Mommy Shift Begins as Nanny Shift Ends

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This Latina immigrant is one of thousands in L.A. County whose time spent with their employers' children is time spent away from their own.

By Anna Gorman, Times Staff Writer

Margoth Enríquez looks at the clock. It's 6:03 p.m. -- past time to go home.

She sighs.

The nanny feeds 13-month-old Elise a bottle while Elise's twin sister rests nearby. Their 3-year-old brother sits at the table, finishing his broccoli and chicken. Samantha, 2, holds her mom's hand as they walk toward the kitchen.

"Let's see if your bottle is ready and then we're going to say goodbye to Margoth," Stacey Arnold says to her daughter.

"Why?" asks Samantha.

"Every night, 'Why is she going home?' " Stacey says, referring to her daughter's inability -- or unwillingness -- to accept Margoth's departure. "I ask myself that very question."

The answer lies across town, in a neatly decorated one-bedroom apartment near downtown Los Angeles, where Margoth's own young daughter and teenage sons anxiously wait her return.

After a full day of taking care of Stacey's four children on the Westside, Margoth arrives home just after 7 p.m.

"¡Hola, ninos!" she says as she opens the door.

And so her second shift begins.

Jasmine, 3, who was still curled up in her Dora the Explorer blanket when her mom left that morning, jumps and squeals. She grabs her mother's hand and pulls her to the kitchen table to show her the crayon drawing she made in preschool.

"You did this for me?" Margoth says in Spanish as she kisses Jasmine's head and puts the poster on the refrigerator with alphabet magnets. "Gracias, muneca."

Margoth takes off her shoes and immediately begins cooking dinner. When she has the energy, she prepares traditional dishes from her native El Salvador. But many nights, she cooks what's easy and quick: fish sticks, chicken nuggets or spaghetti.

Tonight, she decides on steak, rice and a bag of vegetables from the freezer, which she puts on the table at nearly 8 p.m. -- two hours after she helped feed Stacey's children. As she cooks, washes dishes and sets the table, she asks her sons, ages 13 and 15, about their days.

"Raul, did you do your homework?" she asks. "Mario, what did you do in school?"

Similar scenes play out throughout Los Angeles County every day. Immigrant women leave their children at home -- with siblings, relatives or bargain baby-sitters -- so they can earn a living caring for other people's children.

"It's everywhere," said Lisa Loomer, who wrote a play, "Living Out," about the trend in Los Angeles. "It's this city. It's the great divide in this city."

There are roughly 62,000 Latina nannies in Los Angeles, said University of North Carolina professor Philip N. Cohen. He based his estimate on census data and noted that the actual number may be higher.

Inevitably, immigrants feel the pull between their employer's children and their own families. Every day, they take their employer's children to play dates and the park, often unable to do the same with their own. They pick up their employer's children from school while theirs take buses.

"They are forced to be away from their families and yet reminded at every instance what their families are being denied," said Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, USC professor and author of "Domesticia: Immigrant Women Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence."

Often, the only baby-sitters they can afford are untrained or unreliable.

"The immigrants are paying each other," said Arizona State University professor Mary Romero, author of "Maid in the U.S.A." "Somebody has to take care of the children. It's the nanny or the maid's child who gets the short end of the stick."

Stacey says she never takes Margoth for granted.

She gives her nanny paid time off to attend school meetings or stay home with a sick child. She tells Margoth she can bring her daughter along to work.

"She's a mom," she says. "Those are her kids. She feels about her kids the same way I feel about mine."

But Stacey, whose husband works long hours in commercial real estate, also depends on Margoth -- so much so that at the end of the day, it's hard to let her go home.

When the twins were younger, Stacey says, it was even worse. Some nights, Margoth wouldn't leave until after 7.

"At 6 p.m., things were falling apart," Stacey says. "It was like a madhouse."

Margoth depends on Stacey, too -- particularly for the $550 paycheck she receives each week.

