

Margaret  
Cunningim  
Women's Center

## Searching for community within diverse family structures

Joan Anderson is Secretary in the division of Adolescent Medicine. Her book entitled *The Single Mother's Book* will be released in June 1990.

No two families are alike. Just as we have the opportunity to recognize

are headed by a single parent, usually a single mother. In order to include single parents in the family formula, we need to establish that marriage does not necessarily create community and divorce does not end it. When the biological family breaks apart, the family is not shattered like glass but rather knocked horizontal for a while, like fallen building blocks. Usually by the time the judge pronounces a husband and wife divorced, the family has already been rebuilt in a different form. The children will still have two parents in their family, but the two parents now live in separate spheres. Whatever its structure, the family nurtures, protects, promotes, worries about, nudges, celebrates with, and otherwise interacts with its members.

When there is a commitment to living and loving together, there is family. For this reason, non-relatives may be accepted as part of the family. Children are quick to pick up

and celebrate diversity in individuals, we can recognize and celebrate diversity in family structures. A major benefit of family, no matter what its structure, is community -- the responsibility of contributing to and the privilege of drawing from an intimate group across time. If we can experience nurture, support, personal challenge, and stimulation through interaction with other family members, we are experiencing community.

The American family used to be biological Mom, Dad, and the kids living in the same house. Now, 24% of families with dependent children

on this: they seem to think operatively. Their dad's new live-in partner, for example, may be part of their self-defined family. "Parents," might mean biological Mom in one house and biological Dad and Dad's

live-in partner in another house.

Society places great value on the family, and rightly so. Traditionally the *biological* family has been viewed as the sanctioned vehicle for family life. The breaking up of the biological family carries with it strong feelings. To say that a family has "broken up" connotes failure. In an article for *Working Woman* magazine (September 1981, pp. 53-57) entitled "There Are No Failed Marriages," Owen Edwards writes, "Even when a marriage doesn't last, it often can be viewed as a success rich with the rewards -- children, knowledge, growth -- that do last...a lifetime." He talks not about his own "divorce," but about his "completed marriage." While that concept, standing alone, may sugar-coat the wrenching feelings and the complicated and sometimes expensive process which surround getting a divorce, the idea has merit.

When a single mother thinks about her marriage as "completed," she acknowledges the good times, the meaningful intimacies, the rituals, the explorations and the struggles together -- the closeness which was also a part of her life with the partner who is the father of her children. If her partner had died, she would not burn all the evidence of their lives together just because the leaving was painful. Nor does she have to deny the value of her completed marriage -- the good part and the bad -- just because it is over. To deny it would be to bury part of herself. The more open she can be about her completed relationship, the easier it is for her to learn from it and accept her involvement in it with assurance. And she can share the memories of that time with her children in ways which can promote their growth and feeling of security within family.

(continued page two)



# Speaking of Women . . .

Vera Coleman joined the Vanderbilt community in 1962 as a biomedical research assistant. She currently works as a Recruitment Specialist in Human Resources. She was interviewed recently by Anita Linde, Activities Coordinator for the Office of International Services.

The walls of Vera Coleman's office on the first floor of the Peabody Administration building bear witness to a life-long commitment to activism and advocacy: the PENCIL Youth Service Foundation and the Opportunity Development Center are among those groups which have recognized Coleman. Indeed, despite the many changes she has seen during the past twenty-eight years at Vanderbilt, Coleman has remained devoted to the belief that one person can make a difference in furthering the University's "mission to diversify."

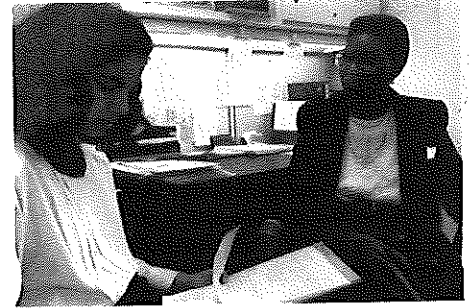
Coleman, a former member of the Chancellor's Committee on the Status of Women and Minorities, says she is gratified to see Vanderbilt coming to terms with the idea that "heterogeneity has its place" on a university campus devoted to the education of "whole people." Despite the notion that Vanderbilt is still perceived by many as a white, male-dominated institution, the University is clearly moving towards an increased awareness of diversity in its midst: whether racial, sexual, religious, or otherwise. Coleman sees programs such as the recent "Hands Across Vanderbilt," held in conjunction with Rites of Spring, as encouraging evidence that a heightened sensitivity to minority issues is developing here.

Growing sensitivity ultimately leads to a healthy tolerance of difference, according to Coleman, where people are content to "live and let live." She herself has reaped the benefits of such tolerance: as a young black woman studying biology and chemistry at TSU in the 1950's, Coleman received the support of her professors and classmates, most of whom were male. Although financial limitations prevented her from pursuing a medical degree, she nevertheless was able to remain in her beloved "world of science" by

working as a laboratory technician and research assistant, first at Meharry and later at Vanderbilt.

