



You can be a mom, wife, the PIC, trial lawyer and law-firm owner

Five life lessons I learned along the way

By MARYANN P. GALLAGHER

I am excited to see so many women taking the step to start their own firms and to step into the spotlight of litigation. I worked as an associate for 10 years, then partnered with someone else, then opened my own firm 20 years ago after my third son was born.

When I was 12 years old, I decided I was going to be a lawyer or a teacher, I thought both choices would give me the time to be a mom. I really wanted to be a full-time mom, but life had other plans for me. When the mortgage industry tanked and my husband's job vaporized, and I had my third child, it was up to me to become the PIC (Person in Charge). In your marriage, there are times when your husband will be the PIC and you will be the PIC. You will have multiple goals and they will take priority at different times in your life.

Here are five life lessons I have learned along the way.

1. You should choose happiness

Happiness is your state of mind, it belongs to you. You cannot rely on other people to make you happy; why would you give anyone that power? It is powerful that you can control your own happiness and no one can control it for you. When you wake up in the morning, and open your eyes, you can choose from that moment to start the day off on a positive note. The first thought out of your mind should be something positive. Anything positive will work. The sun is out; the birds are chirping; something simple will usually be the most meaningful. I have a very strong faith, after being raised Irish Catholic, so I always start off with a quick "Hello" and "Thank You" to God. During the day, when you start a Zoom with someone, you can choose to be happy.

Just start the Zoom with a smile, even if the person on the other end looks nasty and is snarky. If during the day some attorney on the other side is obnoxious and mean, and rude, you can choose to refuse to let them take away your happiness. It's yours and they are not getting it. When you complete something hard, like an opposition or something you have been struggling with, imagine responding to 100 interrogatories, then choose to spend 10 minutes doing something that makes you happy. I like to walk to Grand Central market and get an ice cream cone. Treat yourself to chocolate. Don't let someone else mess with the power you have to control how much happiness you feel during the day.

When my sons started kindergarten, I was proud to hear them say: "Treat people the way you want to be treated." That is the simplest and best way to live your life.

2. You are not and cannot be perfect at everything

This is not a criticism by any means. Each of us is a perfect version of ourselves; no one can be better at being us, *than us*. None of us achieved becoming lawyers without being Alpha ladies, always striving to be the best. However, none of us are perfect at everything in life. When you have children, you suddenly have to balance being a mom, and being a lawyer, and it is overwhelming. Being a mom, and a lawyer and a PIC, is *chaos*.

I suffered through so many late nights trying to make the perfect treats for whatever holiday I volunteered for at school with a beautiful presentation only to go and find some other very creative mom's treats looked so much better. I was crushed. But it didn't matter, the kids gobbled up everything equally. I had to

accept that I was not going to be the perfect "treats for the holiday mom." Although, there was one time I brought in hot chocolate and ended up squirting whipped cream into the kids' mouths... that was fun, although I am not sure if the other mommies thought so! I had to accept I was not a PIC in school but I did my very best and was a support when I could be.

Your house is going to be a mess until your kids leave for college. Just accept it. The living room will be a toy room until they are too old for toys. Then they may retreat to their rooms with videogames and (having three boys), their rooms become minefields of dirty clothes and dirty dishes.

These things you cannot waste your time worrying about.

When you are taking care of your kids and running to practices and games and trying to prepare oppositions to motions, or ex partes, you are not going to be perfect at getting everything done. But you are all super smart and on a good day, you are an "A," so if some days you are less than an "A" on your oppositions, because you are an "A" being there for your kids, that is OK. Your "B" game on a chaotic day is still better than most attorneys' "A" game on their good day.

Love who you are now

I am not on TikTok, but even on other social media, you are constantly bombarded with images of the "perfect" woman looking extremely glamorous and slinking around in fabulous places. Take off the TikTok goggles. If you look at your busy day as a pie, there is only so much time in a day for each slice. If you have the time, you sleep, and that is one of the essential parts of the pie. You have to invest your time in taking care of the kids, before school, after school. That



MARCH 2024

leaves 12 other hours in the day (some days it is more like 8-9 hours). If you add up the time you spend on TikTok and social media, is that an hour? More than an hour? Then there is the time you spend stressing or feeling inadequate because of what you are seeing. Why spend valuable time of your life, letting someone else control how you feel? Spend that time talking to your friends, your hubby, your kids, or someone who brings positive energy into your day.

