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A professional woman's ruminations on work-life balance

Work/Life Harmony

Lawyers recall a story in their career in this new feature in The Daily Record.



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When I was admitted to the New York State Bar in 1981 after graduating law school, I had been married for five years but had no children. My husband at the time was also an attorney, already practicing law as a federal prosecutor. I was also a trial lawyer, albeit as a commercial litigator in private practice. We were both born downstate and despite not having any family locally, we deliberately chose to remain upstate after law school. Those first few years of my professional career were a whirlwind of long days and nights honing my craft as a trial lawyer, with little thought of motherhood.

I always knew that I wanted children. When I did become pregnant with my first child — despite the fact that my firm had been in existence for over 20 years — I was the first female attorney in the history of the firm to have a baby. Although I came from a large family and was very familiar with babies and small children, after my son's birth I quickly learned that there was a huge disparity between responsibility as an older sister and as a mother. The truth is that I was totally un-

prepared for the physical, emotional and practical consequences of becoming a mother while pursuing a full-time professional career as a trial lawyer, particularly in a city hundreds of miles from family.

My 12 weeks of combined maternity leave and accrued vacation passed in a flash. Before I knew it, I had to return to work, after a C-section birth with a 3-month-old infant who was born early and a day care plan that I quickly realized was unworkable. This became all too clear one morning as I was leaving the house with my son at the crack of dawn to drop him off at day care and then make my way to the courthouse, where I was representing a client at trial expected to last for a week. As I stepped outside with my son — dressed in my best navy-blue suit, white blouse and heels — he vomited all over me, quickly spiking a fever.

My husband was involved in a complex criminal case in federal court, with his trial expected to last for six weeks. I had no grandparent to call or any viable backup plan and had to call my office, explaining that I could not attend court. One of the senior partners appeared and adjourned the case for me until the following Monday. Thankfully, after a pediatrician visit, my mother flew up to Rochester over the weekend and stayed with my son until he recovered, and I began looking in earnest for a full-time nanny. Even with two salaries, the cost was prohibitive, but this arrangement worked for two years, until my son's immune system was developed enough for him to attend day care without constant illness.

I tell this story because this was probably my first brush with trying to achieve some work-life balance between my professional ambitions and my personal desires as a mother. Alignment, communi-

cation and compromise became my new watchwords and have been my guide ever since.

Despite the premise of an article I read this past weekend in Slate — written by a young millennial, newly pregnant and distraught over her now-retired mother's pronouncements that “you can't have it all,” and that despite a very successful corporate career, she wished she could have spent more time at home with her children — you can indeed have both a successful career and children, but not without establishing priorities and continually aligning those priorities with your life and work commitments.

If you have a life partner to share the burdens and joys of child-rearing as a working mother, so much the better. If you don't, life will be a lot easier if you have grandparents or other close family members to help. In any case, of critical importance are determining your life and work priorities, developing a plan regarding who will do what and when to care for your child, and communicating effectively with those who you will rely on to help raise your child while you work. Finding middle ground and compromise are also mandatory.

This all starts with what Stephen M.R. Covey, famous for his book “7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” calls “authentic communication” with your child's other parent to discuss and make sure your respective priorities are aligned and to make necessary compromises. As Covey often states in his many books addressing life-work balance, “[t]he main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” What comprises the “main thing” changes over time.

The reality is that when you become parents, unless you want your children

to be raised primarily by hired help or grandparents, you cannot both have jobs with long hours and little flexibility. This remains true not only during infancy, preschool and the elementary school years, but also the middle school and high school years.

In my case, we decided that my husband at the time would continue to pursue his demanding career as a trial lawyer and that I would switch the focus of my law practice to representing businesses and their owners, where I had more control over my schedule. I was happy to make this compromise because most of my clients were businesses and their owners; this change in focus aligned with our priorities for ourselves and our family. I wanted to continue to be both an involved parent and an attorney and we made that happen, understanding that while my husband would also continue to be an active participant in raising our son, the primary responsibility for taking my son to doctor's appointments and staying home with him when he was ill during the work day would fall to me.

As our family grew to three children under the age of 6, we hired a full-time nanny and I also decided to leave my position with my law firm and open my own law practice. While this decision did not come without risk, as I was now responsible for developing my own clientele, getting the legal work done, billing it and collecting it, this decision also provided me with an incredible amount of freedom over how I spent my time that I have never regretted. I had the flexibility I needed to be both an excellent attorney and mother. I would often work at night, after my children were settled for the evening, to attend to my growing law practice on

a timely basis while accommodating the needs of a young, growing family.

I have also always been involved in providing pro bono legal services and giving back to my community since I graduated from law school and was admitted to the bar, by serving on various boards over the course of my career. To accommodate the needs of my growing family, I learned to say "no" when necessary to invitations to join a board or become engaged in a not-for-profit matter so that I could maintain the life-work balance I have achieved. What worked for me over the years was never to be involved in more than one pro bono case and one board position at a time, and never to be out of the house at night more than one work day a week.

My roles as both a lawyer and a mother have always been priorities; because of the personal and professional choices made, I was always able to arrange my schedule so that I could leave work when necessary to take my children to doctor appointments and participate in their day care activities, and in their school activities as they got older.

After my children's father and I divorced, and my children got older and entered the middle school and teen years, my priorities changed. To accommodate my growing practice and my children's needs, I once again joined a law firm as a partner and I again changed my schedule, getting to work early and leaving for home in the late afternoon, to be home at the end of the day for my children's math and sports competitions, art shows, concerts and other school-related events.

My children are all adults now, with careers and families of their own, and once again, my priorities have shifted. My typical work day as an attorney starts at

8 a.m. and continues until at least 6 p.m. Now that my children are on their own, I also have the time and flexibility to be more involved in community outreach and providing pro bono services. And of course, when I am not working, my roles as a wife, mother and grandmother all continue to be of great importance.

If I have learned anything over the course of my career from my experiences as a professional working woman and as a mother and now a grandmother, it is this: While it is certainly true that every woman requires her own economic power to be the mistress of her own destiny (a mantra that I repeat to my daughter, nieces and other young women in my life), that does not preclude experiencing the joys of motherhood, if that is what you want. It all comes down to priorities.

While what worked for me may not work for you, this notion that as a modern woman, you cannot have a rewarding career and live a fulfilling life as a mother is simply not true. It isn't easy; it takes planning, resources and compromise, but ultimately it comes down to knowing who *you* are and what *you* want, and having the courage, gumption and stamina to pursue your passion, wherever it takes you.

"Your life is your story. Write well. Edit often." — Susan Statham.

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