

Balancing Act: Work-Life for Mom Attorneys

By Angela M. Hutchinson

Balancing life as a mother and work as an attorney can be a daunting task, but many women have taken on the challenge and achieved success. Today, attorney moms are thriving as sole practitioners, making partners at law firms and raising well-rounded children.



MAY 13, 2012 MARKS THE 98TH YEAR OF honoring mothers and celebrating the maternal bond and motherly influences around the world.

Mother's Day became a national holiday in 1914 when a former law student, better known as President Woodrow Wilson, signed the bill. The original proclamation declared that it was a day of observance for mothers whose sons had served in the military and died in war.

In the field of law, studies often report the gender gap and salary differences between males and females. According to a 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey, women made up only 31.5 percent of lawyers in the United States. Many of these women attorneys have children, while some never start families for various reasons, one of which may be that the combination of being a mommy and law firm partner tends not to go hand-in-hand.

Becoming a successful sole practitioner or staff attorney without children is already a challenge. When you add in sleepless nights for a newborn mom, child sick days for the toddler mom, extracurricular activities for the adolescent and teen moms, late nights at the office or case study research on the weekends may not necessarily mesh well with family life. Regardless, there are plenty of women attorneys who do make it work. The SFVBA is proud to acknowledge two attorney mom members. *Valley Lawyer* thanks these dynamic women for sharing their viewpoints on such an intimate topic.

Criminal Law Attorney/Mother of 8

Leah Naparstek is a criminal defense attorney. She married a rabbi at the age of 18, and within 12 year's time she birthed eight children, ranging in age today from 16 to 28. Five of her children are married and she has eight grandchildren.

In 2004, Naparstek and her family moved from Marina del Rey to Agoura Hills, and she decided to go to law school. She attended Abraham Lincoln Law University where she attended the university and had online coursework. She says, "This setup was crucial for me as I was still able to be a mother to my children while studying at the same time. I found that I LOVED the law!"

Her passion showed when she graduated summa cum laude and was class valedictorian. Throughout law school,



Leah Naparstek (standing, third woman from the left in black dress) with her family.

Naparstek worked at an immigration law firm and passed the Bar in 2009. She then continued with immigration and also worked in the entertainment law industry. Several months ago, she opened her own practice in criminal defense.

As for balancing work and family life, Naparstek finds organization a challenging aspect. "I must be well prepared in order to succeed with my work well and still have enough time and energy left for my kids. It's a bit easier for me in this respect since I went back to school at the age of 40 when my youngest child was 8-years-old," she shares. "He is now 16, and while he is still a challenging teenager, there is less of a demand physically with regards to motherhood and it's more of a need to be emotionally in tune with his and his siblings' needs."

While it is difficult to balance being a great mom and attorney, it is definitely possible to be both according to Naparstek. "I find that I need to be particularly organized in my work during the daytime so that when I come home to family I am able to be there for them 100%," she says. "Of course there are always work emergencies that do arise when I am at home, but my children are old enough to understand this and they do cooperate with me."

Naparstek may not consider herself a perfect mom, but as the mother of eight children, she offers some parenting tips. "I think that one of the best gifts a parent can give their child or children is showing them that a person can achieve whatever it is they set out to accomplish at whatever stage they are in their lives," she says. "It is certainly difficult to be a successful attorney while still juggling family, meals, doctor's appointments, shopping, etc., but organization, once again, is the key for me."

When asked if children are a woman's hindrance to becoming a successful attorney, Naparstek says, "Not only does having children NOT prevent a female attorney from having a successful career, but rather, being a mother gives a person a much deeper insight into other people and their issues and problems."

As a criminal defense attorney, Naparstek stresses the importance of not judging others, giving people the benefit of the doubt, and having a keen sensitivity towards clients that have made mistakes or who have been misjudged or mistreated. She suggests being kind and gracious even when others are angry, rude, resentful and even hateful.

"Being a mother and having dealt with children and their challenges at every stage of their lives makes dealing with everything that I deal with in my work second nature. I don't have to think about what to answer...how to phrase something...when to be gentle...when to be firm...it simply comes instinctively and effortlessly."

While knowing the law and understanding the criminal justice system is critical to being a successful criminal defense attorney, the experience that Naparstek has gleaned in raising children with regards to understanding the human psyche on a much more profound level is what she describes as a priceless advantage.

Family Law Attorney/Mother of 2

Cari M. Pines is a certified family law specialist. She has two daughters who are four and five-years-old. Pines has been practicing law since 1993. For her, the most challenging



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aspect of balancing work and family is sorting out the grey zones. “There isn’t enough time in the day to be the teacher, advocate, nurse, therapist and lawyer for my daughters, and my clients that I wish I could be.”

Pines jokingly tells people that she is really a lawyer who plays a mom on TV because she delegates so many of those duties to other people every single day. “It’s easy to figure out which duties can and which absolutely cannot be delegated. The hard part is figuring out what falls in between those two categories,” she shares.

“Peanut butter and jelly tastes just as good if a nanny makes it but Thanksgiving turkey requires my personal attention.” She continues, “A babysitter can apply a bandaid to cuts and scrapes but a hospital visit means that I’m going to need to miss work.” Pines shares that it is the dinners in between and the 102 degree fevers that most challenge her to balance her work with family life.

