

WEEKEND LIVING

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Good things come in small packages
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Stewardesses meet after 45 years
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KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES



STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR

Financial planner Sylvia Sarkus's staff includes personal trainer Matt Sharpe, housekeeper Ann Andrews, chef Peter Crook, and landscape designer Beth Lawrence.

Help wanted

The upper middle class is spending its money on staff, not stuff, because having 'people' is the latest status symbol

TRISH CRAWFORD
LIVING REPORTER

Sylvia Sarkus has not gone "Hollywood."

The married Toronto financial planner and mother of two teens may have a personal trainer, chef, cleaning lady and gardener, but she is not the only one. Today, the middle class is spending money on staff, not stuff — having "people" is the latest status symbol.

Time-crunched, Sarkus has hired a retinue of workers so she can enjoy a healthy lifestyle, including soul-restoring leisure. It has taken some getting used to, she admits, fearing that having staff made her sound "a little Hollywood."

"When I got a personal trainer, I kept apologizing," says Sarkus. "I do it not because it's chi chi but (because) it is keeping me out of the

physiotherapist's office."

The days at her desk can be long, especially in spring when she is doing taxes on top of accounting and financial planning, so Sarkus needs to build healthy practices into her daily life.

The free time won by hiring people to make meals, plant her flowers and clean the house means Sarkus can belong to interesting clubs, spend time with her husband Michael Augustinavicius and their children, and exercise regularly.

The delicious food chef Peter Crook whips up in a one-day blitz on the weekend means she's eating

STAFF continued on L10

STATUS SYMBOL: Experience, L10

STAFFING: Fear in the kitchen, L10

6 *I do it not because it's chi chi but it is keeping me out of the physiotherapist's office . . . I am buying my sanity*

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KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES



CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR

Shopping is one of the many tasks Stephanie Kardos performs as part of her Voila! concierge service. She also spends time in clients' houses, waiting for service calls.

Hired help keep affluent afloat

STAFF from L1

soba noodles with greens and grilled salmon for lunch mid-week, not junk food.

Sarkus says, "I am buying my sanity."

She's aware most of the chores she's paying for used to be done by a housewife and says the average woman "is working to replace herself."

The mass exodus of women from the home to the workplace that began in the '70s means there's no one at home to take care of the children and the housework. This explains the popularity of cleaning ladies, nannies and dog walkers.

But the proliferation of gardeners, decorators, financial planners, handymen and even butlers speaks to the larger issue — the quest for leisure time.

The middle class has experienced a dramatic change in working conditions in recent decades, notes sociologist Stephen Katz, a professor at Trent University in Peterborough. People are working harder and longer and more often for themselves in a precarious and competitive professional environment that leaves little free time.

"It's not that you go to a job any more but you *are* the job," says Katz, who admits he didn't take a vacation this year because he was too busy. "A popular narrative of our culture is the progress of the upper tip of the middle class — its holidays, luxury and transportation. The new status symbols are

time and experiences."

Helen Goldfarb, vice-president of sales for a Canadian lingerie manufacturer, travels extensively abroad. She says a status symbol for her is a fabulous garden. "When I visit a friend and see beautiful flowers, I think, 'What a wonderful hobby. This is her relaxation. It means she has the time to have a garden.'"

That's coming a long way from her childhood in Montreal when a Cadillac and a country weekend retreat were hallmarks of having made it, the 48-year-old says. Today, she ranks the cultural life of London and the warmth of the people of northern Italy as her two most treasured travel experiences. In terms of material things, she values family heirlooms above anything electronic or modern that she can buy.

Goldfarb knows all about the competition for home helpers — she is currently without a cleaning lady. It's hard to keep a good one, she says, because they are in such demand. But she has been successful offloading such pesky chores as Christmas shopping or hanging blinds in her office, even waiting in her apartment for the cable guy to make a service call.

The person who handled these tasks was Stephanie Kardos, a 24-year-old literature graduate from the University of Toronto who started her concierge service, Voila!, a year ago in partnership with her mother Maria Argyris.

Kardos spends a lot of her time shopping and doing errands for people — including decorating a

STATUS SYMBOLS THEN AND NOW

1967

Rec room with wet bar, a Cadillac, cottage, cleaning lady, southern vacation in winter, country club membership.

1987

Monster homes with wine cellar, foreign car, designer clothes, nanny, European vacation, gourmet club.

2007

Gated communities with private security, two foreign cars, designer dogs, high-end electronics, staff, green vacations, spa membership.

AND SPEAKING OF VACATIONS . . .

When it comes to travel, it's how you go, not where you go, says

anthropologist Julia Harrison.

"The status symbols now are experiences," says the author of *Being a Tourist: Finding Meaning in Pleasure Travel* by UBC Press.

"People are still going to Europe but they are staying in 12th-century monasteries and touring wineries. It's passé to just visit a country. Now, you ride a bicycle from Paris to Istanbul or spend a week at an archaeological dig with Earth Watch."

Travel is about collecting experiences, she says. So is reducing your "carbon footprint." Being kind to the environment is important if you are going to impress people.

