



# BALANCING ACT

Women attorneys maintain successful personal and professional lives by finding the right mixture of the two.

**A**ttorney Christy Myatt had just finished a bankruptcy-court hearing in Durham when the call came. The person on the other end of the line said her 6-year-old son was having tooth trouble. She rushed to his school in Greensboro, trying hard not to break the speed limit during the one-hour drive. When she arrived, her son was calmly waiting to leave the cafeteria after lunch. "I asked him about his tooth. He told me that he had pulled it out himself, wrapped it in a napkin and then deposited it with his lunch plate into the trash. At that point, I just had to laugh since we missed out on keeping my son's first tooth." Years later, she still leaves work to support her now-teenage son. Taking time for her family often means spending a night at the office catching up, but she doesn't have any regrets. It takes extra to be successful in both of her worlds.

For Myatt and female lawyers like her, juggling home and work hinges on developing a balance between the two. Once that's established, the lawyers, firms and clients profit. "The benefits of hiring women attorneys are obvious," says Martha Barber, an intellectual-property-law partner at Atlanta-based Alston & Bird LLP's Charlotte office. "Clients demand diversity from outside vendors, including law firms."

But women are still searching for equal footing. Despite making up nearly 50% of law-school admissions, they are only 19% of equity partners and 25% of judges, according to a recent *Women in Law* survey of the 50 best firms for women. Charlotte School of Law professor Meredith Jeffries has worked in both private practice and academia. "It is my strong belief that the barriers faced by women advanc-

ing into law-firm partnership or other high-ranking legal positions are not imposed by the profession but by cultural expectations and personal decisions that lead many women to make different career decisions than men."

As partner and bankruptcy-group chairwoman in Columbia, S.C.-based Nexsen Pruet LLC's Greensboro office, Myatt is part of an elite group. The *Woman in Law* survey revealed female lawyers are just 10% of chairmen, 12% of managing partners and 28% of nonequity partners.

Female lawyers have always faced different challenges than their male counterparts. "When I started practicing law 26 years ago, women in the courtroom were more of a novelty," says Leslie Packer, litigation partner at Raleigh-based Ellis & Winters LLP. "One judge offered to recess court early each day during a trial so that I could get

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home in time to cook supper for my family. Credit is due to the generations who paved the way." Clients are also changing their perceptions. "I think sometimes people want to make a big deal out of the fact that female attorneys don't always have the same interests as men — such as golf, sports, etc. — but I have found that this isn't really a significant impediment," says Susie Gibbons, an employment-law partner at Raleigh-based Poyner & Spruill LLP. "A lawyer, whether male or female, is just as likely to obtain and maintain a client relationship based on solid legal work, responsiveness to client needs and genuine interest in the client's business as opposed to meeting the client at a country club."

Greensboro-based Brooks, Pierce, McLendon, Humphrey & Leonard LLP litigation partner Jennifer Van Zant is the first woman to serve as chair of the

firm's associates committee. She is responsible for associate development, training, evaluation and mentoring. She also has three children between ages 6 and 10 and is an active community volunteer. "People assume without inquiring that female attorneys are unavailable and/or unwilling to commit fully to tasks. Therefore, it is essential to make yourself available when needed while holding firm to preserving boundaries. Once I had a case that had a midnight filing deadline on my son's birthday. I told everyone up front I would not be around from 5 p.m. until 9:30 p.m., and then I would be back to make the deadline."

Many women have made the choice of working as in-house counsel as opposed to in a private practice, which is considered more time consuming. "Demanding jobs are tough for women, but we do it every day,"

says Elizabeth Scott, litigation partner at Richmond, Va.-based Williams, Mullen, Clark & Dobbins PC's office in Raleigh. "We work just as hard as male counterparts, but we have different time sequences. We might have to finish working at night after a child's bedtime."

The long hours that go with a career test all lawyers but especially working mothers. "If attorneys are not working, they and their firms are not making money," Scott says. "Midsized and larger firms expect a minimum of 2,000 billable hours from associates and young partners. That works out to a minimum of eight hours a day over a 50-week year. ... It is not a 40-hour week job. Seventy-hour work weeks are common."

