Mother in the House: Nancy Pelosi's first career

by Valerie Weaver-Zercher in the February 6, 2007 issue

Soon after the November election, stories began circulating about Nancy Pelosi's "mother of five" voice, which she uses to great effect with staff members and colleagues. Forged during the years she spent at home with her five children, Pelosi's voice of authority helped make the Californian speaker of the House, the first woman to reach within two rungs of the presidency. Aside from the fact that she has to hike about a mile to get to the women's restroom, and that her wardrobe is sometimes considered as newsworthy as her politics—I'd call that progress.I don't know Pelosi, but I know that voice. I've used it often, though my "mama-means-business" voice rarely floats beyond the grimy walls of my toy-strewn house, and no one born before 2001 or taller than about three feet pays attention. Pelosi's other-than-mother career began only after her youngest was a senior in high school. That is a welcome reminder for some of us that we, too, might not spend the rest of our lives wiping peninsulas of snot from toddlers' noses.

Pelosi is the most recent version of what psychotherapist Daphne de Marneffe calls "the professional lover of children": a public figure who makes the well-being and nurture of children central to her platform (if she is a politician) or research (if she is a scholar). In *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*, de Marneffe cites Hillary Clinton, Marian Wright Edelman and Sylvia Ann Hewlett as examples of this type. "The professional lover of children satisfies our longing for a cultural image of both the nurturant mother and the mother whose career has never suffered," she writes.

The new Democratic House speaker differs from the women that de Marneffe examines in one significant way: she "sequenced" family and career instead of balancing both at the same time. If women like Hillary Clinton wrote the 1980s memo to women, *You can have it all*, Pelosi's career may be crafting the message that *You can have it all, just not at the same time*. In any case, Pelosi has managed to keep children at the center of her career. In an interview for the *AARP Bulletin*,

Pelosi connects the two: “The reasons I came to Congress are simple: the children, the children, the children.”

What is often invisible in celebrity mothers’ success stories is the tremendous wealth and social capital that undergird their choices. Off- and on-ramps to a career are a lot less bumpy when you hail from an established political family and when your husband is a multimillionaire, as is the case with Pelosi. The fabled “balance between career and family” is a lot easier to strike if you have a flexible work schedule, access to good child care, and a job that brings respect and challenge. In these days, when terms like *opting out*, *off-ramping* and *sequencing* have hit the vernacular, it is essential to remember that this lexicon of choice belongs to the privileged classes.

For the vast majority of mothers, drastic economic and social costs would ensue from opting out of paid work until age 47, as Pelosi did. Many women can’t even afford to take 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave. According to the Center for Work-Life Policy, women who leave their careers for even three years lose 37 percent of their earning power. “On virtually any measure of outward achievement—pay, power, prestige, even job satisfaction—investing time and energy in motherhood is a recipe for marginalization,” writes de Marneffe.

Attainment of power and prestige represents only one way to measure achievement, of course. Years spent caring for the next generation can hardly be described simply in terms of wasted earning potential or a marginalized identity. Some economists even propose that the labor involved in “the formation of human capital” should be included in calculations for the GDP. In this view, the folks who spend years caring for children—their own or others—are, as Ann Crittenden points out in *The Price of Motherhood*, the “single most important source of our most valuable economic assets.”

While Pelosi didn’t pay the price of marginalization for her stay-at-home years that many women do, her story may still help to change the ethos that values production over nurture. By being frank about the choices of her early years, Pelosi may help our culture value the care of children. Many women are reluctant to talk about the pleasures of mothering for fear of resurrecting the oppressive notion that women’s place is in the home. “In the current milieu, women rarely perceive their desire to care for their children as intellectually respectable, and that makes it less emotionally intelligible as well,” writes de Marneffe. “Maternal desire tends to be

treated as background noise or unspoken assumption rather than as something explicit, valuable, and important to include as an issue relevant to women's lives."

I hope that Pelosi's narrative as a mother, rather than being used to punish or patronize women who have not lived her privileged life, can move the background noise of parents' desire to care for their children to the foreground of public discussion about family and work. Even more, I hope that rhetorical affirmations of mothering can be translated into tangible help for real-life mothers—such as a raise in the minimum wage for them and their partners and health coverage for their children.

Finally, I hope that some day a male member of Congress can be as candid about his "father of five" voice and his years as a stay-at-home parent as Pelosi has been about hers. Now that would be progress.