"People are asking, 'Did I go as green as possible?' It's decadent, but in the right way."

Trish Crawford

house for Halloween — but has frequently been asked to hang around for a service person to show up or handle problems with a utility. So one service is springing up because another one is unsatisfactory.

"For most people, their time is more valuable than anything," says Kardos, whose rates vary depending on the task.

Another service she provides is unpacking and cleaning up after the movers leave, so a client goes to work in the morning from one place and comes home to another.

Busy executive Warren Kotler, married with three children, believes quality time with his family comes first and he's only too happy to hire a service to do errands, such as grocery shopping on the day the family returns from a vacation. The family also has a cleaning lady and a financial planner. Kotler says it is money well-spent.

"I am happy to pay for the assistance," he says in an email. "As a company president (who travels

frequently), I find it almost impossible to juggle the demands of work with that of everything else in my life."

Condo Butlers is a service run by Sita Kaith. A former bookkeeper, she ended up being more like a personal assistant to her clients, because they had so many little tasks that needed to be done and no time to do them. So, two years ago, she started Condo Butlers, which charges \$30 an hour to arrange any help, from a cleaning lady to a handyman to a dog walker.

Three of the most common things people hire her to do are polish the silver, get in supplies and do the laundry. One executive recently asked her to arrange for someone to iron his clothes.

"People are too busy," she says. "They have hectic schedules."

Whatever shyness the middle class had about hiring someone else to do their chores has long disappeared, says Kaith. "It's not a negative anymore. It's a beautiful thing."

Besides, the three or four helpers most middle-class people employ are nothing like the team that British newspapers recently reported Victoria Beckham began assembling upon her arrival in the U.S.

She was lining up a chef, three nannies, two personal secretaries, three housekeepers, two gardeners, one pool man, two private tutors, two personal shoppers and a personal trainer.

Now, that's going Hollywood. tcrawford@thestar.ca

Why our 'help' manages us

SUSAN DELACOURT
TORONTO STAR

Sooner or later, we must all come to grips with our deepest fears.

For me, the moment came this year, shortly after I tumbled down a muddy, rocky riverbank, all dressed for work. Limping home to change my sodden shoes and dirt-caked hosiery, I had an epiphany: I am a cowardly idiot.

Okay, let me back up a bit.

I found myself on a path by a river at 8 a.m. because I was in the midst of a complicated, logistical manoeuvre to simultaneously accommodate my cleaning lady and my dog walker. The cleaning lady doesn't like the dog in the house while she's doing the stuff we pay her to do; the dog walker doesn't like the routine to be upset.

So I, technically the employer of these two people, was scrambling to make sure that neither one was annoyed, moving the dog to a mutually satisfactory location. In the midst of it all, the dogs scuttled down

the riverbank and into the water, where I had to retrieve her before the current pulled her away.

You might well ask: Wouldn't it have been easier to tell the cleaning lady to put up with the dog? Or tell the dog walker that the routine had changed for the day?

Well, yes, if I weren't so afraid of my "staff." I'll admit it — I have absolutely no backbone when it comes to service personnel.

And I don't think I'm alone. In these days when we're hiring more and more people to perform the chores we're less and less capable of doing, I think there are many of us who are letting these folks push us around.

Why? It can't be just that we're afraid they'll quit and we'll have to find new people. When I ask around about others' experience in this area, I keep hearing one word — "guilt."

I have one friend who has been known to go sit in the park for several hours at a time — not far from

where I fell down the river bank, in fact — rather than stay at home while the cleaning lady is in the house. Of course, it goes without saying she's already tidied the house before the help arrives. Who doesn't do that?

We feel guilty because we worry we should be doing these chores ourselves. Call that 1950s guilt.

And many of us, brought up in the shadow of the equal-rights era, feel a bit squeamish about anything that hints of a master-servant kind of relationship. Call that 1960s guilt.

So we profusely thank our handymen and offer them refreshments while they're working, and we wince in shame when the dog walker lectures us on causing her inconvenience. One woman I know had to summon up all her courage to tell a landscaper she wasn't pleased with the work on her garden, only to be met with a blank,

hostile stare. Of course, my friend scuttled back into her house and didn't mention it again.

Privacy also enters the picture here. Whether it's the accountant doing our taxes or the person washing our linen every week, we're entrusting these people with intimate glimpses into our personal lives. We're afraid of being judged or worse; being the object of extra-curricular gossip. A babysitter once did her last assignment for us after

she spent 10 minutes spilling details about the lives of one of her "celebrity" clients.

What's most surprising about all this deference to service people is that, for many of us, it's out of character. As I was limping home with my wet shoes that day, for instance, I was also on the BlackBerry to my boss, saying a firm "no" to something or other. I wondered idly why I could be so brave with someone who's paying me and such a chicken when it comes to people *I'm* paying. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

That may also be the legacy of growing up in an era when deference has gone out of fashion. We've been encouraged and acculturated to speak truth to power. We just don't know what to do when we're the ones who have that power. Heaven forbid that we speak the truth.

Susan Delacourt is the Ottawa bureau chief at the *Toronto Star*. sdelacourt@thestar.ca

