

## MID-CAREER MOTIVATION HOW TO KEEP GOING WHEN LIFE HAPPENS

BY HEATHER BARNES & MADELINE DENNIS

Some things get easier with practice. Striking a work-life balance as a midcareer lawyer is not one of them. Job responsibilities and personal obligations multiply simultaneously. The unexpected happens despite meticulous planning. While answering emails, drafting a brief, and planning for a client meeting, you get the call: “Your child is sick, can you pick them up from school?” Or your dad calls before lunch and you feel guilty cutting it short, recalling the countless times you called him at work as a child. Driving home after a wearisome workday, you talk to your mom, and she asks, “Have you talked to your siblings?”

Consider the unexpected from a career perspective. One day, serving as in-house counsel, the company takes a change of direction and eliminates your position. Or maybe you’ve built a thriving private practice and receive an offer for a once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity, but it doesn’t fit your ideal timeline. In both cases, now what? It can be difficult to know what the right next step is, particularly when most career support focuses on grooming young talent or the opposite end of the continuum: succession planning.

The curveballs that both professional and personal life throw at midcareer lawyers are daunting. This is true particularly for women lawyers, who still tend to shoulder a disproportionate burden in terms of mounting personal obligations, whether they be children, aging parents, or personal health issues. It is hardly surprising, then, that while women represent 45 to 50% of new law firm associates, they comprise only 18 to 20% of equity partners.<sup>1</sup> Getting woman attorneys in the door isn’t the problem — it’s keeping them from leaving or stagnating as work/life demands skyrocket midcareer.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Even though life happens, we have more control than we think over many aspects of our careers and lives. Small tweaks can make the difference between moving up and moving on under pressure. We hope our personal stories and professional advice can help you rediscover career enthusiasm, raise your hand, and adapt to the inevitable changes and challenges of life in the law.

### Madeline’s story: 8th year trial lawyer and young mother

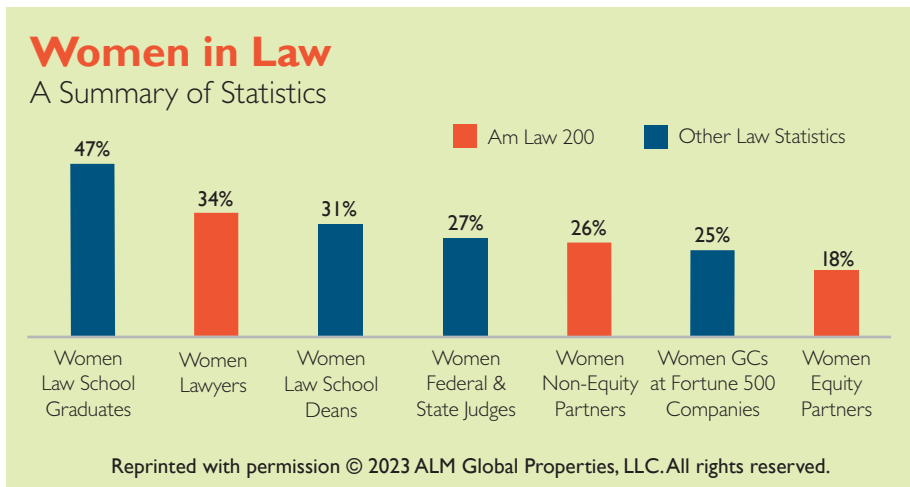
I am an “early-mid-career” litigator and mom

of Quinn (age 4) and Reece (age 1.5). I succeed as a law supermom by raising my hand for challenging career opportunities, even when my instinct says “step back, Madeline — you cannot do it all.” While seemingly paradoxical, engaging in difficult career endeavors during a life phase that includes screaming toddlers helps me maintain enthusiasm in both realms.

I am at the career stage where it feels like I have “been there, done that” in many ways. That first deposition becomes the thousandth, the once intellectually stimulating motion writes itself, and attending a conference for the sixth time is tiresome. Career monotony plus home-life exhaustion can lead to withdrawal and, ultimately, stagnation.

During the past year, I said yes to career opportunities that seemed daunting in the midst of tantrums, sleepless nights, and ear infections. When my son was 6 months old, I tried a case successfully to verdict even though it required asking the judge to provide me with a special room to pump every few hours. I gave oral argument on a complex legal issue in a federal multidistrict litigation. I came home ready to be with my kids, their silliness and exuberance a welcome respite from contentious cross-examination. Being a lawyer, a mom, and/or a lawyer-mom is hard, no matter what. Exhaustion is unavoidable, but rekindling career passion can make every aspect of life more fulfilling.

