

# PUBLICATION

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## Spotlight: Baker Donelson Work-Life Warriors

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**As Dolly Parton reminds us: "Never get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life."**

**But how do we do both? How do we manage to balance our jobs with all the other, equally busy, and equally important, aspects of life? Finding any semblance of balance between work and life is hard. And just when you think you've figured it out, the landscape changes.**

Work-life balance is a universal, shared struggle. We asked several of our own attorneys, Katy Furr, Rusty Gray, Kelly Preteroti, and Michelle Zaltsberg, how they define work-life balance and to share the tips and tricks they use in the never-ending, ever-changing quest for making, not just a living, a great life.

### Q: How do you define work-life balance?

**Katy Furr:** I think we can all agree that there is no optimal balance but instead an imperfect balancing act each day. To me, work-life balance means that some days are going to be work-heavy (like the days when you have to leave for work before your child is up and you come home late after they are long asleep) and some days are going to be life heavy (like the days your child has a school field trip that you attend or your child has a doctor's appointment in the middle of the day). In the end, it's all going to balance out as long as I'm working hard on the work-heavy days and disconnecting on the life-heavy days.

**Kelly Preteroti:** To be honest, I do not think there is such a thing as work-life balance. Rather, some seasons of life require more attention at work and others do at home. It is finding a way to keep the other moving forward, while work or home is dominating your time.

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** I define work-life balance as not being extreme in either direction. I don't want to neglect my work or my family and personal interests. Some days the scales tip more in one direction than the other – I think finding "balance" is giving what is needed to each as they need it. That doesn't mean it is always equal.

**Rusty Gray:** Meeting your commitments to work while at the same time meeting your commitments to your family and yourself. The "balance" often requires a longer view because we are faced at times with more attention required in the shorter term to one side or the other.

### Q: You have each won Baker Donelson's Work-Life Warrior Award. What does "Work-Life Warrior" mean to you?

**Rusty Gray:** Work-Life Warrior to me means a fighter for working hard and a fighter for ensuring healthy family and personal time.

**Kelly Preteroti:** To me, being a Work-Life Warrior means having the grit to persist and be successful in my career when life throws unexpected challenges at me.

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** I am about 14 years into my career, working full time, managing a household, and raising well-rounded, happy kids – this phase of life has been so rewarding, even though it can be really difficult at

times. The term "warrior" is appropriate in the sense that sometimes I feel like I'm up against a formidable opponent, be it my to-do list or my 4-year-old, and other times, I feel like I'm absolutely killing it! As long as I have more good days than bad, I consider myself a winner.

## Q: How do you find (or attempt) balance?

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** My mantra is to just keep moving forward. If that means doing only half a sink of dishes, because I have work to do, at least I've made progress. If it means drafting the start of an email that I'll finish and send later, because my kids need my attention, at least I've made progress...Eventually, it all seems to get done.

**Katy Furr:** I have 3 main "rules" for myself. First, I try to maintain a workout routine early in the morning before anyone is up to give myself some "me" time before the day's distractions start. Second, when I'm at work...I'm there to bill hours so I can get home quicker to my kids. Lastly, outside of work emergencies, the 5:00 – 8:00 p.m. window of time during the week is exclusively for my family. I leave at 5:00/5:30 p.m. each day so I can be at sports practice or help with dinner. Maintaining those rules or priorities for myself, helps me feel like I have some days in control.

**Kelly Preteroti:** I ask for help...Identifying the tasks that someone else can do and take off my plate is critical to managing stress. I am a huge work in progress here.

**Rusty Gray:** First, work-life balance requires the right mindset. I start from the basic reality that the practice of law is generally time intensive and at times very time intensive. We are professionals, like medical doctors, who must serve our clients when they need us, even if inconvenient for us. The intensity ebbs and flows based on client service needs and sometimes Firm needs, and recognizing that and being at peace with that can be healthy and helpful. Understand that particular intense times will not last and that those times are often great opportunities for professional growth. In other words, acknowledge and embrace the work stress and see the positives in particularly stressful times. Great things can come from those stressful times. The stressful times, however, will also present challenges for the people close to you. Keep your family informed about the situation and what to expect with as much advance notice as possible. Help plan to deal with the challenges they will face while you are working through an intense work period.

