

YOUNG LAWYERS

Angela Brunicardi-Doss

Chairperson
Young Lawyer Section
The West Virginia State Bar



LIFE AS A LAWYER: A BALANCING ACT

In preparing to write my second article for *The West Virginia Lawyer*, I decided to peruse the archives of articles written by past young lawyer chairs. I had already decided that I would write about the importance of work-life balance for attorneys, and especially young attorneys. Then I discovered that nearly every chairperson of the young lawyers had written about this issue in years past. Article titles like “Take Time for Yourself” and “Find Your Balance” jumped out at me; I thought, “Well, has this topic been talked to death by now?” And then I quickly realized, as I sat holding my new 3-week-old baby, phone in hand reading articles about young lawyers, that discussions about work-life balance

for attorneys should happen often and be taken seriously. And so here we are, once again discussing the need for work-life balance and what that might look like.

Thankfully, the impact of the legal profession on mental health is now widely discussed and researched. Bar associations around the country encourage their attorneys to recognize issues like depression, anxiety, addiction, burn-out and suicide. At my law school orientation, one of the first items addressed by the administration was mental health among law students and lawyers. It is not a topic to be taken lightly. Within just a couple of years, our graduating class lost a former classmate and fellow attorney to addiction, and just this year our

State lost one of its attorneys and a fellow West Virginia State Bar member to suicide. While work-life balance is not a cure for these serious matters, as attorneys we can at least recognize the dangers that individuals in our profession face with these issues, and continue to openly discuss the dire need for something as simple as balance in one’s professional and personal life.

While balance is something attorneys have to juggle for the entirety of their careers, there are certain life events and personal issues that predominantly affect young lawyers. The transition from student life to work life is hard enough, especially for those of us who went straight from high school to college to law school. Suddenly at about 25 years

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old we are finally starting our professional lives. We feel pressure to prove our young selves worthy to our new coworkers and bosses, who are oftentimes older and have established a certain way of doing things. And so new lawyers find themselves at a crossroads, as the first decade of being a lawyer is about putting in the extra time and work to make a reputation for yourself, while the years from 25 to 35 personally bring about several life changes. This is when many individuals find themselves getting married and starting a family, or deciding to relocate to a new city, for example. How does a young lawyer balance the need to put the time in at work to build a ladder to success professionally, without missing out or putting one's personal life on hold?

Life is all about choices, and a work-life balance is not a finite thing. It means different things for different people, and it is a constant battle. For me, my career and my personal life have often been at a crossroads. In law school I envisioned myself working in a larger city practicing immigration law or labor law, and focused my law school studies on those areas. Then as graduation

approached, I realized that if I wanted to pursue a legal career in either of those areas, I would likely have to relocate away from my family and hometown. So I chose to focus on other practice areas and move back home after graduation. Similarly, my husband and I decided that we wanted children, and so I have chosen attorney jobs accordingly for the past several years, trying to land on a career path that will allow me to maximize the time I spend with my family, while still thriving professionally. These are the choices we make as young lawyers, and these choices and sacrifices determine the trajectory of our lives. It determines how much time we put in at the office versus how much time we spend at home. It determines our happiness and undoubtedly affects our mental health. That is how important these choices are.

That is how important work-life balance is. For me, it may look one way, but for my fellow young attorney, it may look very different. But ultimately we all have to decide how our own work and personal lives can coexist. **WVL**