Coleman identified her "calling" in science as a junior at Pearl Senior High in Nashville. The female math and science teachers Coleman had at Pearl played a decisive role in guiding her decision: "All of my teachers were Marva Collins-types," Coleman boasts, referring to Chicago's inner-city educator whose name has become synonymous with the inspirational teaching of disadvantaged youth. In stressing the influence that female role models had on her professional development, Coleman points out the need for more women mentors at a co-educational institution such as Vanderbilt.

"There is a way to have a career and a family without either one



Anita Linde interviews Vera Coleman

suffering," Coleman insists, "and young women today must be reminded of this." Indeed, she herself was able to juggle the two successfully for years with the help of highly supportive family and friends. Coleman believes the creation of such "consistent communities," where family, school and church life all complement one another, is essential if modern women are to maintain their dual role as bread winner and care taker: "After all, living is more than just *earning a living*..." ■

## Community (from page one)

All family structures -- the married couple without children, the biological family, the single parent family and the blended family -- have their problems. Single parent and blended families often face greater difficulties than the biological family. For the blended family, children can become an overriding source of friction between the parents, so that two people who might have built a solid family with biological children find the stresses of parenting stepchildren are too much for the relationship to bear and the second family ends in frustration.

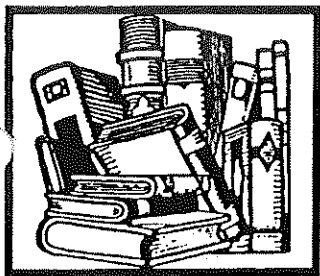
In the single-parent family, especially the single-mother family, limitations of time and money can leave the family weak and its members prone to drugs, acting-out behavior, withdrawal, and other signs of emotional crisis.

But the problems of blended and single-parent families are solvable -- in part by stretching family resources to include non-family members. Blended and single-parent family structures can be nurturing, supportive, and stimulating. And they can be an improvement for the individual members over the biological families which preceded them.

From my point of view, the three

most important elements in the success of any family are *economic stability, commitment* to each family member and to the family, and *love*. Each of these elements involves work. Commitment is active; we do it daily. Love is active; we do it daily. Through thick and thin, we stick together with our family, work on our problems and share the good times and the bad.

As we grow older and our grandparents and parents die and our children move far away, a non-relative family/community to interact with becomes crucial. The best we can aim for in this world is to establish for ourselves a supportive community of people to contribute to and to draw from as we maneuver through life. The children, family, friends and men in our community may come and go. We will need to let go of individuals from time to time. We will need to add on individuals from time to time. But it is our job to make sure that we never let go of the concept or the reality of our community, whatever form it takes. To live in community is to risk experiencing pain, but also to be able to connect with the depth and power of all humanity and experience true wholeness. ■



## In the library

Naomi E. Heiser  
Women's Center Librarian

Summer is here, bringing (hopefully!) some spare time to treat oneself to leisure reading. The women's center library has a wide range of interesting books with which to escape, indulge, or otherwise entertain oneself. Here are a few choice examples:

· *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women* (Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., 1973) Includes a large variety of poets writing about women such as Louise Bogan, Judy Grahn, Gertrude Stein, Phyllis McGinley, Sonia Sanchez, Anne Sexton, Audre Lord, Marge Piercy, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Sylvia Plath, H.D., Denise Levertov, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, and Rita Mae Brown. Supplemented with biographical material.

· *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga, Mariana Romo-Carmona, eds., 1983) In their introduction, the editors (whose stories are also included) say, "For the most part, our lives and the lives of the women before us have never been fully told, except by word of mouth. But we can no longer afford to keep our tradition oral -- a tradition which relies so heavily on close family networks and dependent upon generations of people living in the same town or barrio...In *Cuentos* our intent is to mention the unmentionables, to capture some essential expression -- without censors -- that could be called "Latina" and "Latina-identified." Some stories are written in English, some in Spanish, and all have words or phrases of both languages mixed in. The editors explain that, "In este libro, we wish to stretch la imaginación -- help the reader become accustomed

to seeing two languages in a book...mixing English and Spanish in our writing and talking is a legitimate and creative response to acculturation."

· *The House of Mirth* (Edith Wharton, 1905) is a tragic, although exquisitely parodic novel about a young New York socialite, Lily Bart, and the high-society world in which she moves. Wharton examines women's roles at the turn of the century, and concludes that they are limited, suffocating, and in Lily's case, deadly. Lily's pride and determination not to prostitute herself through compromise (marriage of convenience) eventually doom her. Her struggles to stay economically afloat show how the double standard forced women to play dangerous social games in which any small slip in virtuousness, imagined or otherwise, resulted in instant and irreversible ostracism. Lily's intelligence can only be used to play this social game, which indicates an enormous loss to our society of female creative power. Lily's story also chronicles the desperate fight against aging, "loss of beauty," and the increasing humiliation of exceeding a "marriageable" age.

