

BALANCING WORK AND LIFE

Workshop Presentation: Mr Patrick Mullins and The Hon. Justice Debra Mullins

Saturday, 20 May, 2000

Hidden in this catchy topic is the issue we all have to grapple with - how to balance working life with the rest of life. In fact, in one respect, it is misleading to speak of balancing work and life. Work is an integral part of life. In another respect, it is also misleading, because so often the nature of work influences or affects the other activities of life. Our topic is about strategies to allow each person to achieve the right balance for that person, in his or her personal circumstances, of both work and the rest of life.

To give context to our comments, we will give a brief introduction to our family and our work and other activities. We will describe some strategies which we have identified in our pattern of life and work. We hasten to say that we did not sit down and work out these strategies before we embarked on our family life. We now recognise that these strategies have affected what we have done. The strategies have played different roles at different stages of our lives. Obviously, strategies must be individual. The emphasis on, or the importance of, a particular strategy or combination of strategies, will differ from person to person.

We will then look at the advantages for the individual, family and work place when a person achieves the right balance of work and life.

- **Description of Family**

Both of us are Lawyers. Pat is a Solicitor. Debbie was appointed a Judge on 16 March 2000. Prior to that she practised as a Barrister.

We have three children born in 1985, 1988 and 1991. The children are involved in a variety of activities - gymnastics, scouting, piano, tennis, rugby, cricket and swimming. Our ability to cope has been assisted by the fact that the children have no serious medical or health problems.

- **Description of Debbie's Work and Activities**

Until 16 March 2000, Debbie was a Barrister who had been in private practice in Queensland since 1984. Our three children have therefore been born while Debbie was a practising Barrister.

The strategies we discuss in this paper relate to Debbie's time in practice as a Barrister. A Barrister in private practice depends on receiving work from solicitors. Sometimes clients may specifically request a solicitor to brief a particular named Barrister, but it is more usual for the Solicitor to choose a particular Barrister for a particular job. A Barrister's success therefore depends upon receiving work from solicitors and doing that work well, so that there is a continuation of that work. The nature of practice as a Barrister affected how Debbie worked towards achieving the balance between work and family life.

Debbie is a parishioner of the Church of the Annunciation, Camp Hill. She is a member of the Council of Cannon Hill Anglican College, having been appointed in December 1996. While a Barrister, she was a member of a number of committees of legal professional associations including the Law Council's Equalising Opportunities in the Law Committee. Debbie was also involved in setting up the local Neighbourhood Watch.

- **Description of Pat's Work and Activities**

Pat is the Senior Partner of Brisbane city law firm, Mullins & Mullins. He has been a Solicitor since 1981, and his main areas of practice are in workers compensation, employment law and industrial relations and he acts for the Christian Brothers and the Marist Brothers, and therefore a number of private schools and is the honorary lawyer member on the Ethics Committee of the Greenslopes Private Hospital. Pat is a member of six committees of the Queensland Law Society, chairs the Society's Access



to Justice Committee and is a member the Law Council Committee on Access to Justice. He is an executive member of the Commission for Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane.

Pat is an active member of the Roman Catholic parish of St James, Coorparoo and chairs the Parish's Liturgy Committee. His hobby is amateur theatre, and for the last 14 years has been an active member of Villanova Players Incorporated, appearing in at least one play a year.

Both Pat and Debbie are joint convenors of the Interchurch Families Association, Brisbane.

- **Have Goals**

Right from our decision to marry, we had goals. We understood that both of us had embarked on careers in law, and that we both wanted to continue on a full-time basis. We also knew that we wanted to have children. We understood that each of us was committed to our faith, and that we had to accommodate our different traditions.

It was not a matter of sitting down and writing a shopping list of goals. These goals underwrote our actions. They were not always articulated, but they were clearly understood.

- **Do What Suits You and Your Personal Circumstances/Family Best**

Look at your needs and/or your family's needs, work out goals and how best to achieve both your goals and the family-related goals. Do not feel that you have to conduct your family or personal affairs the way you perceive that other people think you should.

A friend of ours had her first child soon after our first child was born. She made a deliberate decision that she would give up her career and stay at home full-time. Debbie had decided that she would maintain her practice. Our first child was born in October 1985, so that Debbie planned to return to work at the beginning of February 1986. When our children were still babies, our friend and Debbie happened to speak about other people's reactions to their respective choices.

