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Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Role Reversal

For alumni who make the decision to leave careers and stay home with their children, the rewards can be great but the transition isn't always easy.

Story by **RACHEL HATCH**



Beth Janicki Clark '85 with her twins. On her last day of work, colleagues told her, "You know you're making the right decision, don't you?"

Beth Janicki Clark '85 returned from the theatrical performance a little later than expected. Clark, a former attorney for the village of Downers Grove near Chicago, generally wasn't the type to linger after a show. She and her husband, Peter, also an attorney in a downtown Chicago firm, usually kept to a tight schedule. With Clark's new job, however, her keen interest in two of the actors meant other things could wait.

"Why, that's a lovely paper-clip chain, dear," Clark said to one of her twin 5-year-old sons arriving home at the conclusion of a school play in which both had singing roles. After hearing her son suggest a possible use for his metal creation, Clark responded, "No, dear, I don't think it will fly over the railing."

Clark's new job requires all the patience and negotiating skills of her days as an attorney, but now her coworkers are a bit younger. She joins many Illinois Wesleyan alumni who have decided to take the sometimes scary leap off the career track to become stay-at-home parents.

"It took a long time for my husband and me to get pregnant," says Clark, who was 36 when the twins were born. "I was working long hours; my husband was working long hours. Even after we had the kids, we were going at such a hectic pace. When the boys turned 4, I just had a feeling I was missing out on some pretty important years."

Most parents face a crossroads in deciding how to balance their work and family lives. As little as 30 years ago, there was very little question that mothers would stay home with the children while the husband went off to work. The 1970s brought new freedom for women to enter the workplace. With that freedom came a difficult choice, for families who could afford to be supported by a single income, of whether or not one of the parents would stay home with the kids. Now that more couples are choosing to wait several years before having children, that choice is complicated by the fact that staying at home will likely interrupt or halt one of the parents' careers.

For parents with college degrees, the decision to leave their jobs often holds an added layer of complexity. Some are haunted by the idea that they may be “wasting” their educations by staying home. But that idea only applies if you think the purpose of a college degree is just to get a better job, not to live a better life. Leslie Powell-Skinner '91 believes her Illinois Wesleyan education has enhanced her parenting abilities. “I find I use a lot of my management and leadership skills when it comes to my 2-year-old,” says Powell-Skinner, who lives in Elridge, Iowa, with her husband, Kerry, and their two children. “Really, it’s the love of learning that is a tremendous asset in raising a family. Wesleyan helped me to teach my children to think critically and love learning.”

Because of her liberal arts background, Allecia Ranney Correll '00 says, “I’ll be able to teach my children how what we do fits into this world, and that there are consequences to what we do.”

A former analyst with State Farm Insurance, Correll — who has two sons with husband Zachary '96 — takes her parenting role seriously. Yet she knows that others don’t understand her choice. Instead, they assume “I stayed at home because I couldn’t get the job I wanted, or I am uneducated. It’s difficult for them to believe I left a wonderful career.”

Clark recalls that when she announced her decision to stay home, many friends and family members were stunned by her decision. “My mother was supportive, but my father asked why I got all that education if I was just going to stay at home.” She pauses. “He’s still proud of me, though.” As her last day in the office drew near, many colleagues began to offer their support. “I had people come into my office and say, ‘You know you’re making the right decision, don’t you?’”

Even with such support, parents who trade work for home can face a potential loss of identity and self-esteem. “There’s not a lot of thanks in being a stay-at home mom,” says Powell-Skinner. “No one compliments you on a well-changed poop diaper. You have to know your own worth.”

“It’s a weird thing,” says Tina Kurecki Lewis '96, a former full-time epidemiologist who lives near Atlanta with her husband Christopher '95 and their infant son. “I went to a new doctor’s office and when they asked my occupation, I had a hard time writing down ‘homemaker.’ It’s tough to acknowledge that I no longer have a job.” She pauses. “Wait, I *have* a job, I just no longer get paid for it.”

Mother-of-two Amanda Lenk Xenos '00 recounts similar reactions when accompanying husband Eleftherios to various social events. “When I tell them I am a stay-at-home mother, they have a look



Alumni find rewards and challenges in their jobs as stay-at-home parents. Leslie Powell-Skinner '91 and her three children.

that says, 'How boring.' There's an assumption that I'm letting my mind go to waste," she says.

Faced with similar social situations, Zarina Mullan Plath '94 — who has two children with her husband, IWU English Professor James Plath — has found it helpful to define herself outside the home. "I wasn't defensive when people asked what I did," she says. "I just found myself presenting myself differently, saying what else I was doing as far as writing poetry or reviews, editing, or teaching classes." (Plath is a part-time adjunct professor at Illinois Wesleyan). "It was just easier to connect with people."

Not everyone struggles with the idea of staying at home. For former teacher Lori Alhambra Fowler '96, being a full-time mom for her and husband Tim's two children seems quite natural. "Staying home is more of a norm in my social circle," explains Fowler. When the family moved from Iowa to Philadelphia, she was able to meet more stay-at-home mothers. "Perhaps the only downfall is that you tend to forget you had a life before your kids," she says. "No one asks what you did before."



Rhys Lovell '87 with his son and daughter. Lovell has since returned to work, but when resuming their careers, parents often find the change is emotionally difficult.

