

The Job of Staying Home

Terry Spraitz Cizek, a homemaker in Fayetteville, North Carolina, talks about changing perceptions of women in the traditional economy and those who choose to leave their careers to raise a family.

[James Fallows](#)

For many women, the decision of whether or not to go back to work after having a child remains a fraught one. After all, returning to a job after maternity leave often means facing significant workplace challenges and even a [decrease in earnings](#). On the other hand, there is also frequently a stigma attached to women who leave the workforce temporarily to raise their children or become long-term homemakers. Oftentimes, the decision for new mothers to rejoin the workforce can be seen as a reflection of the state of the economy. The number of stay-at-home mothers [fell consistently for decades](#)—from 49 percent in 1967 to a low of 23 percent in 1999—before bouncing back to 29 percent in 2012.

The ability for one parent to stay home, for kids or otherwise, is often viewed as a [luxury of upper-middle class life](#). But even for the households that can afford it, the financial implications can extend beyond the loss of one steady income: A hypothetical 26-year-old female worker with a salary of \$44,000 a year could [lose about \\$707,000 in lifetime income](#) (\$220,000 in income, \$265,000 in lifetime wage growth, and \$222,000 in retirement benefits) from taking just five years off to care for a child.

Terry Spraitz Cizek, a homemaker in Fayetteville, North Carolina, was around that age when she decided to stay home with her first child in the 1980's and not re-enter the workforce. I spoke with Cizek about the work she did as a stay-at-home parent, how perceptions of mothers who don't work have shifted over time, and how she sees her now-adult children

navigating work and parenthood. The interview that follows has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Adrienne Green: How did you arrive at the decision to become a homemaker and stay-at-home mom?

Terry Spraitz Ciszek: Largely, I grew up at a time when it was more common in America for women to stay at home and raise their families. It was more economically possible in those years as well. It was before Title IX, and we weren't exposed to a lot of opportunities that girls are today. It wasn't as common to choose a career, and the professions you were encouraged to go into were teaching and nursing. I enjoyed helping my mother cook, sewing, and I babysat a lot. It seemed like a natural thing, and I always wanted to have children so I guess I had a maternal instinct. I have two girls and a boy, and they were spread out. I had the first at 28, and then I was 32 with the next, and I was 39 with the last one.



Terry Spraitz Ciszek, a homemaker in North Carolina

(Terry Spraitz Ciszek)

Green: You have an associate's degree and became a nurse before having children. Did you ever worry about trying to balance a career and children?

Ciszek: While I was working, at the beginning of my marriage, I saw the difficulties that people who had children and still worked encountered. I couldn't imagine the emotional pain of having to leave your baby with someone else, and then all of the things you would have to juggle when you got home. So I hoped I didn't have to have a life like that. I hoped to be able to stay home with my children, but I also loved my job.

When I did stop working after I had my first child, I longed to go back, but I also didn't know how I'd manage it if I did. My husband is a physician, and he takes care of premature babies, so his hours were really terrible in the early years. He was on call every third day for 36 hours for about seven years straight. I don't know how I could have done it without a live-in nanny, and we certainly couldn't afford that. But we could afford for me to stay home.

Green: If you could've afforded a nanny, do you think you would've went back to work or made the same decision to stay at home?

Ciszek: I would've made the same decision to stay at home. I just couldn't imagine someone else raising my children all day long. I enjoyed being able to spend an hour watching a praying mantis climb up a fence, and talking to them about insects. I enjoyed going out for a bicycle ride with them on the back of the bicycle. [If I was working], I wouldn't have had time. I enjoyed teaching them myself. I don't think I would've been good at being a parent myself, with my personality and my abilities, if I just had to rush through everything in the evening when I got home. Some people can do that. I'm not a good organizer of time, probably.

Green: You became of working age around the same time as a growing feminist movement in the 1970's. What was that like for you, trying to navigate whether to stay at home with a social movement that was encouraging of women entering the workforce?

Ciszek: It caused some self-esteem and ego difficulties because I watched people move ahead and have exciting careers, and people more or less would tout that as a tremendous accomplishment. It was difficult because I was a good student in high school. My classmates went on to colleges and advanced degrees, and I know that my own situation was more difficult because I had to work my way through a junior college and support myself. It was ego-deflating, and it was all in the news. In the 70's, it was all about, "women can do it all," and I remember the [Virginia Slim commercials](#). It was deflating to be publicly frowned upon as though I was settling, or that [staying at home] was all I could do. I can be very accomplished.

I lived in Illinois at the time, and in the 1980's no one else was home in the daytime because they were working, so you didn't have company on your street or in your neighborhood. When I moved to North Carolina, it was a different story. I noticed people there sacrificed so that the mother could stay at home with their children; they lived in smaller homes, and didn't have to drive the fancy car. Stay-at-home motherhood was more valued in the society of the South.