Debbie felt that some people were disapproving that she was leaving our son with a nanny most days during the week, and had returned to almost full-time work. Our friend felt that some people were disapproving that she had sacrificed her career to stay at home with her baby.

It struck us that it was the same people who were sending different messages to our friend and to Debbie. We eventually translated those different signals - it does not matter what you do, those outside your family may be judgmental. You can never satisfy the outsiders, but then you don't need to. What counts when you have a family is whether you and your partner [and the children as they get older] are satisfied or comfortable with the choices.

From an early stage, we decided that we did not have to justify our choices to other people, provided our family unit was functioning well.

- **Cultivate Support Networks**

We provide support for one another. We both play an integral part in the daily routine, so that if one is busier than usual or away on business, the other fills the gaps in the routine.

We have found that the support has to be wider than us.

We have employed full-time nannies continuously for 11 years from the time our first child was four months old, until our youngest commenced Year 1. In that time we employed eight different nannies



who lasted for varying periods from six months to three years. Having a full-time nanny at home who was flexible enough to stay longer hours if either of us was unable to arrive home at the usual time, provided us with some of the flexibility that was essential to meet work commitments.

We have also relied on the members of our wider families, particularly Pat's parents who live nearby. Sometimes it has been a combination of both. The nanny stays longer and then drops the children off at Pat's parents, until one of us can collect them. Now that the three children are all at school, we have carers who work part-time and who are available for the constant driving required for after school activities. Our work and social commitments mean that we require babysitters for some weekend and evening functions. We have tried to use former nannies as babysitters. We like to maintain contact with them to avoid the children feeling that there is a constant stream of strangers who enter and leave their lives.

Over the years a couple of babysitters with whom we have first made contact through an agency have remained available to do babysitting and emergency care for us, such as when one of the children is ill or when one of the regular carers is unavailable to come.

As the children have got older, we have been able to rely on neighbours to help out every now and then.

It has been our experience that you need to have a number of persons on tap to provide the support that is invariably required when both parents have busy lives and the children are involved in many extra curricular activities.

In the work place there is also the need to develop support networks. Because Pat understands the pressures of juggling child care responsibilities with work commitments, he has been able to talk to staff members at work about those responsibilities or difficulties. Sensitive co-workers can be great allies and a great support in juggling family responsibilities. Likewise, it is important for employers and managers to know and understand the family responsibilities an employee may be coping with. Informal support networks can grow up in the workplace.

- **Be Prepared to Adapt**

This is a strategy we often have difficulty with. It is so much easier to put off making the hard decisions and changing routines in the hope that whatever is the glitch will sort itself out.

We employed one nanny who was unsuitable. We eventually parted our ways almost a year after she had commenced working for us. It was obvious within weeks that she was not suitable. We persevered because we wanted to put off the upheaval that necessarily accompanies having a new person become acquainted with the routines. It was a real mistake. That particular nanny caused tension within the family and/or us personally. The children were grateful and we were relieved ourselves of an unnecessary tension when we finally took steps to replace that particular nanny.

Having a nanny or housekeeper work in your home does require you to be flexible about things, such as where the saucepans are put away, and how the washing is folded. We had no idea there were so many different ways to fold socks! Largely speaking, the benefits of such assistance outweigh the minor irritations.

This strategy applies equally to the home and workplace.

- **Keep Goals Under Review**

The detail of our goals have changed or aspects have become clearer or the priorities amongst the goals have changed over time. When Debbie was establishing her practice, she was very focused on taking steps to ensure she could develop the practice as well as be a mother.



When her practice had been established for some time, her goal was then to maintain it, and she was then able to be more concerned about lifestyle issues. That was a benefit that accrued, because of the time she had spent in establishing her practice.

Pat is a person who seems to collect committee memberships and he also finds it difficult to say no to a good part in a play when offered one. However, there have been other community involvements in which he was active in earlier days that have now faded into the background - for example, an active involvement as President of his Old Boys' Association. It seems as one grows older, one is able to more easily discern what are one's priorities. Pat prefers a gradual process of discernment rather than a midlife crisis.

Obviously you need to consider every now and then whether you are living your life [at work, at home and elsewhere] in a way that is consistent with the goals that you have set.

