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## Women IN THE LAW





# Working Moms Making It Work



At age 6, BJ congratulated his mom, Tracy LeRoy, on making partner.

Shaw Pittman LLP, has a great group of other parents in her neighborhood who rely on each other. The parents coordinate school drop off and pick up and extracurricular activities, and they have even had joint birthday parties for their kids. All of the parents in what Amanda calls their “village” know that they can call on other parents in the village for help. Maryann Zaki, an associate at Eversheds Sutherland, also talks of a “village” and points out that, as lawyer-moms, we have to get over the fear of asking others for help.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Another benefit to having family and community support is that you will have time to take care of yourself. Successful lawyer-moms all seem to agree that you have to take care of your own needs if you

want to be able to take care of everyone else's. Some lawyer-moms I interviewed wished for more time to go to the gym or read a new novel, but most of them have found ways to nurture their mental, spiritual, and physical health in spite of the extrinsic forces competing for their time.

Cheri Thomas, a staff attorney at the Fourteenth Court of Appeals and mother of three girls, says that blocking out time each year for a girls' weekend helps her maintain her sanity. Michelle Gray, a partner at Fogler, Brar, Ford, O'Neil and Gray, also makes time for girlfriends by planning a girls' night at least once a month. And Jennie Basille takes a “me” day at least every other month so that she can go get a facial, go running, or have her hair done while her girls are in daycare. She also tries to work out regularly during her lunch hour.

Other lawyer-moms put self-care on their calendars or find creative ways to fit in working out. Tracy LeRoy works out while her kids are taking tennis lessons. Michelle Scheffler, a partner at Haynes and Boone, goes to the gym after she drops her kids off at school and before heading to the office. Dani Sanchez, a single

“I don't know how you do it all.” I have probably heard this statement hundreds of times. And I would wager that most, if not all, lawyer-moms have too. Being both a lawyer and an involved parent is hard. It is a lot of work, and it requires a lot of juggling. It takes commitment and dedication, and sometimes lawyer-moms have to make tough choices. And those choices are different for everyone.

We all have different responses to “I don't know how you do it all,” but all of our responses distill to this: “Somehow, I make it work.” This article explores how some of Houston's lawyer-moms made it work. Their solutions are not your solutions, but I hope they will help you realize that you are not alone. We all struggle some days to make it work, but we are strong, smart, and dedicated women—and as the World War II slogan reminds us, “WE CAN DO IT!”

## Family and Community Support

When I was in law school, I had three young children. People often asked, “How

do you do it?” I always responded that I had a supportive spouse who helped a lot. I interviewed a dozen successful lawyer-moms in the Houston area for this article, and they all attributed much of their success to extensive support from their families and communities. Sherrie Young, an in-house attorney at a major oil company, has three young children and often travels for her job.<sup>1</sup> She relies on her husband and live-in mother, who she says is her “proxy,” to help her make it work. Kara Stauffer, a partner at Alvarez Stauffer Bremer PLLC, has flown her mom down to help on occasion. Tracy LeRoy, a partner at Sidley Austin LLP, has in-laws who travel to Houston to help when needed. Jennie Basille, an Assistant United States Attorney with two toddler girls at home, has a cousin in town who has helped Jennie many times when the kids were sick or Jennie needed to travel.

While this type of family support is essential to most lawyer-moms I interviewed, several find similar support in their extended communities. Amanda Halter, a partner at Pillsbury Winthrop

lawyer-mom with two school-aged children, is labor-and-employment counsel at Texas Children's Hospital; she hires a person to come sit with her kids and tidy up the kitchen while she goes running at 4:30 a.m.

Some lawyer-moms similarly sneak in reading time. Sherrie Young listens to books on tape during her commute, and Michelle Gray escapes in a book for about 20 minutes a night after she has put her daughter to bed. Whatever your escape of choice, Kara Stauffer very astutely points out that "[d]efining time for yourself is critical."

So, when you need Calgon to take you away,<sup>2</sup> call on your support network to watch the kids and go shopping, exercise, volunteer, or take in a game or show.<sup>3</sup>

### Support from Other Lawyer-Moms

Sometimes, lawyer-moms have to make choices that will lead to feelings of guilt no matter which solution we choose—the tough choices. If we miss something our kids are doing, we feel like we are not being the best moms we can be. If we miss something at work, we worry our partners or colleagues will think we are not as committed to the law as we should be. While the issues we face as lawyer-moms are frustrating, one thing is clear: other lawyer moms have faced similar choices. One theme that recurred during my interviews was that lawyer-moms depend on the support of other lawyer-moms to get them through the difficult times.

There are several ways to find other lawyer-moms to support you when you are trying to make tough lawyer-mom decisions. The first, of course, is through organic friendships that develop along the way with law-school classmates and work colleagues. As Maryann Zaki reflects, "Just having someone to text about how crazy your life is, or to grab lunch with you on a bad day, helps you realize you aren't alone, and that we're all pushing through together." Kara Stauffer says that meeting her lawyer-mom friends for coffee or lunch on a regular basis "is one of the best ways [she has] found to keep [her]



Michelle Scheffler with Joe, Margaret, and Max



Jennie Basile with Amelia and Abygail



Cheri Thomas with Lucy, Rose and Iris



Dani Sanchez with Sagan and Gavin



Tracy LeRoy with Benjamin and BJ



Kara Stauffer with Caelan and Hudson

sanity intact." These friends "are a consistent source of advice in both law and life, and provide laughter and friendship along the way."

If you do not feel you have that type of friend support at this point, a great way to find it is through informal mentoring. If you have met a lawyer-mom who seems to have all of her ducks in a row in your office or through the HBA or other groups with which you are involved, ask her to be your mentor. Take her out to lunch or coffee and ask her how she works through tough lawyer-mom choices.