You know who is going to think you are in the best shape of your life? *You* in 10 years. You will look at pictures of yourself and say, "Wow, I wish I could look like that again." So, take that positivity and use it now. Don't waste the time being critical of how you look or focusing on what might be slight imperfections that no one else will see or realize. There are so many other things to spend your time on.

3. You are going to make it through the absolute worst times. Keep walking forward

We are all going to face tough times in our lives. One of the toughest I faced when my trial lawyer- and mom-separate lives collided was when I was 14-weeks pregnant and I woke up to get ready to pick a jury and I suffered a miscarriage at home. It was a terrible day that I will never forget. Unfortunately, at that time I was surrounded by men, men at work, men in the courtroom. They all decided that two weeks was enough time for me to recover and get back to work. I did it. I just started by walking outside and around the block. Then the next day I walked a little longer. I prayed, I cried, I believed that God felt that this child was not ready and that he would remain an angel.

At that time, I didn't know anyone else who had gone through this. I had two young sons at home and getting back to work and trial was what I needed to do, and it actually helped me focus on someone else and to move forward. I had to survive, so I walked through the wall of

pain back into life. You will have tough times, being a mom, being a lawyer, being both at the same time. I cannot tell you how many times I was up in the morning getting ready for court and my child woke up with a fever and I had to leave him and go to court. It tears your heart out, you feel guilty driving away, and I would cry the whole way to court.

There is not anything we can do to take away the guilt. But we can rename and refocus it and realize we are being the best Mom as we are focusing on the long-term goals. For me, I knew I was working to build my sons' futures. It didn't take away the guilt, but it helped me to focus on what I felt were my own shortcomings (like being a good mom in those moments) into thinking about the positive goal that I was working towards: "I am building a future for my sons, so that they don't have to worry when it comes time for college."

4. Decide what your goals are and work toward them

What are your goals? I knew I wanted to be a kick-ass trial lawyer from the first time I set foot in a courtroom as a law clerk at my firm. I was still single, so that was my goal and I did everything I could to get involved with every trial at my firm. I worked weekends reading every piece of paper in any case. It didn't matter if it was a case assigned to me or not, I looked at the trial calendar and wanted to be involved in those cases. I also knew that I would be a mom one day. I got married at 34, after I had tried a bunch of cases and was well on my way to my first goal. I actually received my first nomination for Trial Lawyer of the Year the same year I got married. I didn't win until much later, but that's a story for another time.

I had my first child at 36, my second son at 38, I had a miscarriage at 39 and my last baby at 41. From the time I had my first child, my goal was to make sure that I was able to put my sons through college. I had worked three jobs during college and two jobs during law school, including waitressing all weekend during

school, and I wanted my sons to be able to focus just on school and not worry about loans.

That was one of the driving forces in starting my own firm. That is one of the forces that still drives me today. At one time I had three sons in college at once, but now I have one son in law school, one son who is going for his master's in engineering and one son in college. That was my goal and I am happy to say that I am almost there. I do have to say that my sons don't even remember me not being there when they had a fever; they were too young to remember, but they have each come to me when they were in college and thanked me for working so hard to put them through school without loans and be an example of hard work.

Owning my own firm was a means to meet my goals. I needed to be able to have the flexibility to be there as much as I could for my sons at school and be able to work around the school schedule.

I do have to say, the best time you can spend with your kids once they get into that 12-17 age when they become something from a horror film, is to drive them and their friends home from school and to sports and to "play dates." Some of the best times I have had were picking up my sons and their friends from school; you are the silent invisible driver, they all talk about their day, girls, other kids, whatever; you get to learn so much in those driving adventures. We would blast the music and roll down the windows and just have fun. So, carve out time from your lawyer time to pick them up and drive them, with their friends; it is worth it. I purposefully always had the car with the third row so I could fit the most kids and friends.

Your goals are going to switch over time and you will focus on one goal (being a mom) for some period of time more than the other goal (lawyer, law firm owner), giving one goal more time out of those 12 hours of the pie you have left in the day, than the other.

