

Juggling Law Books and Children

By Jim Rollings

Among this year's Marshall-Wythe School of Law graduates at William and Mary, more than ever before, women with children are joining the respected ranks of the legal profession.

Men have been both fathers and lawyers all along. But that is precisely why society takes them for granted. It is the newness of the mother/lawyer combination that still makes it extraordinary.

Not unexpectedly, these goal-minded women do not consider themselves particularly unusual. They work very hard, and seem to have no time for the socializing, shopping, and T-V watching that many of their friends do. But to themselves, they are simply following through on the choices they've made, postponing the time when life will resume a hectic pace, rather than the superhuman juggling act it now is.

"I make a list every day; that includes everything from wake-up time to a trip to the drycleaners," says Christie Cyphers of Williamsburg.

Ms. Cyphers was a high school drop-out. Her husband Bob is a former schoolteacher turned plumber; he holds a Master's Degree in education. Their two children -- David, 10, and Jennifer, four, -- are "just your average normal children."

"David plays soccer and basketball and he's in Scouting. Bob is an assistant Scout leader. They're all very helpful to me," she says.

"Each of us has our responsibilities around the home. We all have our jobs we're supposed to do. That's not to say they always get done, but it's a good system anyway," says Ms. Cyphers.

According to Ms. Cyphers, good baby sitters are hard to find, and hard to afford once you find them. So she and her husband both make extra efforts to spend their time with the family.

"I guess any mother has to cope with some guilt over leaving her kids with a sitter while she goes off to school or work, but I'm convinced that it's the quality more than the quantity of time spent with children that's important," says Ms. Cyphers.

Doris Perry of Portsmouth shares that sentiment. Also the mother of two--Patrice, six, and Andre, one, -- the added burden of commuting to Williamsburg each day has left little time for her to do anything else.

"I'm fortunate because the children have grandma and their aunts and uncles at home to look out for them. I think it's much better for the relatives to care for them, and I couldn't have done it without their help," says Ms. Perry. The grades have suffered because my family has to come first.

Another commuting mother seeking a Doctor of Jurisprudence is Judith D. Coook of Virginia Beach. A divorcee, Ms. Cook has undertaken the impossible. She has two teen-age sons--ages 16 and 15--a nine year-old daughter and a hankering to hang out her own shingle.

Up every morning at 6:30, Ms. Cook tries to time her study activities to coincide with her children's homework time. But even the best-laid plans can go awry.

"The night before my corporate law exam, my son came home with a sprained ankle. So it was off to the emergency room for treatment, bandages, crutches, the whole thing. Then my daughter came home ill before my tax exams. Well, I had to just let the studies go, but it shows up in the grades," Ms. Cook says.

Though each of these women has a different set of circumstances at home, and different reasons for applying themselves to the awesome task of obtaining a law degree, they each share many things in common.

First, and probably foremost, is their extreme self-discipline. A regimen of classes/study/children/classes etc., etc., would drive most people crazy if not kill them altogether. But law school, and especially law school at

It takes an abundance
of hard work and
organization to raise a
family and study law.

William and Mary, makes the study burden many times heavier. One wonders why they didn't choose something easy like solving the problems of the Middle East.

Second is the active support of the immediate family members. Of course, male law students usually have their families' support also. But for women, and particularly women with children, that support is crucial.

Third is careful organization. Ms. Bessida White of Richmond, put it succinctly.

"I live by a list. If it's not on my list, it doesn't get done. Even relaxation has to go on my list, and for me relaxation means not thinking of anything on my list," says Ms. White.

And fourth is a belief in equality of opportunity for both sexes. Whether by active support or simply by belief and lifestyle, women's rights are a factor for these dedicated Moms.

"I've been active in the women's movement for eight



Comparing notes from their classes are (clockwise from lower left Christy Cyphers, Judith Cook, Doris Perry and Judy Foster.

or nine years," explains Ms. White. "My husband and I have lectured on the topic in most of the high schools and colleges in Virginia. And it should be said that caring for a family while carrying on a career or education is equally difficult for the mother or father. If it's not, someone isn't pulling their load," Ms. White asserts.

Ms. White, like many of the other mothers, has brought her child—a two-and-a-half year old girl named Lauren—to the William and Mary campus to show her the Marshall-Wythe School of Law. This helps create an understanding of where Mommy goes during the day, and what she is doing.

The question "Why?" is one they all admit to hearing several times, and they all have different answers to explain their motivations.

Judy Foster of Williamsburg says that because her father is a certified public accountant and a lawyer, she has always been surrounded by law books and legal jargon. So it seems only natural for her to go to law school.

"It's difficult with a six month old, but I think it's easier to handle than a full-time job," Ms. Foster says.

after graduation, Ms. Foster and her son Samed Michel will go to Iraq to join her husband, Dr. Sabah Wali. Dr. Wali is head of the physiology department in the medical center at the University of Kufa in Iraq.

"So much money changes hands in the Middle East, there must be room for someone with a law degree over there," explains Ms. Foster.

Doris Perry says that civil and social law will be her field, and she already has a job with the Roanoke Legal Aid Society.

"Just having the education and being able to accomplish things I want to do are my reasons for getting the degree," Ms. Perry states.

Besida White states similar objectives, with an emphasis on human rights and criminal law.

Judith Cook wants to go into general practice, preferably on her own or with a small firm.

Corporate law and large firms don't appeal to me.

"Corporate law and large firms don't appeal to me. I think a broad view and experience will make me a better lawyer," Ms. Cook says.

Dianne Wilcox, who probably will give birth to her first child before this story sees print, shares her experiences in order to "round out" the women law student's viewpoint.

"I had my first job interview recently," says Ms. Wilcox. "The interviewer took one look at my stomach and my chances went down the drain. But I still feel I

can handle it," she says.

"My instructors really flip over having a pregnant woman in their class," Ms. Wilcox adds.

"Congress really breach-birthed
that one!"

"Once the teacher was discussing the new securities and exchange laws, which had been rushed through by Congress at the end of the session. 'Congress really breach-birthed that one!' he said. Then he looked at me with wide eyes and turned beet-red," Ms. Wilcox says.

If these women and their stories seem a bit unorthodox, it's because they are. Few individuals have the circumstances or the desire to accomplish what they are doing. Fewer still would have the sheer physical stamina to keep it up for three years.

Whatever the reactions of society in general, it is impossible not to respect the amount of will-power and effort these women have generated. And they all want their kids to be proud of them when they say, "My Mom, the lawyer."



Editor's note: Dianne Wilcox, pictured above was delivered of a healthy son, Victor Nathaniel on March 5, 1979.