

LIFESTYLE

The Carousel Awaits: A Mother's Day Tribute

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To be or not to be is not the question for many women lawyers. For women in the law (who are also 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 we really be good at both? Some say no. I say a resounding yes...well at least on most days.



Kirsten Scheurer Branigan

My journey for work/life balance has not been unique. I know many other women lawyers who face the same daily struggles, stressors, triumphs and disappointments. I also have found that, in those challenges, many of us unite, lean upon one another and move forward. Now, I have begun to view it all as a beautiful carousel ride – much like the one that my children crave on summer vacation.

While my husband and I crave the peaceful quiet of Jamestown, Rhode Island, my 2 ½ year-old daughter and 4 year-old son spend their time deciding which horse they will select to ride at 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.

I did not get off the carousel. I simply decided to leave big firm 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. While in law school, I worked for a municipality in New Jersey and interned for a federal Magistrate Judge; and both were very positive experiences. I then got 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, how to manage staff, the critical aspects of the business of law. I was also active in firm life.

I got married at the age of 31 and then had my son Maguire soon after turning 33. At the time, I had been at the firm for eight years. I had some pre-term labor that landed me on bed rest for a period of time at about my seventh month of pregnancy. I was totally unprepared to leave work, as I had planned on finishing up as much as I could so that I had 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. (However, in looking back, I do not think I realized this at the time just yet). I took a 4 ½ month maternity leave and then returned to work on a full-time basis with the tremendous help of extended family, including my mother-in-law who watched our son.

Horses Down

After returning from my first maternity leave, I began to get back into the swing of things, including preparing for and second chairing a trial. I soon became pregnant with my second child. About half way through the trial, and at about 11 weeks into my pregnancy, I found myself in excruciating pain. I was told it there was a "growth" on my right ovary. Soon thereafter, I was sent to a gynecological oncologist. This was in part due to the size of the "growth," in part due to the look of it and in part due to my mother's sister dying from ovarian cancer at the age of 34. I was 34 at the time. I was told that the mass was large and needed to come out, but I had to wait for 5 weeks as to have the surgery before 16 weeks into the pregnancy would increase the chance of miscarriage. So, I was told I had to wait (which no typical lawyer likes to do anyway). So I waited - all the while thinking that I would come out of the surgery and be told I had cancer and that I could not have my baby and/or several variations related thereto. This was problem number one. Problem number two with waiting was that, while I was waiting, the mass could burst or twist, either of which could have made me septic and would have been very bad news for me and the baby.

On May 13, 2004, I went under the knife. The surgeon let me listen to my baby's heartbeat before I went under the 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). Despite the fact that I was down one ovary, I forged on. I was convinced, however, that the Demerol pump that I was on for 2 days would cause 11 toes so I went off the meds as I soon as I could bear the pain. I returned to work full-time 2 ½ weeks later to write a major post-trial brief which led to a month of 300 billable hours. On October 29, 2004, at the age of 34 ½, I gave birth to my daughter Madeline Catherine, who was 9.75 pounds and luckily did not have 11 toes. Rather, she was simply perfect, despite the Demerol... I returned to work after 3 ½ months and again, on a full-time basis. This time, we relied on not just my mother-in-law, but now my mother as well for child-care.

Getting off the carousel?

Upon my return, I threw myself into a full court press of business development and work, but soon came to the realization that something had to give - I had this nagging feeling that I could not be the mother I wanted to be and meet my firm’s requirements (at least for a while anyway). I felt that if I continued my life would spiral out of control and could feel it already happening. For a while, 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. The firm was all that I knew; as I had been there for my entire legal career.

Just before I jumped off, something made me stop. It was that little voice inside, my gut – whatever you want to call it. I stopped and 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 became like an excited child who now saw possibility instead of disappointment and futility. I say, but for the Grace of God, I found my way, as I really do believe, I was meant to be an advocate and think that I serve my clients well.

These days, we are all having fun practicing law, and I truly believe that this is due to the flexibility that we all have.

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Slow and Steady

I left the firm and became a flex-time partner at a small firm

(working three days per week). While I was not at this firm for long, it was a critical transition period for me. In the mean-time, I networked my way into picking up a part-time government job, which was a wonderful learning experience. At the time, I had two part-time jobs, but started to have that feeling once again that something had to give. Now, instead of feeling paralyzed, I gave up the firm job and took a leap of faith and started my own law practice as a 100% woman-owned law firm. Throughout all of these decisions, my husband, a teacher with quiet confidence, is there every day and enables my sometimes overbooked and chaotic schedule to continue. We are true partners (he has nights and I have mornings with kid duty), although, he does do more work in the house and cooks for our children and for that I am ever grateful. We are now working slow and steady as a team to advance his teaching career and to have a thriving law practice for me. We are relocating my law practice to the town we live in as this, too, will help in our attempts at balance.

In first six to eight months, the firm has grown quickly and steadily. In less than one year from opening the doors, we now have a staff of two part-time paralegals working mostly remotely, a firm manager who comes in one day a week, and otherwise works remotely, administrative assistant, and a law student. We have also steadily added attorneys. In addition to myself, we now have five part-time attorneys who are all women attorneys with children seeking balance and flexibility. I am so fortunate to have all of them as they are all well-trained and highly skilled. I offer them interesting and satisfying work, an understanding that family comes first (however, they all have the work ethic which ensures that the clients’ needs get met even if it means staying up very late), flexibility, and fun. These days, we are all having fun practicing law and I truly believe that this is in large degree due to the flexibility that we all have.

Also, our attorneys and staff alike (except our lone male law student) all share a common experience – we are all mothers. With our common motherhood bond, there comes camaraderie as we all know the carousel well. We all know that the ups and downs are well worth what the carousel ride provides – the colors, the lights, the music and mostly the smiles of our children and those joyful giggles that linger and 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) 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 or...the Carousel Awaits – so get on and enjoy the ride. •