If she had the choice, Margoth says, she wouldn't work. She feels as though she spends more time with Stacey's family than her own. Sometimes, she accidentally calls Jasmine by the name of one of Stacey's daughters.

"I also have my family," she says. "They also need me.... I don't want my family to eat cereal for dinner."
The oldest of eight girls, Margoth grew up in the village of San Rafael Chalatenango. When Margoth was young, her father left the family. She began cleaning houses to help support her mother and sisters.

The money was never enough.

In 1988, Margoth decided to head to the United States. She traveled by bus to Tijuana, then climbed into the trunk of a car to cross the border. She paid a coyote $350 to guide her through the two-week journey from her village to Los Angeles.

A few months after arriving, Margoth started dating Mario Leon, a man from her village. The couple married in 1989 and soon had Mario and Raul. Jasmine was born 10 years later.

Margoth, who has since become a legal resident, earned money as a maid while her husband worked in gardening and construction. She struggled to find clients for herself -- and baby-sitters for her children.

She kept thinking of the saying common among Mexican immigrants: "Norte queriamos, norte tenemos" -- North we wanted, North we have.

It's a twist on "Be careful what you wish for."

"People think life is easy here," Margoth says. "Nothing is easy."

In time, she found clients, including the Arnolds. She started by cleaning their house once a week. Then both Margoth and Stacey got pregnant. Before long, Margoth was back at work, spending two days a week at Stacey's house.

Along with cleaning, Margoth started helping out with Caden, now 3, and Samantha. Then Stacey got pregnant again, with the twins, Taylor and Elise. She asked if Margoth could work full time.

Margoth liked the flexibility of cleaning houses. She worked fast, then went home to her children. But she knew she would earn more for her family working as a full-time nanny. She agreed to try it for three months.

Even with Stacey home, the job was exhausting. The hours were long: She worked five days a week, about 11 hours a day, making about $8 an hour. But Margoth says she got used to it. She also got attached to the family.

Stacey got attached to Margoth, too. Margoth was very comfortable with the kids, singing and reading to them, watching Disney movies endlessly at their side. She hugged them constantly.

"It's more than just having someone change a diaper," Stacey says. "It's the love and devotion she has for our family."

Stacey, the youngest of six, grew up in eastern Washington state. Her father was a dentist, her mother his longtime assistant. As a young adult, she worked for financial companies, training employees on computer programs.

In 1996, she moved to California, marrying Michael Arnold four years later. In the next four years, the family grew from two to six. She stopped working after Caden was born in 2001, and now they live on her husband's six-figure salary.

Stacey never thought she would have a full-time nanny. After all, her mother did it by herself.

But when the twins were born, both Caden and Samantha were still in diapers. Plus, Stacey was taking care of the family's 13-year-old golden retriever, Lexie.

"If I had one baby, I might not have needed as much help," she says. "Four makes it much harder."

Without Margoth, Stacey says, "I probably wouldn't be as good of a parent.... I'd be pulled in so many different directions."

Having Margoth "allows me to have some freedom to do some things for myself, which in turn, I think, makes me a better parent because I come back refreshed."

Without discussing who should do what, Margoth and Stacey share the cooking and cleaning. They also share intimate moments with the children, often without speaking.

Margoth lifts Elise up. Stacey takes her temperature. Stacey takes out Caden's lunchbox, Margoth packs it. Stacey bashes Taylor, Margoth dries her off.

On a recent morning, Margoth walks into the living room with a laundry basket full of clothes. Neither woman speaks, but both sit down and begin folding: the twins' pink pajamas, Caden's Spiderman underwear, Samantha's pale blue princess dress.

Caden and Samantha look on. The twins begin to cry. "Ay, ay, ay," Margoth says, as she picks up Elise. "Oh, my goodness," Stacey says, as she picks up Taylor. "They slept 30 minutes today, that's it?" she says.

"Yeah, Sammie too," Margoth responds.

"Nobody sleeps in this house, except for Mom. Mom wants to sleep."

Margoth and Stacey glance at each other and laugh.