While many women fight the need to prove themselves as intellectual equals to working mothers, Rhys Lovell '87 faced a new kind of bias. He was part of a new trend: the stay-at-home dad. It was a double stigma, and one he struggled with for a while during his time at home with his and wife Devon's daughter, Carys. "It was hard for me at first," says Lovell. "Men are so hard-wired to be the hunters. I would go to the park in Evanston (Illinois) with Carys and be the only guy, the only parent, surrounded by nannies."

As an older brother who once cared for his younger siblings, Lovell had no problems with diapers and bottles. "The hardest thing was coming to terms with being the secondary wage earner and trying to be comfortable with that. Maybe there are some stay-at-home dads whose masculinity isn't threatened by staying at home," he says, adding with a laugh, "I'd really like to meet them."

Even as they hurdle challenges to their self-esteem, stay-at-home parents face other difficulties as they make the transition from work to home. Clark admits, "I used to have this image in my mind when I saw stay-at-home moms. I thought, 'They have it so easy.' But now — *oh, brother!* — I didn't know how much energy it took."

When Clark and her husband both worked, a 21-year-old nanny had stayed with the twins. "I didn't require her to do housework, so she could play games with the kids all day." When she realized her new job included taking care of her two energetic boys and her home, Clark was

amazed at how full her days became. “It’s funny — now I get to bed and there is still laundry in the dryer. Yes, things have changed.”

Clark’s friend Leisa Dede Johnston ’86 — who, with husband Ben, has two children — recalls feeling a similar sense of shock when she transitioned from her former life as a creative director. “My work was fast-paced,” says Johnston, “but this is constant. It’s a 24-hour job.”

Entering the world of an at-home parent means losing a certain amount of entitlement. There is no sick leave or earned vacation — and every lunch is a working lunch. The loss of adult camaraderie in the office can also be a challenge, says Johnston. She adds with a laugh, “Sometimes there’s only so much of Thomas the Tank Engine you can watch.”

Despite the occasional bouts of loneliness or tedium, Johnston says she has “no regrets” about her decision to stay home at this time in her life. “That doesn’t mean there aren’t days I yell to my husband, ‘I’m going back to work tomorrow!’” she adds with a laugh.

The struggles involved with staying home are often tempered with the self-made promise to return to work. Yet, as the years go on, many fear finding a job again. Each year, colleges turn out a new batch of graduates, eager to work for entry-level pay. “I think the biggest challenge for me is not being in the workforce for a while,” said Laura Lutz Laird ’97, a former financial coordinator who stays at home with her and husband William’s son and daughter. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get back.”

Lovell returned to full-time work when his family moved to Bloomington. “I miss it,” he says of his former life as a stay-home dad. His 2-year-old son, Will, watches with disappointment when his father leaves in the morning for work. “I’m the kind of dad who can’t not play with my kids. I try to make up for the time I miss with him, but there are just not enough hours in the day.”

Tari Fitch Carpenter ’86, says she was determined to find a job that allowed her to spend as much time as possible with her son, Ben. A former musical-theatre major who performed year-round until Ben was born, Carpenter says, “My story is a bit different than most.” Because Ben was born with spinal muscular atrophy, “nobody questioned my decision to stay home, and it was worth every moment.”

When Ben entered first grade, Carpenter became an institutional technology contact for a Florida school — a job that’s “so not me,” she says with a laugh. “They gave me training ... and now all of Ben’s friends call me, ‘The Computer Lady.’” But the most important thing about her job is that it allows her to maintain the same schedule as her son, including holidays and vacations.

Those kinds of trade-offs — a less-than-ideal job for a kid-friendly schedule— are made by parents of all walks of life, every day. No solution will likely feel like a perfect fit, nor does one solution fit all situations.

Yet, in an era where women are encouraged to aspire to “have it all” — a fulfilling career, children, and a successful marriage — many are finding a compromise in not trying to have it all at once, but to have it at different times. “You know, I realized I could be 100 percent mom, or 100 percent teacher,” but not both at once, says Kathy Kanak Stein ’84, a stay-at-home mom and former full-time teacher who lives in Birmingham, Ala., with her husband Gregory ’84 and their three children.

Johnston lived the life of a successful working woman for 20 years before she married and started a family. “I did the great single life in Chicago with a great career,” she says. Within a four-year period, Johnston wed, had two children, and moved to Morris, Ill. “It’s been crazy, but this is where I assumed I would be someday. I was ready for this next step.”

Lisa Powell Williams ’88 decided to stay home the last year before her daughter, Katherine, now 10, was in school full time in kindergarten. “My intent is to continue in my chosen professional career path, rather than to be at home full time when she does enter junior high school.

“There is no right or wrong answer to parenthood,” sums up Williams. “I guess the key is trying to find a balance between work and home, whatever that may be. If anyone has that figured out, can you have them call me?” she adds with a laugh.

For parents who do decide to trade careers for home, knowing they have made the best decision often boils down to that old standby: it just feels right for them. For Clark, “the important thing is that I feel I’m experiencing their childhood with them. ... Of course, right now they are pulling each other’s shirts off, so I’m not sure how I’m supposed to be experiencing that,” she adds loudly for the benefit of her twins. “I guess I’d better go,” she concludes.

Back to work.



Tari Fitch Carpenter ’86 with her husband James and son Ben. Carpenter took time off to care for Ben, who was born with spinal muscular atrophy, but has returned to work.