

Women at PwC. A global business issue.

www.pwc.com/women

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS 

Search *The Glass Hammer*



- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Jobs](#)

January 6th, 2009 | 1:00 pm

[Raising the Bar: Balancing Professional and Personal Choices](#)

filed under [Life/Work Balance](#)



Contributed by Jacqueline Harounian, Esquire of [Wisselman, Harounian & Associates, P.C.](#)

As a mother of four and partner of a leading matrimonial law firm on Long Island, I have some inspirational anecdotes and advice related to the challenges of balancing professional and personal choices.

I married my husband during college and by graduation day, we were expecting our first child. I always knew I wanted to continue to graduate school, and with my husband's encouragement I started law school when my son was 9 months old. I had always loved to read and write, which made analyzing cases for hours each day slightly less impossible. After class, I immediately went home to my "real job". I studied with my son on my lap and after he went to sleep. I soon became adept at multitasking and juggling family and school.

During law school, I excelled in my studies, but I was fraught with anxieties and concerns about what I was doing: Would I ever practice law in the future? Would I be able to handle combining family and career?

I had watched my mother run her own retail business as I grew up, so I had an excellent role model. But I also had a group of well meaning relatives and friends who were convinced that I was wasting my time and money, not to mention neglecting my child. Throughout my law school years and the varied permutations of childcare arrangements that accompanied them, I had many moments when I feared that my Juris Doctor degree would end up as a wall decoration in my bathroom, but I persisted.

During a part-time internship with my current law firm in my second year of law school, I realized that I really liked family law; I was able to increase my hours to pursue it.

Shortly after being admitted to the Bar, my daughter was born. As I continued to work as an associate in the firm, my third and fourth children were born. After eleven years of practice, when my youngest child was two, one of my career goals was realized when I was offered a partnership in the firm. I am currently the only female attorney out of seven attorneys in the law firm of [Wisselman, Harounian & Associates, P.C.](#), which is recognized as one of the largest matrimonial firms in Long Island, New York. Complex divorce cases are my specialty. (It is lucky for my husband that he was one of my supporters in law school!) Incredibly, I've had the good fortune and opportunity to work at the same firm continuously for the past 15 years.

Today, my son is a calm and well adjusted 17-year-old, driving a car and planning for college, and my three other children are ages 13, 9, and 4. Despite the fears that I had as a student, I am successfully balancing family and career (although I do have my share of hair-raising days and weeks). I know now that no matter what your fears and doubts are, you can overcome them and prevail.

Based upon my personal experience, I believe that women who try to balance their time at work and home by requesting fewer hours actually have more difficulties developing their careers in the long run. They are given fewer opportunities to handle the more challenging matters and are relegated to lower profile cases. In a litigation practice, the best way to develop skills is by being in a court room. Given the way court schedules work and the time involved in handling a complex case, it is very difficult to gain this experience on a part-time basis.

By the same token, it is vitally important to work for a law firm that provides flexibility that enables you to meet both family commitments and work obligations. Firm management must trust and have confidence in their attorneys (male or female) to get the job done successfully, and provide them with the autonomy to conduct business effectively within the attorneys' own schedules.

As a law student, I would never have predicted that I would someday work in a firm that specializes in family law right in my own neighborhood. To some, working as a matrimonial lawyer lacks the glamour and prestige of corporate law, or a huge firm on Wall Street. But my work is immensely rewarding, and never ever boring. As a mother, I find the issues of family law and custody to be very relatable and pertinent. Furthermore, due to the proximity of my office to home, my daily commute is several minutes vs. hours. I can attend events at my children's schools, car pool for their many activities, and be home in time for dinner during any given week.

I can honestly say that I look forward to work each day. I enjoy working with clients and other attorneys in my profession. I feel that most days, my personal and professional lives are in good balance.

To accomplish my goal of becoming partner, I kept a steady presence and workload in the firm, taking off very little time for the births of my children and even working into the ninth month of pregnancy. I always tried to maintain a professional demeanor in front of clients and in court, which meant that I made it a practice to avoid discussions about my children, my personal life, or my stress levels. I made sure to be involved in my children's lives when I was needed, and even managed to stay active in the PTA, and as a "class mother". That meant arranging the time to make up my work around it. I stayed in touch with clients and coworkers via email and my invaluable Blackberry, and working in close proximity of home allowed me to "juggle" with more ease.

Organizing these responsibilities is a difficult challenge, but it can be done. It is certainly possible to work a full caseload and still have time for a rewarding personal life by being organized and working productively in and out of the office. I believe that through the experience of raising families and "juggling" this with their career,

women actually cultivate the capacity to be better organized at work. As a result, they can be more productive during the time they are at work and can, in fact, maintain comparable billable hours to others who put in more time at the office.

I also think it is important to recognize my husband and children for their many contributions to making our family life work so well. Every member of our household does his or her share. I always remind my children that just as their father and I have a “job”, their job is to be a conscientious student, to do their homework and meet their daily responsibilities. They each pitch in with household tasks, and they are fully aware that their help is needed and expected. My three older children help out a great deal in caring for their youngest brother, whether it is bathing him, caring for him, or reading him a book. My 13-year old daughter loves to cook, and on some nights I rely on her to start dinner. My 17-year old helps out with driving and other chores, and works part time. My husband does the lion’s share of the weekly grocery shopping, a task he actually enjoys. A balanced personal and professional life simply cannot work without the team effort of each family member.

Regular family vacations, holiday celebrations, and attending religious services also allow us to bond with one another and to recharge us throughout the year. Some days, when I am particularly stressed out, the thought of an upcoming vacation or special event is the only thing that gets me through the day!

With a view towards helping other women break through the “glass ceiling”, I have become involved in programs such as the Teens-on-the-Job program at Great Neck High School, the Columbia College Alumni Mentor Program and the [Hofstra Law School](#) Alumni Mentor Program. These are mentoring programs for female students, the last of which helps those interested in the legal profession. I firmly believe that helping others by mentoring, motivating and creating pathways for women to do their best, we can cultivate a whole new generation of women who will be well prepared to tackle the personal and professional challenges even better than before.