Another way to get support from other lawyer-moms is through affinity groups. There are several lawyer groups in the area where lawyer-moms can meet other women who are also juggling career and motherhood responsibilities, such as the Association of Women Attorneys, the State Bar's Women and the Law Section, and the Association of Corporate Counsel Houston Chapter of Women In House.<sup>4</sup> There is also a group in Houston catering specifically to lawyer-moms called Moms in Law.<sup>5</sup> And if you cannot find a group that fits your needs, you can create one. Mary-



ann Zaki and Michelle Gray meet a group of women lawyers for breakfast once a quarter. And Dani Sanchez founded “Latina Lawyers Network” in 2010. This group meets every other month to discuss issues that are specific to this underrepresented attorney group. Additionally, some lawyer-moms find support through social media, including the Facebook groups MothersEsquire and Girl Attorney-TX.

### Creative Work Solutions

Many large law firms offer part-time or flex-time programs to help attorneys for whom the typical 2,000-or-more billable-hours scenario does not work. These firms often offer special programming to help lawyers who are trying to balance practicing law with raising a family. Some of the lawyer-moms I interviewed found these programs helpful, but they are not a panacea. While working at a large law firm is the right option for some lawyer-moms—and if this is your path, there are many women who have found ways to make that work—some lawyer-moms I interviewed have found other solutions, such as moving in house or taking government jobs with more standardized hours. And some have even started their own firms.

Both Kara Stauffer and Michelle Gray, who are partners at small firms, have found that while they do not have the same defined options designed to help with work-life balance that are available in larger firms, they are able to create their own options. Kara says that this is “invaluable many weeks.” Michelle notes that she is fortunate to work in a small firm with partners who are also her friends, and as long as she gets her work done, she can easily come in a little later if needed or take her daughter to the doctor when she is sick.

Taunya Painter, a mother of four, used to work as an attorney and director of international trade for a large corporation—a job that required significant international travel. When Taunya decided to change jobs, she partnered with her husband in the Painter Law Firm. She likes

the arrangement because she never has to apologize when she has a sick child, and she and her husband can cover for each other—at work or at home—as needed.

Carey Worrell, a solo practitioner and mother of two school-aged children, designs her work schedule around her mom responsibilities. She can work part-time while her kids are in school by only taking small matters that will work with her schedule. She has a virtual-office service that covers calls and offers an address for her letterhead, and there are conference rooms available in a physical space for when she needs to meet with clients. She was fortunate to find another lawyer-mom and solo practitioner who likes to work on more drawn-out matters, and they refer matters that do not work with their individual firm mottos to each other.


Of course every lawyer-mom’s work solution will differ because we all have different reasons for wanting to practice law and different professional goals. The take away is that other lawyer-moms have found the right work solutions to fit their goals, and there are many different ways to be a successful lawyer-mom. As my teenage daughter tells me (usually when I am making a huge fashion faux pas): “You do you.”

### General Advice

The lawyer-moms I interviewed were very happy to share their experiences so that other women could benefit from what they have learned. Some of them had very helpful advice for other lawyer-moms trying to make it work every day. Tracy Le Roy cautions lawyer-moms not to be apologetic to people with whom they work for having kids and not to apologize to your kids for having to work. Jennie Basile advises to “focus on the moments of joy every day and not let everything feel like a chore.” Michelle Gray says to “give yourself a little slack” as there “will be days you are a great mom, but sub-par on the work front,” and “other days that you’ve killed it professionally, but weren’t able to attend a school function or forgot something for show-and-tell.” Michelle Schef-

fler, Dani Sanchez, and Sherrie Young all recommend outsourcing the chores you do not enjoy. Michelle also recommends focusing on face-time with the kids and not overcommitting to volunteer or school activities that aren’t directly related to being with them. Amanda Halter says to “[g]et rid of the guilt. It’s not doing anything for you or your children.” And Cheri Thomas sums it up by advising fellow lawyer-moms to “be gentle” with themselves.

### And When That Does Not Work, Tomorrow is Another Day

Sometimes, despite good advice from friends who have been in your shoes, support from your families and communities, and valid attempts to find the right work arrangement, you reach the end of the work day, the kids are in bed, a late night show is on the television, and you think, “Wow, this was a bad day. Nothing worked out like I planned.” The good news is, we have all had those days, and, as Scarlett O’Hara reminds us, “Tomorrow is another day!” 

*Anna Archer is a career law clerk to the Honorable Gray H. Miller, a United States District Court Judge in the Southern District of Texas. She is also a member of The Houston Lawyer Editorial Board and the HBA Gender Fairness Committee. She would like to thank all of the lawyer-moms who agreed to be featured in this article.*

### Endnotes

1. Sherrie Young is a pseudonym. The other names in this article are real.
2. “Calgon take me away” is a slogan from a series of commercials for Calgon bath products. See, e.g., Calgon Commercial (1988), <https://youtu.be/sNgZFxAkKtA>.
3. Don’t forget to take advantage of your HBA discount for TUTS theatre tickets, HABLA Spanish classes, a Houston Rockets game, or a shopping spree at Brooks Brothers. To see all of the great discounts available with you HBA membership, visit <https://www.hba.org/membership/member-benefits/>.
4. For more information about Texas women’s networking groups, see <http://www.texaswomenlawyers.net/home/resources/national-organizations/>. To learn more, specifically, about the Women In House group, visit <http://www.acc.com/chapters/houst/women-in-house.cfm>.
5. Moms-in-Law (@momsinlaw), FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/momsinlaw/> (last visited Jan. 24, 2018).