
The Carousel Awaits: A Female Lawyer's Quest for Work-Life Balance

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To be or not to be" is not the question for many women lawyers. For women lawyers/mothers, the question goes more like this: to be or not to be a good mom ... or to be or not to be a good advocate. Can women do both well? Some say no. I say a resounding yes! Well, at least on most days.

My journey in pursuit of work-life balance has not been unique. I know many other women lawyers who face the same daily struggles, stressors, triumphs and disappointments. I have found that, in those challenges, many of us unite, lean upon one another and move forward. I now try to view it all as a beautiful carousel ride—much like the one that my children have enjoyed on our summer vacations. While my husband and I crave the peaceful quiet of Jamestown, Rhode Island, over the years, our kids have spent their time deciding which horse they will select to ride on the carousel at Newport Beach. I wistfully watch them and think, I hope this year brings a slow and steady ride for us all. But I know the year will bring ups and downs, as so goes life.

Horses Up

I became a lawyer due to unadulterated idealism. I had an epiphany in a women's history class. As I learned about how women were oppressed in so many ways, I knew that there was no other choice for me. What could be more empowering than learning the law of where you live? So, off to law school I went. I was fortunate to land a summer associate position at a large New Jersey firm and so began my path to becoming an employment lawyer. For my 10 years at the firm, I was well trained on how to practice law, manage staff, market and develop business. I was also active in firm life.

I got married at the age of 31 and had my son Maguire soon after turning 33. At the time, I had been at the firm for 8 years. I had pre-term labor that landed me on bed rest in my seventh month of pregnancy. While this was not completely uncommon, and I was able to thankfully carry until full term, I was totally unprepared to leave work before I had planned. I wanted to have a "clean plate" before going on maternity leave. So much for plans. I soon began to realize that a life where things went "as planned" was over as I knew it. I went back

to work full-time after maternity leave and was fortunate to have the help of family with child care.

Horses Down

At 34, I became pregnant with my second child. In the middle of a trial on which I was second chairing, and 11 weeks into my pregnancy, I found myself having excruciating pain on my right side. My doctor was worried it was an ectopic pregnancy. I went to the emergency room on Easter Sunday and was told that, while the pregnancy was fine, there was a "large mass" on my right ovary. Soon thereafter, I was sent to a gynecological oncologist due to the suspicious look of the mass, coupled with the fact that I had a family history of ovarian cancer. I was on bed rest for five weeks, hoping the mass would not burst until I hit 16 weeks into the pregnancy. This was the safest time to have the surgery with less of a chance of miscarriage. On May 13, 2004, I went under the knife. The surgeon let me listen to my baby's heartbeat before I went under anesthesia. Thankfully, I awoke to news that the mass was "benign" and to hear once again my baby's heartbeat (who made it through the surgery with flying colors). I was stapled up and returned to work full-time two and a half weeks later, to write a lengthy post-trial brief and get through a busy month. (The mass became affectionately referred to by my co-workers as the "Summer Squash" as we were unlucky enough to have a photo of the horrid thing.)

On Oct. 29, 2004, I gave birth to my daughter Madeline. She was healthy and perfect (despite the Demerol pump I had been on for two days after the surgery). I returned to work full time after maternity leave, again, with the help of family with child care.

Getting Off the Carousel?

Upon my return to work, I had this nagging feeling that something had to give. I felt I could not be the mother I wanted to be and meet my firm's requirements (at least for a while anyway). Many days, I felt simply paralyzed. I was going through the motions of my life, but knew something felt very wrong. I thought the answer was getting off the carousel and leaving the law all together, as I truly did not see any other way at the time.

Just before I jumped off, something made me stop. It was that little voice inside, my gut—or whatever you want to call it. I stopped, took one giant step back and got back to basics: why did I do this all in the first place? The women's history class came flooding back, and thankfully along with it, a newfound enthusiasm and excitement that I had truly lost sight of with the grind of the profession. I began to see possibility instead of disappointment and futility. I always say, but for the Grace of God, I found my way and persevered. I firmly believe that I was meant to be an advocate and think that I serve my clients well.

I did not get off the carousel. I simply decided to leave big firm life after 10 years of practice.

Slow and Steady

In 2006, I took a leap of faith and started my own employment law practice, a woman-owned law firm dedicated to the advancement and retention of women in the law. Before I left big

firm life, I looked around to see how other women lawyers were making things work once they had kids, as I knew I was not alone. I noticed that many of my close friends were "opting out" of the profession once they had kids as it became too difficult. Sadly, I realized that there was not a strong network of women lawyers in NJ. I thought to myself that this really needed to change ... and boy did it!

While I was getting my firm off the ground, I was part of an amazing group of women that helped revitalize the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association (NJWLA). Today, there is a thriving statewide sisterhood of women lawyers. There is no question that the support of my NJWLA sisters has helped me become the lawyer I am today. They have offered support in all ways possible, including business referrals, shoulders to lean on, and unwavering friendship.

Today, 10 years later, I have a successful law firm that provides employment law and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) services. I was fortunate to have handled matters from both the plaintiff and defense perspectives in my career, which helped foster my role as a neutral. I perform independent employment investigations, serve as an arbitrator and mediator on the American Arbitration Association (AAA) panel, conduct harassment prevention training for employers, and offer employment expert witness services. However, I continue to serve as an advocate, often engaging in employment negotiations for employees, including high level executives, many of whom are women who have been treated adversely. I am fortunate to have highly dedicated and skilled staff who I afford flexibility. My paralegal exclusively works remotely from home, and my assistant works four days per week in the office and from home when needed. I have an attorney who helps with overflow work when I am busy—and I am always busy, for which I am grateful. They are like family to me, and we all support each other.

And then there were three Just when things could not get busier, a few years back, we welcomed our third child, Myles, who I had at the age of 42! Maguire is now 13, Maddie is 12, and Myles is 4. The age gap has brought us "built-in babysitters," but more importantly, the older two can experience the joy of seeing things through his excited eyes now that they are old and jaded teen and tween. Myles is truly a family baby and has made everything complete. Three weeks after I had Myles, I found myself performing a sexual harassment investigation. While I did not have much of a maternity leave, I have flexibility when I need it and can literally walk to my office, which is in the center of town, within walking distance from my kids' schools. (Granted, I only get visits when they want money for food or Starbucks, but I still like the visits and, like all moms, will take what I can get.)

Throughout the mayhem, my husband Alan (a former professional soccer player turned teacher) has supported me. With quiet confidence and a smile, he is there every day enabling my sometimes overbooked and chaotic schedule to continue. We are true partners (he has nights and I have mornings with kid duty). He is also the better cook and for that I am ever thankful. We continue to work slow and steady as a team to advance our careers while juggling the ever-challenging activities and sport schedules of our children. Fortunately, he has never once said he "babysits" our kids, including when I am out tending to my father who suffers from bipolar disorder (and who, sadly, has had a very challenging year due to medication changes).

We all know that the ups and downs are well worth what the carousel ride provides—the colors, the lights, the music and most of all, the smiles and joyful giggles of our children that

stay with us through it all ... another stressful day, another sleepless night. No matter what the price, there is no question that the ride is worth it and yes, yes, a resounding yes, women attorneys can achieve balance. It only takes a great support network, tenacity (creativity and enthusiasm help quite a bit too) and, of course, that enduring work ethic that got us all to this point in the first instance. So, for those who got off, stayed on, or are thinking about either... *your carousel awaits*, so get on and enjoy the ride. •

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