In Pines’ opinion, it is impossible to be a great mom and a great attorney. “I do the best I can every day just to try to ‘break even’ as a mom and as an attorney,” she says. “I believe that it is possible to excel at individual tasks but that to focus on excelling at everything is an unrealistic goal that only serves to make it harder to achieve excellence in either capacity.”

Pines continues, “I try to break things down into the smallest parts possible and take on each challenge as it emerges. You win some and you lose some and there never seems to be a lack of opportunity in either department to succeed.”

Pines believes that every child requires different attention. From time to time, she wishes there was a handbook on how to deal with the variety of adventures that present themselves on a daily basis. Pines has experienced several memorable experiences as an attorney mom. She tells stories about bringing her children to work. “I brought each of my children to work with me for the first few weeks of their lives. My oldest didn’t make a peep and lasted in a bassinet by my desk for four weeks. Every once in a while I’d remember to take a break from a phone call or client meeting to change her diaper or feed her but she never presented any problem.”

With Pines’ second daughter, “She screamed at the top of her lungs from the second she popped out until



Cari M. Pine, Family Law Attorney

she turned two and required me to hold her every second of every day.” Pines recalls during an extremely stressful settlement conference in a complex support case, her forensic accountant had to hold her baby and rock her for hours so that they could get through the meeting without the baby’s personal participation in the family’s conflict. “Finally, when I had to have random staff members pass her around to keep her quiet during a conference call with two lawyers, a judge and a custody evaluator in preparation for a Bar presentation we were putting together, I decided it was time for her to stop being a permanent fixture in my office,” she explains.

As for Pines’ master plan in balancing her work-life, she likes to play things by ear and roll with the punches. “Aside from that, the advice of other parents facing similar situations has been the more important asset I could have as a mother. But you can’t know what those situations will be until they occur,” she says. “There is no baby-gear store that can help you push a baby carriage along with a rolling brief case. There is no lactation consultant that can prepare you for pumping breast-milk in a courthouse restroom.” Since many attorney moms have the same battle scars, they are often the best resource for advice, but Pines says, “Finding them is the hard part.”

To the female attorney who thinks having children will prevent a successful career, Pines says, “She needs to have a very clear concept of how she defines success.” Pines considers her career as a family law attorney to be the most successful of anyone she knows. She does the work she loves—improving the lives of other people’s children while also being able to enjoy and participate in the lives of her own children.

“Running my own practice has afforded me the luxury of spending as much time as I can get away with dealing with the day-to-day dramas of my own children’s lives, yet operate my practice with the support and assistance of my brilliant staff and partner,” says Pines. “I have surrounded myself with an office filled with people who know my priorities, know when to interrupt me from a meeting when necessary and who tolerate and compensate for my absences when I’m out on mom-duty.” Pines believes that having an office where people are supportive and understanding is the key to success as an attorney mom.

The Common Denominator

“What law and motherhood have in common is the ability to be able to have a profound and positive effect on people’s

lives in one way or another,” says Naparstek. She believes being a mother allows for nurturing, teaching, guiding and interacting with love, kindness, firmness and consistency. “This certainly impacts the path that a child will take when he or she becomes an adult,” she says. “Similarly, when a person finds himself caught up in the justice system, the manner in which an attorney can support and assist in that particular case can make a huge difference in the client’s life, as well as the lives of his or her family and friends.”

According to Pines, “The common denominator between law and motherhood is the same as that old saying about what the law has in common with a hotdog. It seems great on the outside but you don’t want to know what goes into it.” She continues, “Motherhood, like the law and hotdogs, is filled with ingredients that you never thought possible—sleepless nights that go on for years longer than any book will warn, bodily fluids that have no name, conflicts with grandparents about diapering choices and other facets of the world you never knew existed.”

Pines explains that the law provides guidance and structure in a desperate world, and that motherhood, provides a reduction in chaos in a way that the law cannot. “If only the law could offer a Band-Aid and a hug to make things all better, the world would be a much better place,” she says.

Career Success v. Motherhood

A key tenet of the SFVBA Diversity Committee is that the more students interact with lawyers in a positive light through mentoring or parental relationships, the more likely they are to not only become a lawyer, but also to thrive in the legal profession and their community. As a result, attorney moms with daughters have a unique opportunity to help reduce the gender gap of women in the field of law.

In the case of career success versus motherhood, it is evident that both are valuable. Some women attorneys choose the path of solely nurturing their career, and they desire to win every court case. Other female attorneys may also be career-driven, but they have more of a passion for raising their children and are determined to be at every athletic game their child plays. Then there are the mom attorneys like our two SFVBA members who strive to balance it all, and are both career and family-driven. These renaissance women and others like them are sincerely committed to the balancing act. 📌



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Angela M. Hutchinson serves as the Managing Editor of *Valley Lawyer* magazine, and she was recently accepted to law school. Hutchinson is also a published author and entrepreneur within the entertainment field. She and her husband of eight years have two young children. Hutchinson can be reached at editor@sfvba.org.