· *The Joy Luck Club* (Amy Tan, 1989). These are powerful and beautifully crafted intertwining stories about eight Chinese-American women: four mothers and four daughters who struggle together with difficulties resulting from trying to assimilate into a new culture while preserving and respecting aspects of the old. The older women tell of their lives in China and the circumstances of their immigration to the U.S.; their special experiences as women are fascinating and often very sad. Told alternately from the point of view of each woman, the stories examine with sympathy for both generations the relationships between mothers and daughters.

· *Bodily Harm* (Margaret Atwood, 1981). At times frightening, at times hilarious, this is a good adventure story. Of course, one expects much more from Atwood than just a lively plot, and she delivers: a disturbing multi-layered exploration of the meanings of and ties between colonialism/invasion of an individual's body, of women's bodies, and of countries or peoples. Atwood describes various forms of terrorism and intrusion, both physical and

symbolic, including heterosexual sex, pornography, politics, disease and medicine. The protagonist of the novel is a free-lance journalist who takes a "vacation" to recover from a partial mastectomy. She ends up inadvertently involved in the violent local politics of a small Caribbean island, recently given "independence" by the British, where she has been sent to write another banal "travel piece". While reflecting on her life, and her many and various experiences with male culture, "She wondered what it was like to be able to throw yourself into another person, another body, a darkness like that. Women could not do it. Instead they had darkness thrown into them." In the end, her life is given new meaning by life-threatening experiences. ■

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## Fathers, too, are seeking a balance between their families and careers

By Carol Lawson

"Fathers are beginning to talk about the same issues that working mothers are struggling with," James A. Levine told the group. "Men feel torn between juggling their jobs and a commitment to being a father. They feel pulled in both directions."

Mr. Levine, who studies and writes about the behavior of the man he calls "the new father," was leading one of the fatherhood seminars he conducts in the offices of major corporations around the nation.

Mr. Levine, a former vice president of the Bank Street College of Education, defined the new father as a man who "attempts to make child rearing an important part of his life."

"It does not mean that a man gives up a career or the drive to succeed," said the 43-year-old speaker, who began studying changing patterns of fatherhood in the early 1970's with a Ford Foundation Grant. "It means trying to achieve more balance."

excerpted from *The New York Times*,  
April 12, 1990

# Announcements et cetera

The Women's Center Book Group will discuss *Woman On The Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy on Monday, June 11 from 5:15 p.m. until 6:15 p.m. at the Women's Center. Joyce Laben, Professor of Nursing, will lead the discussion of this story of a Chicana, incorrectly labeled as insane, who is committed to a mental institution. New members are welcome. Light refreshments.

**Kudos to Denise Tucker.** The Senior's Chemistry Reception recently honored Tucker with the Donald E. Pearson award as the outstanding undergraduate in chemistry research. In addition she received a national award from the American Institute of Chemists.

Denise served as co-chair of the Students for Women's Concerns Committee this year.

**Women's Research & Education Institute of Washington, D.C.** is searching for a Director of Research. The institute is a small nonprofit organization.

Job Requirements include an advanced degree in economics, sociology, political science, law, or related field with at least five years experience in policy research. A more extensive job description is available at the Women's Center.

Applicants should send a resume,

including references, and two writing samples to: Executive Director, WREI, 1700-18th Street, N.W. #400, Washington, D.C. 20009.

**Elisabeth Perry**, Associate Professor of History, is to be congratulated on receiving for the second time funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for her seminar entitled "Feminist Classics in American Culture." Sixteen secondary school teachers will live and study on the Vanderbilt campus in July during this program. Dr. Perry, who teaches women's history at Vanderbilt, developed the seminar to help teachers understand the varieties of American feminist thought.



**Editor's note:** This issue of *Women's VU* (did you know we pronounce this as "women's view"?) is the last one for the 1989-90 year. We do not publish in July and August.

As I look back over the last ten issues with pride, it is uppermost in my mind that many people have contributed to the newsletter. Although my name is listed as editor, many others help shape and define

each issue. Foremost is Nancy A. Ransom, director of the Women's Center, whose great ideas and support are paramount to the production. Naomi Heiser, librarian, not only writes her monthly column *In The Library*, but offers invaluable help with design, editing, and proof-reading. This year I've been most grateful for the photographs taken by Lesley Collins for the *Speaking of Women...* column.

Other proofreaders and labelers who have valiantly read and mailed each issue are Kathy Thornton, office manager at the Women's Center, and student workers: Cheryl Brown, Holly Toensing, Charice Mowery, Julia Burns, Joanne Park, and Laura Warren. Two others outside of our office who have provided invaluable proofing are Elaine Goleski and Margaret Meggs.

Another big thanks to all the authors whose bylines you've seen each month who make the newsletter valuable and interesting. Grateful appreciation to Beth Colvin Huff who has contributed the monthly health column in an informative and concise manner.

Finally, Cindy Brown's delightful editorial cartoons have added a touch of humor to the lead stories this year.

*Judith T. Helfer*, editor

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Edited by JUDITH T. HELFER

**Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center**  
Vanderbilt University  
Franklin Bldg., West Side Row  
Box 1513, Station B  
Nashville, TN 37235

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