

# THE CAROUSEL AWAITS: A MOTHER'S DAY TRIBUTE ON WORKLIFE BALANCE



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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. My journey for worklife 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 3 year-old daughter and almost 5 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.

## 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 legally, 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 many facets associated with the practice of law. My practice area was exclusively that of employment law and litigation, which I found was a great fit for me. I was fortunate enough to learn how to practice law by talented attorneys who were (and remain) mentors and friends and both of whom were critical in my development as a practitioner and for that I will be ever-grateful. I was given a significant amount of responsibility, even as a junior associate and was able to have immediate client contact. Perhaps just as important however was that, during this time, I was able to hone my skills in the management of legal staff, was provided with invaluable firm training (including both inside and outside opportunities), and was positioned well to learn key aspects associated with the business of law, including marketing, client development, as well as budgeting and financial analyses employed by firm management. I was active in firm life, including serving as the only associate on the firm's hiring committee for a number of years, as well as a mentor for the firm's summer associate program.

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 8 years. I had some medical issues that interfered with my plans of 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 went out on my first maternity leave and 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 then became pregnant with my second child. About half way through the trial, I once again encountered some medical problems, which in comparison to my first child, were more serious. I was told that I needed surgery that could not wait until the end of the pregnancy. Needless to say, this was a stressful time. Thankfully, all went well during the surgery and I returned to work full-time two 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 1/2, I gave birth to my daughter Madeline Catherine who was simply perfect, despite the Demerol I had to take after the surgery. I returned to work after my second maternity leave again, on a full-time basis. This

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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 going to 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. I did not get off. I simply decided to leave big firm life.

### **Slow and Steady**

I left the firm I was at and became a flex-time partner at a small firm (working 3 days per week). While I was not at this firm for long, it was a critical transition period for me. In the meantime, I networked my way into picking up a part-time government job, which

was a wonderful learning experience. At the time, I had 2 part-time jobs, but started to have that feeling once again that something had to give. Now, instead of feeling paralyzed, at the age of 36, 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. Soon thereafter, the firm work got so busy that I needed to give up the part-time government job as well. 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 generally tends to the house more than me and cooks nutritious meals for our children and for that (and him) 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 recently relocated my law practice to the town we live in as this too will help in our attempts at balance.

For the first year and a half, the firm concentrated in employment law and litigation. The firm has grown steadily. I have agreed to creative and flexible work schedules to get a loyal, dedicated and talented team of lawyers and staff. We have a paralegal who works mostly remotely, except she comes into the office one day a week. Our firm manager similarly works remotely except that she too comes in one day a week, and sometimes more if needed. Our administrative assistant (who also lives locally in our town) physically works in the office all day, but she too has flexibility. She often has to leave to pick her daughter up from school in the afternoon and return to work. When her daughter has to come back with her (as is often the case), she quietly does her homework while her mom finishes up the day's tasks. We have also steadily added

skilled attorneys who also value the flexibility. There are a total of 4 of us. One attorney who serves as of counsel to my firm (and also has her own firm) provides commercial real estate and land use services for my firm's clients. The other two attorneys work part-time as this works best for their schedules right now. I am so fortunate to have my entire legal team 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 who worked for us last year and will be joining us as a full-time associate in September) 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.

