

Finding Satisfaction Requires Setting Priorities

By Carmen E. Bremer

When I agreed to guest-write this column for the Winter 2006 issue of the NAWL Journal, the first thing I did was read the column from the previous issue, Autumn 2005. As a University of Houston alum who attended the Law Center during the first three years of Nancy Rappoport's tenure as dean, (if images of the "trailer village" and accompanying port-o-lets just flashed before your eyes, you remember what the post-tropical-storm-Allison era was like for students and administration alike), my first thought after reading Dean Rappoport's article was, "What insight can I offer that someone pulled in as many directions as Nancy did not?"

The insight never came, but I can offer the perspective of a third-year associate at a national firm, and the rules-of-thumb I've tried to follow for getting the most out of my job and out of my free time.

Making Work Meaningful

For most readers of this journal, to say that work is our primary time commitment would be an understatement – a big one. For me, making this time commitment as fulfilling as possible makes everything else in life easier too. As young associates, we do not always have the control over our jobs that we might like. Even within the big firm framework, however, we can maximize our satisfaction on a daily basis by speaking up if our work is not challenging, and by taking as much ownership of our projects as our supervisors will let us get away with.

If, after weeks of drafting, revising, and re-revising that summary-judgment brief, the judge quotes my brief in granting the motion, then the hours spent on that brief suddenly have a tangible result that makes time spent on the next one more exciting and meaningful. In addition, maintaining friendships with co-workers, taking advantage of pro bono opportunities, and getting involved in community activities are not only encouraged as part of our associate development, but they can also do a lot to make hours spent away from family more fulfilling and enjoyable.

Which brings me to family. Whether it's our spouses, children, or parents, family is the most important aspect of our personal lives. Unfortunately, when the pressures of the office

are building, spending enough time with family can sometimes feel like another obligation. But this is backwards! Family knows how busy we are. They want to see us anyway, and we're lucky for it. Even if I have to take work home with me, just spending an hour or two with my husband before turning back to my work is invaluable, and since he's a big-firm attorney as well, he understands the demands that sometimes make bringing work home necessary. Likewise, a phone call to my parents when I need a break from proofing a brief, or better yet a visit – even one that has me checking my email every fifteen minutes – is always worth the time sacrificed. The brief will still be there when I get back.

So for me, striking a satisfying balance between work and my personal life is all about prioritizing. Work has a way of making itself a priority. And when it comes to the rest of my life, I can choose to put spending time with my husband or family at the top of my list and watching television or getting my nails done at the bottom. By making that choice, I control my time outside the office, and I can make sure to spend it in ways that keep me energized for everything else in life – including, you guessed it, work.



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