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Lawyering is quite the balancing act

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“What struck us as we reviewed the results of these forums was that the attorneys’ responses — regardless of their number of years in practice, size of firm, practice setting, etc. — were consistent on one central point: They all were having a very difficult time achieving a balanced life in the law. Again, we wish to emphasize that when we refer to a balanced professional and personal life, we embrace ... not only attention to private interests, family and friends, but also involvement in bar association, civic, and community activities, all of which contribute to achieving a well-balanced life. ... Most felt that, at the time they decided to go to law school, they didn’t fully appreciate the extent of the demands a legal career would place on them.”

— New York State Bar Association’s “Final Report of the Special Committee on Balanced Lives in the Law,” March 7

As the recent NYSBA “Final Report of the Special Committee on Balanced Lives in the Law” concluded, the law can be all encompassing.

It’s always been that way, hence the saying “the law is a jealous mistress.”

Attempting to balance one’s chosen career with other non-legal obligations such as the demands of life outside of the office can be a delicate and difficult balancing act for both male and female lawyers.

Prior to becoming a lawyer, I didn’t give the idea of work/life balance much thought. All I’ve ever really wanted to do is litigate.

I spent the first half of my life methodically planning and creating a strong foundation for the first few years of my life as a litigator. But, I was shortsighted and failed to consider that life might throw me a curve ball when I least expected it — in my case, just three weeks before my wedding, when the man I would soon call my husband was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

Not surprisingly, that diagnosis changed me. It changed everything.

I’d met the man I loved and was going to live happily ever after,



as both a lawyer and “wife,” much as that term annoyed me. Maybe we’d have kids, too. Who knew?

And then, on that fateful day in April 1998, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. If he survived, there was a good chance we would face fertility issues. Fertility issues, of all things — when I wasn’t even sure I wanted kids. And, he might die, although, we were assured his particular cancer was “quite curable.” Apparently, we were supposed to feel good about that.

I tried to feel hopeful, but it wasn’t easy. The most difficult times of the day for me were the commutes to and from work. I would find myself stuck in rush hour traffic, seemingly unable to think of anything but the horrible cancer that was invading his body and ruining my marriage before it even began.

Once at work, I was fine (in large part due to the support and understanding of my then-supervisor Jill Paperno, for which I am eternally grateful).

My demanding schedule as an assistant public defender kept my mind more than occupied during the day. Immersing myself in my work seemed to do wonders for my outlook, and at the time I prided myself in the fact that I’d missed only two days of work throughout the entire course of his treatment.

In retrospect, I was taking the easy way out. I avoided the difficult task of confronting reality by convincing myself that my all-important career came first. My husband attended appointments alone, including the doctor’s visit where he was advised his cancer was more serious than originally thought.

If I could do it all again, I’d have been by his side more often throughout this trying time.

Judging from the results of the NYSBA’s study, I’m not alone in my misgivings about the demands of my chosen career. Perhaps the results and recommendations of the study will assist in bringing about a much-needed change in the profession and in the attitudes of those at the top of the legal ladder.

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