Margoth has had several baby-sitters for Jasmine in the past three years. They don't stay long. Last year, one moved back to El Salvador. This year another moved to Huntington Park.

Mario Leon had had enough: He told his wife he wanted her to quit. Margoth didn't know what to do. She knew the family couldn't survive on the money her husband earned from daily construction jobs.

"Here, summer or winter, I work," Margoth says. "Rain or no rain, I come."

She told Stacey the news. "The two of us had knots in our stomachs," Stacey says.

Stacey offered Margoth an extra $100 a week and agreed to let her go by 6. Margoth's husband backed off his demand.

The Arnolds "understood better I have family I have to take care of," Margoth says.

Now, Margoth lifts a sleepy-eyed Jasmine each morning and carries her to a neighbor's apartment.
Margoth pays the woman $125 a week -- about a fourth of what she earns -- to take care of Jasmine from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., when her teenage son Raul brings her home.

In emergencies, Margoth relies on her sister, Flor Hernandez, who lives nearby and works part time at Jack in the Box. A few months ago, when Jasmine hurt her ankle, Hernandez took the toddler to the hospital.

Though Jasmine is the youngest, Margoth is most concerned about her sons. She knows they are good boys. Mario runs cross-country and is already thinking about college. Raul attends Virgil Middle School, loves computer games and gets mostly A's and B's.

Still, she worries about what they are doing while she is away.

Mario and Raul can recite Margoth's lectures almost by heart: Do your homework. Stay out of trouble. Keep away from gangs.

I have eyes throughout the neighborhood, she says. I'll send you to the Army if you misbehave. If I am going to trek across the city and work all day to support you, then you have to do your part.

"Overprotective," Mario grumbles one recent night, as he types a school report.

"What would you do if I gave you more freedom?" Margoth asks, shaking her head.

Mario keeps typing. Raul shrugs.

"Nothing," she says sternly, but with a smile. "You have everything you need here."

Mario, the oldest, tries to take an adult view. "I understand it when she goes to work because, you know, she earns the money for us," he says.

Still, he wishes his mother could go to his races and that, for her own sake, she didn't work so much. "It would be better if she stayed at home because she could rest more."

For Mother's Day this year, Margoth bought herself a cellphone so they could always have a way to reach her.

They often call to ask when she is coming home.

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Stacey considers Margoth a member of the family. "I confide in her, even if she doesn't understand," she says. "I hate the word nanny.... She is not the baby-sitter. She is a co-parent. We work as a team."

Margoth considers her boss a friend but calls her Mrs. Stacey.

"Sometimes she asks me about my life," Margoth says. Margoth responds by talking about how the boys are doing in school, what plans they have for the weekend. "One can't tell everything," she says.

Stacey asks for Margoth's advice on parenting, and the women agree on what to do most of the time.

But not always. Stacey says she reserves the word "no" for big things. Margoth says she doesn't hesitate to tell her children no.

One afternoon, Stacey is about to walk out the door to pick up Caden from school when Samantha decides she wants to change into one of her favorite dresses. Her mother tells her there isn't time.

"Yes!" Samantha whines loudly.

"OK," Stacey says with a sigh, walking her back to her bedroom to change clothes.

Margoth shakes her head disapprovingly. "Oh, Sammie."

They come back into the living room, with Samantha in her dress.

"What do you say to Margoth, Sammie?"

"Thank you for washing my dress."

"OK, de nada, Sammie."

Stacey and Margoth, both 38, are both independent and strong-willed mothers, both doing what they see as best for their children.

But Stacey and Margoth live different lives.

Stacey and her family live in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, on a quiet, tree-lined street of single-family homes near the Westside Pavilion. The Arnolds take their children to amusement parks and on cross-country vacations.

Margoth and her family live in a one-bedroom apartment, on a street near downtown where graffiti is common and trash lines the entryway. They usually spend weekends cleaning, doing chores and going to church.

Walking the twins around Stacey's block one afternoon, Margoth looks around and sighs. It's peaceful, she says. "If I win the lottery," she says, "I'll buy a house here."