Several of the female lawyers at Greensboro-based Smith Moore Leatherwood LLP are committee chairs of the North Carolina Bar Association. Others are community leaders. Terri Harris, a health-care law partner at the firm, manages her schedule with organization and a helpful family and firm. "We have a lot of support for women and working mothers at our firm, and that makes a difference. Women still often have to work harder to establish credibility with clients, other lawyers and the court. And I have found that some people still view smart, assertive women more negatively than smart, assertive men."

Carole Gailor, managing partner at Raleigh-based Gailor, Wallis & Hunt PLLC, knows about juggling roles. "The managing partner has to provide a working environment that allows each lawyer to perform at the highest levels and be supportive in stressful situations, whether that is a lengthy, difficult trial or a family crisis that impedes the ability to perform at work temporarily." To ensure a stable workforce, promote employee satisfaction and keep talented lawyers, Gailor's firm custom-



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izes schedules. The 50 best law firms for women all have reduced-hour policies, 44% have full-time flex policies, 78% offer full-time telecommuting, 94% allow reduced-hour lawyers to be eligible for equity partnership and 78% provide backup child care. Partner Stephanie Jenkins approached Gailor about working a flex schedule. The arrangement allowed her to meet with clients, be available to fellow attorneys and delegate work as needed while caring for her infant son. Partner Cathy Hunt's son was raised at the firm until he went to school at age 4. The firm turned an upstairs office into a nursery and had an on-site nanny. Another partner, Jaime Davis, returned to work when her daughter was 8 weeks old. She put in full-time hours but could work from home.

But what works for one woman might not work for another. "I thought I would be able to bake cookies in the afternoon with my son, but it turned into a fight over homework," Scott says. "And the perception of not working as hard when you are part time can still exist. Often, I worked more hours than my full-time partners."

"I think that the single biggest challenge women attorneys face today is balancing home and work life," Packer says. "To manage career demands, women attorneys have to learn to be very efficient in their work. I routinely eat lunch at my desk rather than go out with colleagues so I can get home a little earlier to be with my family." She had to use the same strategy when her children were small, often returning to her computer at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m., after they had fallen asleep. "Technology generally makes this balance easier, as one can return emails from the soccer field or pediatrician's office, but it also can add stress because of the sense that you are never off-duty on either front." Nevertheless, a portable office consist-

ing of a laptop, smart phone and tablet is becoming the expectation. "The culture of face time at the office is slowly diminishing," Packer says. "It is generally recognized these days that one can perform valuable work for the firm and its clients while not necessarily at the office."

Recruitment is evolving to keep pace with changing expectations. "The younger generation expects to have a life and career, more so than previous generations," Gailor says. "They are looking for the opportunity to have a flexible work schedule when needed, maternity leave of eight to 10 weeks or more and an environment where they know they will not be penalized by reduced compensation or lack of advancement for using these benefits." To address the changing landscape of the legal field, many firms are implementing programs and benefits aimed at

providing support, training and mentoring for young female lawyers. Brooks Pierce hosts an all-female retreat, and at Smith Moore Leatherwood, PINK is not just a color, but stands for Promoting Inspiration Networking and Knowledge. It focuses on issues affecting women.

The benefits don't go in just one direction. Some of the lessons learned as a mother circle back to the firms. "Being a mother has made me more solicitous toward young women associates," Myatt says. "I try to give them wings to fly and succeed, shoulders to lean on, an ear to listen and arms to protect them." As for having it all, Van Zant says it depends on your definition. "Am I progressing well in my career? Yes. Am I happy with how my children are doing and our lives together? Yes. Is my van clean on the inside? No." ■

## Welcome To Our New Attorneys



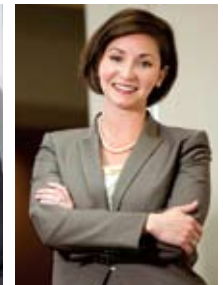
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