Green: How did you overcome that deflation?

Ciszek: With age and maturity, and by meeting other women who chose to do the same thing. I liked being the one who could help out in the schools more often because I was available, and having my children appreciate my wide variety of knowledge. I was able to take the time to answer their questions very, very thoroughly and do a lot of teaching, and my children did well in school. I found that people appreciated some of my external, not housekeeping abilities.

I did not like a lot of the mundane tasks, like ironing. For years, until maybe I was in my 50s, I felt like I was doing the same task over and over, and it just never ended and it never amounted to anything. I grew mature enough to realize that my homemaking skills were a gift, and other people valued them, and I was able to give to other people through maybe even mundane skills.

Green: What was your day-to-day life like when you were staying at home?

Ciszek: We were up early everyday, I packed a healthy lunch, got them dressed and off to school. They didn't have to buy lunch at school. I wasn't as busy then as I am today. I did a lot of vegetable gardening; I enjoyed making the yard pretty and planting things. I would sew occasionally, and I love to cook, so I would explore new recipes and try things out. I love baking homemade bread, so I spent a lot of time in the kitchen. I honed cooking skills because it was a pleasure.

I read books. I've been in a monthly book club since I was 30. I volunteered once a week for years in the health room at my children's' Catholic school where you were like the school nurse, but unofficially. I joined other activities at my parish and participated in handbell ringing.

After school, there was ballet and baseball and tee-ball and gymnastics and soccer and cooking dinner. I was involved in the community. Sometimes I would show up at city council meetings to lobby for things like sidewalks and things to better our community because we didn't have some amenities that I thought were the norm when I grew up in Southern California.

Green: You said that friends of yours touted their careers as accomplishments. Do you feel equally as accomplished as a homemaker, and do you think other people perceive your job at home as an accomplishment?

Ciszek: I think today that's changing. I do think that other people perceive homemakers as accomplished. I think some of it was my own perceptions and sense of inferiority when I was younger, but today, I think it's more valued than it was at the beginnings of the really aggressive feminist movements. I think people around me that know me, or know my children, value that and sense the difference. I know there are people who work full-time that make great sacrifices like taking time off to join field trips, too, and I admire them greatly for that.

Terry Spraitz Ciszek's family (Terry Spraitz Ciszek)

Green: Have you had any conversations with your children about whether any of them will think about being a stay-at-home parent?

Ciszek: My son, the oldest, is 34 and is a data scientist at Twitter. My eldest daughter is 30, and she's been married 6 years, and she's a physician assistant. My youngest is starting her second year of law school in Boston. And they all have graduate degrees.

I think both of my daughters want children, and expect to stay in the

workforce and not at home. That's one of the reasons I think my eldest daughter chose being a physician's assistant, rather than a physician, so that she'd have more flexible hours. She saw how much her father worked and she's hoping we don't retire very far away from her because she'd rather I watched her future children while she works. She just started working as a physician's assistant last spring, and she wants to get a couple of years full time work under her belt before she starts having children.

My son says children are way too much work, and he doesn't intend to have any. He's had a long-term relationship. He's got five computers in his home and umpteen screens, and he gets very involved in technology and the internet. He likes his lifestyle. He says children are way too much work.

Green: Do you think that homemaking is getting less gendered?

Ciszek: I think it's much less gendered [now], and I think it's wonderful. My next-door neighbor is currently a stay-at-home dad, and they have three children under the age of four. His wife is a neonatologist and one of my husband's partners. I got on my husband's case one time: He was feeling sorry for my neighbor because he was so busy with the kids. I said, "Excuse me, that was my life. I don't recall you ever feeling sorry for me about how hard I was working at home all day with the kids." I think it's wonderful that men who are geared to and enjoy raising children, that it's acceptable for them to stay home and do that.

Green: How do you think your work is tied into your identity?

Ciszek: As a mother, I feel like it's also made me a good teacher. It helped me develop good teaching skills and to be able to be naturally nurturing, to be able to help other people that aren't just my immediate family. I've learned to be satisfied and proud of my own accomplishments, which are my children and my home. I've had the time to develop my literary skills and my cooking skills and my photography skills, and I use them to help people and give back to my community.

I like to think back to the version of myself that was four years old, who

wasn't tainted by sorrows and struggles. That's like seeing the world through the eyes of a child where everything is new, and there's always something new to learn, and I think being able to raise children and stay at home with them reinforced that joy.

This interview is a part of an ongoing project on work and identity in America. You may find other pieces [here](#), including interviews with a [funeral director](#), a [prison guard](#), and a [pastor](#).