're either serious about your job or you're not."

Recently, the institute hosted a conference call with senior advisers from the campaigns and corporate executives for what she called "the first-ever presidential platform on work-family issues." Questions focused on workplace flexibility, the expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act and other proposals to help caregivers.

In short, Obama sees an expanded role for government while McCain would prefer to let employers decide.

This is no longer the sole province of mothers and daughters. The institute's survey shows men have the same amount of stress around work/life issues as women, a striking change in 30 years of research.

For Lopes, his desire to be a top-notch surgeon—but also a full participant in the lives of his two children, ages 4 and 7—means slipping back into the family milieu as quickly as possible after work. Coming off the adrenaline rush of saving a life often makes transforming back "to Dad, regular guy" a challenge.

"At work, I have a team of people who follow everything I say, but at home it's not like that," he said. "You're home now . . . and you're going to wash the dishes."

Leslie Brodie, 60, general manager of the Skokie Valley Symphony Orchestra, understands competing demands. She has been shuttling between Los Angeles and her Evanston home since June 2007, when her 87-year-old mother had a heart attack.

"It's been brutal," she said by phone from UCLA Medical Center—on her third trip in eight weeks—where she's juggling her mother's care, finalizing details for a Nov. 2 concert and preparing for 1,300 students arriving for a program the following day.

"But you do what you have to do . . . it's the ultimate family value," Brodie said.

Brodie's employer has given her a lot of flexibility, which is vital for long-distance caregivers.

Diane Wilson, a Chicago-area career consultant, recommends: "Be direct. Ask for what you need but also be prepared to reciprocate, reaffirm your commitment to the organization and support your boss. It doesn't have to be adversarial."

Galinsky suggests appealing to employers by making "a business case."

"Connect to a *real* problem the employer has," she said. "Suggest several ways that you can make it work for the employer."

But sometimes there are no solutions. [Philadelphia Phillies](#) manager Charlie Manuel was in the dugout last week despite the death of his mother two days before. It was the [National League](#) Championship Series, and, "I know she would definitely want me to finish the season," Manuel said.

Attorney Robert Kleinman, 61, recalls being faced with a similar dilemma in December 1987. He

was scrambling to wrap up some major transactions by year's end when his mother-in-law died of a massive heart attack. He closed the deals, then flew to New York, but missed the funeral—a marital wound even two decades later.

"I would have made the same decision today. . . . I couldn't let the clients down," he said. "But I wish that life didn't present such terrible choices."

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