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Success is in the eye of the beholder

I attended a luncheon recently for Rochester-based women attorneys who had graduated from my *alma mater*, Albany Law School. The event focused on the different paths through which women attorneys could find professional fulfillment. Over lunch, each table discussed the various issues faced by women attorneys and at the end of the meal, each group offered a report summing up the gist of the conversations.

The attendees consisted of, for the most part, two different groups of graduates: those who graduated from law school in the mid-2000s and more “seasoned” attorneys like myself, who had graduated prior to the mid-1990s. Missing (for the most part) were women attorneys who graduated between 1995 and 2005.

Initially, this puzzled me, but I later realized that many of the “missing” alumni likely had very small children. Of those who had young families, some were no longer working and were out of the legal loop altogether; others were working full or part-time and were no doubt desperately juggling the demands of work, family and life. For most of these women, attending an alumni luncheon was a time-killing luxury they could ill afford.

Nevertheless, their views were represented, I believe, by those of us who had been there, done that. And, this soon became apparent as each table reported back to the group regarding their discussions. Although many topics were covered, one recurring theme cropped up repeatedly: that the definition of “success” is different for each person.

In other words, you need to define success for yourself and understand that your concept of success must be flexible, since your frame of reference tends to alter the concept of success as well. If you buy into someone else's concept of “success,” you are bound to be miserable.

It is so important for young attorneys and law students — especially women — to acknowledge and embrace this concept, since the failure to do so has the potential to drastically affect their sense of self worth down the road.

This is because many young women lawyers envision having children, but simply cannot, or will not, acknowledge that starting a family will fundamentally alter their priorities, and, quite

possibly, their definitions of success. And if these young women have not yet accepted that their concept of professional success may change over time, then they are in for a rude and uncomfortable awakening — one that begins the moment that they announce their pregnancy to the world.

For me, the internal conflicts that I felt during my pregnancy and in the years that followed were tremendously difficult. I wrestled with feelings of personal inadequacy and worried that I wouldn't be able to maintain the high professional standards that I expected of myself. I also worried that I would be incapable of both working and mothering my child in a way that would not render me an unfit parent.

I continued to experience feelings of inadequacy a few years later when I decided to take a hiatus from the legal field to care for my children. I suffered from extreme guilt and truly felt as if I had single handedly derailed the entire feminist movement and failed women lawyers everywhere.

In retrospect, I gave myself far too much credit! Nevertheless, had I understood that success is a fluid, and very personal, concept I'd have fared much better and spared myself much unnecessary angst.

So please, young women lawyers and law students: Understand and accept that success is in the eye of the beholder. Realize that it is a fluid concept that changes over time. Never let anyone else define success for you — not your colleagues, mentors, parents, professors, career counselors, or classmates. Only you know what success is for you. Delegate that determination at the risk of your happiness.

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