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Young Lawyers

Laura Granier, Young Lawyers Chair

LIFE PLANNING TO DEFER USE OF YOUR ESTATE PLANNING

If you are like many lawyers, you probably do not often take the time to ask yourself what it is you really want to do with your days on earth – what you will do with your one precious life. You may even feel like you are constantly on a treadmill running from one place to the next, living from deadline to deadline, frequently noting how time flies and wishing you could slow it down.

The New York Times reported in 2008 that 44 percent of lawyers surveyed by the American Bar Association said they would not recommend the profession to a young person. It is more than a little bit troubling that such a high percentage of lawyers suggest they might not choose our profession a second time around if given another chance. When I hear a young person express an interest in becoming a lawyer, I cannot help but be excited and recommend it wholeheartedly. Even with the stress and the long hours some days, I love being a lawyer. But I do candidly disclose that there are challenges – a big one I have long struggled with is finding work-life balance. Still, I believe this is true of many professions. Theodore Roosevelt once said “far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” I believe that is what we do as lawyers.

We are in the service business and we must cater to our clients’ needs. If we do not, someone else will. But, making definitive choices in order to bring some balance to your life will make you a better lawyer and facilitate a healthier, happier and potentially longer life. If you want to connect with juries and be able to resolve other people’s problems, you need to be well rounded and have broad, real-life perspectives. You likely cannot gain this or nurture it by working all the time. So, finding time for a life outside of work also is important to your long term success professionally, not to mention your overall health and wellness.

There are tools to help. Ever-improving technology will continue to facilitate balance if used strategically. While some may think of their Blackberry, iPhone or Palm device as a cursed ball and chain, others see it as a blessing that enhances balance. I often have conference calls in the car or in a quiet location on vacation (though, admittedly, finding a quiet place to do this at theme parks can be a challenge). This allows me to get

away early sometimes when I can work from my laptop or Blackberry at my daughter’s gymnastics or my son’s soccer. Some may see this as failing to set boundaries. Maybe that is true; but when we truly are unavailable, we do have the ability to turn the devices off or leave them at home. On the other hand, we can conveniently extend our day by making and returning calls while driving. Thanks to technology, we are better able to effectively serve clients away from the office when we need to be somewhere else.

Clients Understand. In my experience, most clients respect that you have a life outside of the office. They do not expect you to be “on call” 24/7. But sometimes they do have emergencies or time-sensitive issues and appreciate your response after hours because they value a lawyer who cares as much about their problems as they do. In addition, when you are working on an exciting and time-sensitive issue, it can be fun to have an open and immediate line of communication with the client who is one of the only other people who truly shares in the experience with you.

I am not suggesting you be a slave to your Blackberry, but instead that you delve in when necessary and work the long hours and weekends when you need to and recognize when you don’t need to, and be sure you are taking time for yourself and your family when you can. Everyone needs time to recharge and you need to consciously make the time for this when your clients aren’t having emergencies or you are not preparing for trial. Most opposing counsel and judges are very understanding and willing to work with you to avoid interfering with your family vacation or other reasonable scheduling issues.

Find what works for you. As lawyers, most of us do not have jobs that begin at 9 a.m. and end at 5 p.m. but we can choose to have a “good” life nonetheless. It just takes some conscious effort, prioritizing and time management. I freely admit this is no easy task. Lawyering is hard work. There’s no way around that. It requires continuous excellent performance as clients trust you to solve important problems involving their lives, their businesses, their property and, sometimes, their most fundamental rights.

Work-life balance requires deliberately and carefully finding what works for you. By habit I wake up around

5 a.m. every day, almost without exception. I enjoy a cup of coffee or two and often use the time to respond to e-mails and do other work. Generally speaking, it does not feel like an intrusion to me or my family. I find satisfaction in completing these tasks first thing in the morning with no phones ringing or other interruptions. By the time the rest of my family wakes up, usually I have put my work away and can immerse myself in reading Dr. Seuss, getting ready for baseball, or playing a game of cards. Everyone must find their own time-management solutions that work for them. The point is, it does not just happen or even happen easily. We must think about it, plan for it and work at it.

Listen to your family and loved ones.

Although I think it will always take concerted effort and skilled juggling, I do believe you can excel professionally as a lawyer and at the same time have a happy, healthy and fulfilling personal life. You must take care of yourself because if you don't, eventually it will catch up to you. This has not been an easy or quick lesson for me. I am thankful for genuinely caring mentors and my husband and children, who have firmly helped guide me to this realization.

I did not truly acknowledge the need for attention to balance in my life until my six- and four-year-old children, in their most innocently blatant but honest words, told me how much they missed me. As painful as it was to hear, I am thankful they told me because it led me to reflect on what kind of balance (or lack thereof) I had in my life. I believe often we learn much more from our failures than we do our success. Having failed to find balance in life taught me an important lesson and I'm working on improving. I share this to urge you to find your balance sooner than I did, or at least to try. I also share this in the hope that one day my children truly understand that as much as I may teach them, it all pales in comparison to what they already have taught me. Finally, I share this so my family knows I really am listening. Be sure you do too, because what they say is out of love. You fill an important role in their lives that no one else can. To your family, you truly are irreplaceable. Your importance to them cannot be overstated.

Make the most of the time you have.

So, work hard, be available to serve your clients well and practice law with the skill and passion that make you a great lawyer. But, be sure that you claim enough hours in your days on earth to enjoy time with your loved ones, have some fun, rest, exercise and engage in your hobbies. Although it may be not be practical to expect that we will live each moment like our last, we can be sure that we make the time to have those satisfying moments when we smile because we know we have made the most of the one precious life we get. ■