

A Season to Be Present

By SARA J. O'BRIEN

They say that graduating law school is one of the best days of your life. It's an accomplishment that you have spent countless hours working towards. You've sacrificed time spent with friends and family. Maybe passed on other opportunities, but when you hand in that final exam, and ultimately walk across that stage to receive your diploma, truly it is one of the best days. Today, six years into practice, being a lawyer is part of who I am. But it is not all that I am. My daughter recently turned one, and throughout the past year, I have examined the woman, lawyer, and mother that I am and want to be. Adding in a new priority, whether it be a new relationship or the birth of a child, is not a detriment to your career. It simply changes the game: juggle four balls rather than three, seeking balance.

In early September 2022, I reached out to my friend Jeff from law school whom I hadn't checked in with in a while. You know how it goes—life gets busy, work picks up, kids come along, the list goes on. It was by happenstance that I reached out when I did. We communicated back and forth for a few days catching up on work and life, and he told me about his two little girls and the third one he had on the way. Being a new parent myself, he extended his congratulations to me and told me in no uncertain terms, that “being a parent is the best.” I couldn't help but agree, but immediately after I did, I wondered how my new role as a mother would impact my career as a lawyer. Being that I was still on maternity leave, this “worry” quickly slipped away as a thought for another day. I sent Jeff another text and went about my day.

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Two days later, I woke to a message sent in the early hours of the morning. It was Jeff responding to my last text. At first, I thought he was following up on a referral, and that he was just the type of person who did their best work before 5:00 a.m. That was not the case. Through my un-caffeinated fog, I read the words sent from his phone “Hey sorry, rushed to hospital with my second... I'll try to get my computer today.” Despite the added ball, he kept juggling. Twenty-four hours later, Jeff messaged again and told me that his two-year-old daughter had just been diagnosed with leukemia. My own daughter was asleep down the hall from where I sat as I read his message. I couldn't begin to imagine what Jeff and his family were going through. In that same message he continued, “I haven't left the hospital yet. If I don't, I will connect you with one of my colleagues.”

It was at that moment that I realized the type of parent and lawyer that I wanted to be: a present one. I want to be present

for my daughter and family, while also being present for my colleagues and clients. It's not perfect all the time, and like most things it is a balancing act. It is what I strive for every day, though, because being a parent is the best, but being a lawyer is part of who I am. Every day I aim to be 100 percent present in whatever I am doing and for whomever I am with.

In the weeks following, Jeff and his family spent a lot of time in the hospital, experiencing first-hand the challenges of caring for a child with a life threatening illness while also trying to manage their family needs, including their oldest daughter, a pregnant wife (Sam) due any day, and a soon-to-be newborn baby girl; the demands of their careers; and maintaining some semblance of adequate self-care. From the time of diagnosis, Jeff and Sam were overloaded with information on their daughter's condition, how to care for her at home, and how to ensure they took care of themselves, especially during hospital stays. One of the main issues

they faced during hospital stays was securing food for themselves. The hospital provided them with two options: pay for a tray to be delivered to the room with their child’s tray or leave their child’s bedside for a trip to the hospital cafeteria or nearby restaurant. As Jeff and Sam can attest, neither option is ideal and both options raise concern of affordability. Even at \$10/tray for parents, that expense adds up quickly when you don’t leave the hospital for days on end.

Over a year into their journey, and Jeff and Sam have founded Feeding Families Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization that aims to address this very concern of food security and affordability for parents and caregivers of pediatric patients admitted to the hospital. Its mission is to cover the cost of three meals per day for the parents/caregivers of pediatric patients during their hospital stay. Parents will not need to leave their child’s side. The meals are delivered directly to the



room with the patient’s meal tray so that they can enjoy a meal together. At a time when parents are facing uncertainty about their child’s diagnosis, they are also dealing with costs associated with deductibles, coinsurance, and any costs of services that may not be covered by insurance. They are experiencing an increase in other costs

as well including gas to and from the hospital, hospital parking, and childcare for their other children. These additional financial burdens add up and amplify the strain on families already suffering from the emotional and physical toll of having a child in the hospital. Covering the cost of hospital food for parents is a small gesture that will reduce some of the financial and mental stress, allowing caregivers to focus on their child and treatment.

Feeding Families Foundation has partnered with Yale New Haven Children’s Hospital and will launch its pilot program on the Pediatric Hematology/Oncology floor at Smilow Cancer Hospital starting January 1, 2024. As the organization grows, they expect to open services to other areas of the Children’s Hospital, including the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, and even expand to other hospitals. Early conversations with Connecticut Children’s Hospital have taken place. This pro-

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Trademarks

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News and Events

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member of the panel shared their own personal story of why they chose to pursue alternatives to private practice and the advantages that such roles can offer.

The final day of the conference, Saturday, September 30, consisted of two educational seminars. The morning began with Alternative Pathways to Leadership: Government, Lawyering, and Community Engagement, which took the form of a panel comprised of attorneys Michael Dumas, Melanie Dykas, Aigné Goldsby, and Shasta Inman, moderated by YLS executive committee member Ali Toumekian. In the seminar, the attorneys discussed the importance of civic engagement and how participation in bar associations and affinity groups can provide a path to leadership roles in government and other organizations.

During the final seminar of the conference, Balancing Wellness with the Scales of Justice: A Perspective on Attorneys and Wellness, Professor Larry Dickson of Plain and Simple Counseling and Consultation Services presented on the critical issue of well-being within the legal profession. He explained how to identify different physical, emotional, and mental health warning signs as well as how to engage in stress reduction and relaxation techniques to address them.

Following the end of the conference's seminars, attendees were able to enjoy a final lunch together before departing.

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gram benefit is available to the caregiver present with a critically ill child admitted to the hospital regardless of financial situation; age, race, or religion; patient condition, illness, or injury; and regardless of the length of inpatient stay.

This year, the Young Lawyers Section has chosen to honor Feeding Families Foundation as the beneficiary of all funds raised through our annual holiday party. If you are unable to attend in person, we hope that you will consider making a monetary donation to this worthy organization either through their website directly at feedingfamiliesfoundation.org or through the Connecticut Bar Association's registration page for this event at ctbar.org/YLSDonation, which will remain open through December 31, 2023. All proceeds will be donated in honor of Jeff and Sam's daughter.

Jeff and Sam are finding ways to make their community a better place for others who may share the same road. Throughout the past year, Jeff has been present for his family and Harper's treatment all while continuing in his path as a lawyer. Being 100 percent present in whatever you do or for whomever you are with is an achievement that takes conscious effort. As we strive to seek balance in our lives, especially through the holiday seasons, may we be proud to recognize that being lawyers will always be a part of who we are, but may we have the strength to realize that it is not all that we are. ■