

## MOTHER-LAWYERS – the Shero Revamped

By Shantae D. Clayborn

I often feel like Wonder Woman. In the morning, I leap into the duties of a powerhouse litigation attorney, armed with the bangles of justice and equality on each wrist – anxious to take on any legal issue that may come my way. I slide into a sleek black suit, toss my hair into a power bun, and grab my briefcase. I navigate through the complexities of the legal system with the intent of rescuing my clients from whatever giants they may face.

But when night falls, I let my hair down, put on a soft, cotton gown, fuzzy slippers and transform into the comforter that makes tough days in second grade seem like a distant memory. I am a master chef, professor, hair stylist, story teller and lullaby singer – all of the things that growing little ones need.

When I discovered this duality, I embraced it freely and was amazed at all I could accomplish in a single day. Much like Spiderman when he discovered his Spidey Sense, I was in awe of what I could endure mentally and physically,

marveling at my ability to complete multiple tasks in a single bound. But just as the sweet taste of superhuman power turns bitter when the responsibility involved becomes a reality, I too began to discover that my powers came at a cost.

The first sign was the mental exhaustion felt when I arrived home after a long day of work. I had absolutely no desire to cook, clean, or read a single thing after spending hours reviewing documents. This posed a major problem when my eight-year-old son asked for help with homework or my five-year-old daughter asked the age-old question, “What’s for dinner?”

Guilt from lacking the energy to complete the duties I had previously fulfilled began to surface. It was like Kryptonite – preventing productivity during the day. I was consumed with downtrodden thoughts of how I failed to adequately complete my task as the nurturer. Then the self-doubt pulled me even lower. I would ask myself, “Can I make this work? Is it possible for me to do both well? Would I be a better mom if I weren’t an attorney? Would I be a better attorney if I weren’t a mom?” Finally, the anger of questioning my own dedication and ability completed my emotional roller coaster. How dare I consider choosing between being a great mom or an excellent attorney? I was pregnant when I took the LSAT, started law school with two small children and passed the bar in Ohio and Florida – surely I can do this – or can I?

After a few months of uncertainty, constant questioning, and what seemed to be the verge of a total meltdown, I decided to talk with other mother-lawyers. My question was simple, “How do I do both well and not go crazy in the process?” I first looked to more experienced mother-lawyers and was dissatisfied with the response.

I asked a senior partner with four children and she responded, “Well, my husband is a stay-at-home dad.” While her response was genuine, it is simply not an option in my household. I was told by another mother of three, “Hire a nanny. You can afford it.” While this solution had crossed my mind plenty of times, I could not fathom the thought of another woman fulfilling the duties I take pride in completing every evening. Furthermore, there are plenty of mother-lawyers who cannot afford a nanny. Another partner shared, “I work until 3:00 am on Friday night so that I can spend all day Saturday with my children.” While this option seemed more practical, I wondered what mental capacity I would have on Saturday morning when my two children ran into my room bright and early, ready for weekend fun. I began to realize that the requirements of this profession, coupled with motherhood, was a drastically different experience for those who began practicing during the nineties or earlier.

I thought back to a sensitive conversation I had with an accomplished partner last year, following the death of our close friend and colleague who died from complications of



J. Howard Miller, artist employed by Westinghouse, poster used by the War Production Co-ordinating Committee.



childbirth. She told me, “In my day, you had to choose between either having a family or a successful career.” She tearfully shared the fact that she decided very early in her practice that she would not have children – although her desire to have a family was still very strong. This statement was not a surprise to me. Regretfully, many female attorneys of her generation decide to forego having a family to cultivate, what is considered by many, a distinguished career.

Even in this day and age, many female attorneys working in large firms choose to forego bearing children until the year before they make partner, commonly referred to as their “lap year,” or after they make partner – living in constant fear that they will be penalized for taking maternity leave or missing additional time from work due to bed rest or other complications resulting from pregnancy. I often reflect upon my friend who gracefully and diligently put in her time at the firm and became pregnant during her lap year. I cannot help but question her untimely death and the system that fosters and encourages women to forego life’s natural processes to cultivate an idea of professional success.

But what about those of us who decide that we will engage our right to procreation, livelihood, and happiness on our own terms, in spite of bureaucratic stigmatism and obstacle? What can we do to accept our duality and embrace it? How can we do both well? After all, no one else will appreciate and accept our duality until we do so – unapologetically.

After a few weeks of seeking the opinions of more senior mother-lawyers, I began to ask younger female attorneys who appeared to have it all together. Their response was so practical and sensible that I almost felt silly for asking.

Don’t guilt yourself. A mother of four told me, “You’ll spin your wheels when you think you’re not giving the best that you have.” I tried it and it worked. When I began to accept the fact that I give my best as a mother and I give my all as an attorney, it changed my perspective. Contrary to stereotypical belief, the fact that I am a mother is an asset to my practice and not a

detriment. The reality that I live an extremely busy life as an attorney does not discount the fact that my husband and I are raising two healthy, happy children. When I began to accept this fact and remove my guilt, I discovered a new power within myself.

Use technology to your advantage. We are fortunate to have the world at our fingertips. By clicking a button, we can rescue our client from despair with a comforting e-mail, Skype parent-teacher conference, and e-file our Memorandum Contra with the Clerk of Courts—just in time for dinner. Technology has opened up a world of “non-traditional” ways to conduct business. Embrace the freedom it has provided.

Use the help of your support system. A colleague discovered that she constantly refused the support of her husband because of guilt. She thought she could only be a good mom if she attended all of her son’s doctor visits, little league games, recitals, etc. Guilt stemmed from the fact that she could not be in two places at the same time. She jumped through hoops to attend each appointment and complete her professional tasks despite the fact that her husband had a more flexible schedule and had offered to be there. She literally refused his assistance, to her detriment, because she wanted to be omnipresent. When she moved out of her own way, and accepted the reality that her husband was willing and able to support, she discovered she was still a wonderful mother and excellent attorney.

Take care of you. The old phrase, “If Momma isn’t happy – nobody’s happy” still reigns true. If you are not in a good place mentally, it rolls over into every aspect of life. During a women’s initiative meeting at a local law firm, we were asked to share one thing we do outside of work that relieves stress and makes us happy. I had to think long and hard about what my answer would be. Surely, in the midst of accomplishing my dreams, both personal and professional, I have fun. Maybe not the amount of fun I would like – but who has time for fun? This question forced me to find something, outside of my career and family, which brought joy to my life. My happiness now rolls over

on a personal and professional level.

While this list is not all-inclusive, it is a start for the mother-lawyers/Wonder Women who are in the process of accepting their duality and striving for better ways to make this system work for them. My hope is that this article sparks an essential conversation that needs to continue in our homes, offices, and communities.

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