I worked in one law firm as an associate for 10 years. It was a small firm, two partners, two to three associates and



three staff. We were getting eight-figure verdicts in PI cases with just two or three people working on the case. We tried about two to three cases a year. I learned how to work mean and lean.

When I opened my firm, I walked from the courthouse to the closest office building I could find and that was where I opened my firm. My goal was to continue to keep a small firm and work like hell to get big results. During the years my kids were in school, that goal took a back seat to making sure I could be there when they needed me and do the mom things at school, but that goal took precedence for those years, which it needed to do, and I am happy for that. I still had both goals, and still was a mom and law-firm owner, but the bigger slice of my time went to the mom goal. When the kids were older the bigger slice of my time is now back to my lawyer, trial lawyer goal.

5. Practical tips for the law-firm owner/trial lawyer part of your life

- **Hire an accountant.** I say this always. From the time you start, have someone else pay your bills and write your checks. My accountant does my taxes and has someone in his office who pays my bills. With the new State Bar rules regarding accounting for trust accounts, you are going to need someone to do that. Always think of time that you are spending on a task in terms of how much is it taking out of each slice of time for today and whether it's going to be productive to spend time doing that?

- **Team up with other women:** Team up on cases, on trials, find someone you trust, who you like to work with and work together on some of your cases and some of their cases. You will both benefit. I am a very big supporter of women supporting women and an awesome team of women can outsmart and outwork some of the big defense teams any day, I think! We are multitaskers! The wonderful new rule: Los Angeles Local Rule 3.93, which provides

that a party can seek permission to have multiple attorneys perform voir dire, opening, closing, "to allow an opportunity for less experienced attorneys to perform any of those functions."

I have used this in my cases to allow other female attorneys to try a case with me to get experience and it is a great thing, I can split my voir dire time or witness time with a newer attorney so she/he can get the experience, and I am still there to support her/him and to follow up for my client; so, use this to your advantage now.

- **Spend time on being business-social but also harness the Power of No:** There are so many organizations to join; find the one that speaks to you and commit to it. You can be part of others, but don't over-commit and try and be too many things to too many organizations at the same time. Remember, you have your slice of the pie to decide how much time of that slice is going to go to organizations. So, if you have a busy calendar with court or it's basketball or football season and your kid is in sports, then say no to that one, but go to the next one. But on the other side, owning our own firm can be lonely. So, at least commit to doing one social gathering, then keep going on the list serve, see what is happening, You can call a friend, go to an association event, speak at an association event, do this with the other organizations that you find support you.

- **No excuses:** We are genuinely lucky that we have the opportunity to have so many facets to our life. We don't live just one life; we live multiple lives at once! We are moms, we are attorneys, we are business owners, we are wives, we are Persons in Charge. It is tough at times, of course, but I live by Kobe's words, "No excuses." When you get overwhelmed, stop what you are doing, take a break, do some deep breathing for five minutes, go outside and scream if your kids are driving you crazy, then get back into what you are doing.

- **Go to trial on your cases:** Believe in your client and their right to have a jury hear what happened to them and give them the true value of their damages. Defense counsel, and insurance companies, still refuse to acknowledge the value of the devastation of the loss of a job, the humiliation, the anxiety of not having a paycheck coming in anymore. They still refuse to acknowledge that damage to our client's sense of self-esteem, their ability to trust anyone, living in constant fear, are permanent harms that have real value.

The only way that you will get the true value for your client is by having a jury determine these damages. It is hard work, long hours, long days but seeing that you finally have 12 people who say to your client, "Yes, we acknowledge that you have been truly harmed and you have value" is so worth it.

When my kids were young and asked me what I do, I told them I help people who have been bullied or abused. I explained that when I was in trial, it was like I was a fireman. I would be out there and they wouldn't see me for a few days or weeks, but I needed to be there for these people who needed help, and once it was over I would be back home with them. As they grew older, they saw me in trial and it made me very proud that they are proud to see their mom at work.

I celebrate every woman who is multifaceted and multitasking. You should step forward and take a moment for yourself...and celebrate yourself!

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