Margaret Chan was a stay-at-home mum for 20 years before she returned to full-time work at the age of 53. Now, three years into her job, she feels she did the right thing. Work gives her a sense of purpose and she knows she is not in her children's hair.

But, re-entering the workforce was not easy despite a doctorate and years of experience as an actress and a writer. Some of you may remember Margaret in the play Emily of Emerald Hill where she played the Peranakan matriarch.

Despite her anxiety, Margaret says she resolved to just dive in and - lo and behold - each passing day got better. Now she is as confident as someone who never took a break from work.

It wasn’t the fear of office politics that spooked her the most because she knew she could rely on wise counsel from husband John Chan, former Human Resource Director at Shell. Her working wardrobe or the lack of it was her greatest headache. She had spent all her days as a homemaker in T-shirt, shorts and comfortable sandals.

“I went out and bought myself sensible clothes and shoes because I didn’t have a wardrobe suitable for work. That really helped perk me up for the job. Even then I had my worries. When I got through my first working day, I remember saying to myself, ‘I made it for a whole day in a dress!’”

Till today, technology stumps her. Margaret is not quite SMS savvy and has problems remembering if that ring tone is from her mobile phone. For this interview she gave me her daughter’s mobile number, just in case. But she says she is learning, slowly.

“At work, I politely ask my friends to sit and help me understand the technology I need for my job. It was hard at first, but is getting easier as I use it more. I don’t pretend to be a fount of wisdom because of my age and I am willing to ask for help.”

Margaret is a great conversationalist and can talk just about anything under the sky. That she can care for students like a mother must have stood her in good stead when she went for an interview at the SMU which aims to be out-of-the-box. Margaret’s varied interests from food to people must have made her stand out. For instance, for her doctorate thesis, Margaret studied Chinese mediums and their use of “tangki” or ritualistic worship that involves going into a trance and piercing themselves.
A traditional mother

Yet, she is a traditional woman happy to be a mother. Married at age 23 and a mother at 26, she recalls for their first attempt at baby making, she and husband took a holiday to Fraser’s Hill.

“We went up Fraser’s Hill and when we came down, I knew I was pregnant,” says the outrageously outspoken Margaret, even as Cara, the product of that effort sat right across us at lunch. Margaret is absolutely comfortable with her body.

A second similar effort 10 years later, when Margaret was 36, produced Jonathan. By then she had given up work to embrace motherhood, pain and all. Breastfeeding, cleaning dirty bottoms, night feeds, and the wailing. Margaret says she enjoyed it all and even wanted to try for another baby 10 years later at 46.

Of course, her doctor knocked some sense into her and she decided to use her energy to pick up a Masters and later a doctorate before going back to work.

Family first

Some women give up trying to be a good mother and a good worker at the same time. Margaret is one of them because like many others she too had problems with employers who just don’t get it that mothers have to put family first.

Sharing one such example, Margaret says: “When I was working, I told my employers that I could only travel during school holidays. They agreed at first, but later backtracked and also asked me to report for work everyday, going back on a work-from-home-arrangement. I quit.”

But when she stayed home, Margaret was a mother and more to her children. She wanted to grow their minds, make them articulate and help them appreciate other cultures.

“I was not an assessment book Mum. I was interested in giving them opportunities to experience life. We had a schedule about what we would do on any given day and I stuck to it. So, we had biking days, swimming days and we even knew what was for lunch and dinner ahead.”

Because Margaret is also a great cook, the children grew up on interesting, nutritious meals.

Even for a grandchild

Margaret teaches creative thinking at the SMU and is happy at work. But, she says she will give it all up at the drop of a hat – for a grandchild for instance.

Cara, a lawyer at Allen and Gledhill, is getting married soon and may soon oblige. Jonathan, 21, has finished his national service and is busy with his friends and his own life.

Margaret says: “There is a price I paid for making my family my top priority. I realized that when I entered the workforce at a junior level and found out how much I lost out. There is a hurt. It’s best to acknowledge the pain and just accept it.”

After the interview and cheerful goodbyes, I caught a glimpse of Cara with Margaret at the traffic junction, holding hands and very happily chatting away like two girlfriends.

I think Margaret’s sacrifice was worth it.