- **Manage Your Time**

Time is the enemy. You think you have a lot of it, but it ambushes you and before you can blink you have run out of time. Things just don't happen, you have to make them happen by managing your time. We have found that being busy in fact makes managing time easier. Some things just have to be done to a deadline. The adage is when you want something done, ask a busy person. It is amazing just how much you can get done when you have limited time and no choice.

We are both great list makers. We have lists of task for home and each of us uses a list for tasks at work. The list does not create more time, but assists in making use of the time which is available.

- **Plan Ahead**

What we like to do is plan for contingencies. It may appear to others that everything just falls into place, but it really is as a result of planning. When a Barrister, Debbie was the one who planned to be at home at 6.00 pm to relieve the nanny. Sometimes she was involved in a matter in court or a mediation or conference which prevented her from doing that. Where that was a possibility, we usually had a default plan. The easiest default plan was having the nanny stay longer. If that was not possible, we might organise that if Debbie was held up in court and not back by a certain time, her secretary would automatically ring Pat to let him know so that he could go home first. We usually had a few default plans - plans "a", "b" and "c". Both being self employed allowed us some extra flexibility in that planning exercise.

- **Have Good Holidays**

Leading a busy life means that you often get tired. It is important to have good holidays. Go to places where work cannot reach you.

We recognised fairly early in the piece that we wanted to have holidays at regular intervals and for decent periods of time. A day here or a few days there does not really qualify as a good holiday. We have noticed of course, that many in the education sector enjoy good holiday periods. Our advice is to make the most of those periods.

We have found that the best holidays are those shared with the family. The Christmas/January period is a very important time for us. We are usually very busy up to Christmas Eve, but then the next few weeks are a good time to relax and catch up.

We have made sure however that apart from that holiday break, we have taken at least one other holiday break during the year. We have been lucky enough to be able to go to some very special places with the



children. It is not so much where we have been, but the experiences we have shared together as a family. Building shared family memories draws us closer together as a family.

On our last family holiday we flew on the airline Emirates. One enduring memory from that experience is that the children have latched on to the Arabic word for “*Please extinguish your cigarettes*”. It is a word pronounced with a guttural tone, and sounds very much like the Whitsunday town of Mackay. When one of the children utters the word now, it is a shared joke that causes us much laughter, but also many happy memories.

- **Have an Interesting and Challenging Hobby - And Do It**

Working parents seem to spend Saturdays ferrying children to different sporting or cultural venues. One almost needs two parents in separate vehicles to achieve all that has to be done on a Saturday. Don’t be a parent who tries to relive one’s past sporting or cultural triumphs through your child. Instead, choose an interesting and challenging hobby and do it yourself.

Debbie is an avid reader. She has been in a formal book club for 14 years and so each month she reads the allocated book for that month and goes off to her regular book club meeting. As well as that, she is always reading two or three other works at the same time.

Pat’s hobby is the amateur theatre. He finds that to be involved in a production is a three month commitment in terms of the rehearsal times and performance period. In those times he is thrown together with a mixed group of people from a variety of backgrounds. There is usually a good representation of teachers, but there are others from all walks of life thrown together for a relatively brief period of time on a common project.

We all rely on the talents of each other and the energy of each other. When Pat is in a play, Debbie has to be very flexible; as they say, the show must go on. There is no way Pat can absent himself from a performance.

There is a large amount of mental and physical discipline required and very keen concentration, particularly during a performance. These however have almost a therapeutic effect, because one is able to leave the stresses and strains of work pressures behind when one treads the boards. Everything falls into perspective because for the time of the performance, “*the play’s the thing*”. For the relatively brief period of time nothing else is important. That helps Pat to recharge the batteries and keep the life/work balance on an even keel.

- **The Advantages**

It seems to us that when one has work, family and “extra curricular” commitments in proper balance the advantages are these:-

1. As an individual you will be happy and fulfilled.
2. Where you and your partner both share this balance, you will feel happy and fulfilled together.
3. Where there are children, and both partners share this balance, then the benefits to the children are that you will be giving them a good example.
4. Chances are they will also share the right balance with you.

Mr Patrick Mullins is a Solicitor and partner at Mullins & Mullins. The Hon. Justice Debra Mullins was recently appointed a Justice of the Supreme Court, having practiced as a Barrister for fifteen years.