Just as important to avoiding burnout is finding the confidence to ask for help and say no. I embrace the flexibility made possible by the Zoom era. I bill during non-traditional hours so I can pick up my daughter from preschool. I take time off after trial. Importantly, I choose to work for a firm that supports its attorneys with work-life balance in tangible ways. I ask for help at home, too, from my husband, family, and



friends. I talk to successful women attorneys on the other side of the midcareer trajectory. I keep visible near my desk a list of self-care activities that take two minutes each. Even at my busiest, I take five to ten minutes to meditate, breathe, or move my body.

During midcareer, work and life stress are at their respective peaks. This does not require you to step back from any of it. It's time for us lawyer moms to obliterate the glass ceiling.

**Heather's story: intellectual property partner and soccer mom**

Faith, Family, Career. That is how I prioritize. As I navigated the first 17 years of practice while simultaneously raising three children, this mantra kept me somewhat sane. I can nearly guarantee that you will find our family sitting in our pew every Sunday at 8:15 a.m. for mass. Practices, soccer games, track meets, school events, doctor appointments, birthday parties, out-of-town family visits, holidays, sick kids and no babysitter — it was (and is) my responsibility to track, schedule, and plan our busy family life.

In those early years, I found myself juggling my family's needs with professional demands, rotating my work hours where I could fit them in. Because my role was to work through the unexpected with sick children or no babysitter, I needed to be in a place where I could get home to our kids at a moment's notice. With my supportive husband taking the evening shift, I spent a lot of late nights making up time for something I missed during the day, but it worked for us. During these years, I knew who I was and what was important to me. I was not going to be the top biller at my firm, but I enjoyed being a patent and trademark prosecutor as well as supporting mergers and acquisitions. Being on the transactional side made deadlines manageable, but the docket was never-ending and sometimes there was little time for my personal life. Developing a client base brought on its own demands, but it removed a layer of reporting to other lawyers internally.

Six years ago, life happened in a wonderful way. Our kids were getting older — 14, 11, and almost 10 — so the chaos was a little more controlled. I received a call to consider an opportunity with Tucker Ellis. Five years earlier, a law firm in Cleveland an hour away from my home was a clear “no,” because it would disrupt



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my priorities. The thought of a bigger platform became intriguing. I received an offer from Tucker Ellis, but not at the partnership level, where I had been for the previous 10 years. Now I needed to have faith in myself to make this new adventure work. I took the plunge. Reestablishing myself in a new organization took work, but it paid off in dividends. Now my client base is thriving, and I'm back at the table as an equity partner. Our kids are now 20, 17, and almost 16. I know they are watching — especially our 17-year-old daughter. Sometimes what may be perceived as a step backwards is really the beginning of a significant launch of your career to the next level.

**How to stay motivated**

Setting goals and priorities is important to maintain consistency amid the chaos. Over time, those goals and priorities do change, so remember to reexamine them frequently to keep your energy and motivation. Always grow and nurture your relationships, including those within your own organization, whether you are in-house or in private practice. Life happens due to factors outside of your control. Take a minute, and let yourself feel what you need to feel. Binge watch something with a pint of your favorite ice cream — but know that you can find opportunity in any situation.

In sum, embrace the inevitable midcareer challenges in a way that works *for you*. Being a lady in the law should not mean it's up or out when personal obligations come knocking. Try a case, volunteer, or find a hobby. Ask for help, too — at work and at home — to find fulfillment and succeed at both. As women and as lawyers, we can have it all, but maybe not all at once — and that's ok.

<sup>1</sup> Commission on Women in the Profession, A Current Glance at Women in the Law, AM. BAR ASS'N, Jan. 2018, at 2, [https://www.pbi.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/10569\\_a-current-glance-at-women-in-the-law-jan-2018-\(1\).pdf?sfvrsn=0](https://www.pbi.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/10569_a-current-glance-at-women-in-the-law-jan-2018-(1).pdf?sfvrsn=0)



*Heather Barnes, a partner at Tucker Ellis LLP, serves as outside counsel to numerous middle-market and Fortune 500 companies. With more than 20 years of experience with trademarks, patents, copyrights, trade secrets, licensing, and mergers and acquisitions, she is in a unique position to provide executives and in-house counsel various — and valuable — perspectives as they adopt domestic and international intellectual property strategies. Heather co-chairs Tucker Ellis's Women's Initiative and is a Co-Vice Chair of the Intellectual Property Owners Association's Women in IP Law Committee. Heather has been a CMBA member since 2017. She can be reached at (216) 696-3952 or at heather.barnes@tuckerellis.com.*



*Madeline Dennis is an experienced trial lawyer with a focus on defending clients in the health care industry against product liability, personal injury, and medical malpractice claims. She handles cases locally and has considerable national multidistrict litigation experience. Madeline has practiced with Tucker Ellis LLP since she was a summer associate. She serves on the West Side Catholic Center's Associate Board. Madeline has been a CMBA member since 2015. She can be reached at (216) 696-5801 or madeline.dennis@tuckerellis.com.*