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It Goes by So Fast: Achieving Work-Life Balance Through Community Service

By Natalie Schaefer – May 8, 2015

***"God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers."*— Rudyard Kipling**

"It goes by so fast." If I had a nickel for every time I heard that phrase from parents of older children, I would not have to work again. It has a way of breaking my heart every time I hear it, because I, too, suffer from the daily plague of "mommy guilt." I should be the PTA President and at my children's school every day. I should be at home when they get out of school so I can make them a snack. I should be able to get my daughter to her swim practice at the incredibly inconvenient time of 4:00 p.m. But I have a secret: I like to work. No, I LOVE to work. I love my job and cannot imagine doing anything else. I am lucky in that regard.

I am even luckier to have two amazing children, now ages eight and five, and a wonderfully supportive husband. He is a college professor and has the summers off. That's right: the summers off. So in a reversal of clichéd roles, my husband takes our children to the pool every day in the summer. They have lunch that he packed at the pool. They splash and play with him all day in the cool water. I do not resent him. To the contrary, I am so thankful that he is able to provide that for our children. When I was growing up, my mother was a homemaker. She was always present. We never had name-brands, because they were too expensive. I still tell my kids that I never had a Capri Sun unless I visited a friend's house. But I have always been fortunate. My brother and I got home right after school and played until dark. In the summers, we went to the pool or played outside until we could see the lightning bugs. My very normal middle-class background made me understand the significance of community service.

Community service plays an important role in our profession. Many law firms require it. That requirement is, of course, partially self-serving. Community service by attorneys exposes the firm to the community, which is free marketing. But here's the surprise for working moms: most firms don't care what type of community service we choose. Choose wisely! As working moms, we need to volunteer for community service that we authentically believe is important, so it balances our work and our lives.

Like most working mothers, I have bouts of guilt for not being available to my children at all times. My schedule as a litigator fluctuates, so some days I don't get to read them a bedtime story. I can't get to the pool every day in the summer, but I contribute to my children's development, and my own personal work-life balance, in other ways. One thing I can say confidently is that I serve our community, and I also spend meaningful time with my children. My five-year-old son plays soccer. I attend every game, since they are conveniently scheduled on weekends. Yep, I am a soccer mom. I am still fighting the urge to buy a minivan, though.

My eight-year-old daughter is quite an overachiever. She swims for a competitive team, plays soccer, and participates in Girl Scouts. She's a lot like me. When she began focusing heavily on swimming and Girl Scouts, I became community-service crazy. I am a member of the board of directors for her swim team. I serve as the troop leader for her Brownie troop. I spend quality time with my daughter through these activities, doing things she loves to do. And I feel fulfilled on a personal level when I see these great little women collecting books for charity, making "angel bags" for the homeless, and writing "thank you" cards to our men and women serving overseas. I feel balanced.

I began this community service because of my daughter, but it has grown into something else. It regularly reminds me to be thankful for what I have, and it puts everything into perspective. Believe it or not, this translates into a less stressful professional life. At work, particularly in litigation, almost everything is time-sensitive. Deadlines, deadlines, deadlines. Community service will make you sit back in your comfortable office chair, look around your office at the well-earned plaques, certificates, and degrees, and realize that almost nothing in your work life is truly "on fire." Virtually everything we do as attorneys can be fixed, even mistakes. You can de-stress your job as long as you have something in your life to keep it in perspective. For me, it's volunteer service that involves my children.

So I tell you this: don't mind the work stress. You can handle anything that comes your way. You have mentors, senior attorneys, and others that can help you if you need it. Spending time with your children in selfless acts of volunteerism is so satisfying that you eventually won't mind those details. My professional mantra: "I got this."

I am now going to get my kids ready for the weekend, soccer (cleats, uniform, shin guards, ball) and swimming (suit, towel, swim bag that's bigger than my daughter, goggles, fins) and grab a Capri Sun for the road.

Keywords: woman advocate, litigation, community service, work-life balance

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