The right mindset also involves a commitment to maintain a healthy work-life balance. For me, that means generally setting some parameters and expectations for family and personal time. Those parameters change and evolve over time, depending on the circumstances. Over the last ten years, for example, I have typically woken up very early in the morning and taken the first hour for myself enjoying some coffee and reading the news. I then go meet a group of friends for an early-morning outdoor workout. I love my mornings! My workday really starts after those activities. I typically work fairly late (I get home about 7:00 p.m.), but I shut it down when I get home. I avoid looking at emails at night. When I get home at night, that is typically time for my family and me. My clients can call me on my cell if they need me at night. That rarely happens.

In setting my schedule, I think about what will be the least disruptive to my family. Over the last 10 to 15 years or so, for instance, my personal time and workout time largely have occurred while the rest of my family slept in the morning. About 15 years ago, my personal and workout time was after the kids went to bed at night. Things change.

In addition to carving out a schedule for yourself and your family, work-life balance also requires prioritizing certain other activities, such as kids' sporting events or taking care of aging parents. We all have other important roles in our lives that we must fulfill. Among other roles, we have roles as parents, children, brothers, sisters, and friends. We will be happier if we fulfill those roles. At the same time, we must be realistic. We will be better at the roles at some times than others, but they must remain a focus. Stay with it.

One other point: To pull all of this off, you must be a mobile work road warrior. You must be able to squeeze in work here and there, such as while sitting in a doctor's waiting room or at the gate waiting on your plane (and time on a plane provides a great time to catch up; be prepared for that). The little times and places that you squeeze in work can have a huge impact.

In sum, have the right mindset, find a schedule that works for you and your family (and remember that schedule will change over time), prioritize your various roles, and look for opportunities to get some work done when you can. It's doable and can be enjoyable and fulfilling.

## Q: How has that outlook helped you manage others?

**Katy Furr:** My focus on "me" time or "family" time has certainly led me to encourage my associates to take mental health days or vacations...[D]o what you need to do to come into the office with the best version of you each day.

**Kelly Preteroti:** A positive outlook is everything. If I am positive those around me will be positive. At any given moment, we have the ability to create the energy in the room (good or bad). I try to think about that at the start of every meeting.

**Rusty Gray:** It helps so much to have been in the shoes of others when trying to understand and help them. I certainly feel like I have been in the shoes of many young lawyers. I see their challenges and can empathize and provide tips for pushing through. I remember years ago riding the elevator with a senior partner at our firm. I was probably a fifth-year associate at the time. He looked at me and asked me the age of my kids. I responded something like "Five, three, and two months." He said, "Man, you are in it thick." At the time, I was too close to it all and did not fully appreciate his comment and perspective. I totally understand it now and often think of our associates, "Man, you are in it thick." But that thick time, even though challenging, is rewarding and short-lived. The cliché about time flying rings true.

## Q: Has a post-pandemic culture made it easier to pursue balance?

**Rusty Gray:** The pandemic...opened the new option of work-from-home for me, which I still use at times. It provides a nice and usually calming change of scenery. The pandemic also made me a much better and more efficient mobile worker in general and lessened my travel. I am so much better now at working mobile. I seem to be able to do all work things anywhere I may be. I am also not engaging in time-sucking travel to meetings that can effectively be held virtually.

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** Pre-pandemic, working remotely felt kind of shameful. Now I do it proudly. It saves me so much time. I also think it has narrowed the gender gap in some ways – women tend to have more household responsibilities; we also spend more time getting ready for the day because of societal expectations – being able to work remotely reduces these burdens. It also makes me feel more accessible to my kids and reduces the pang of jealousy I used to feel watching the stay-at-home moms walk their kids to school while I was driving to work. I'm still very much not a stay-at-home mom, but I get to pretend a little bit and that illusion actually helps my mental health.

**Kelly Preteroti:** Ever since I had children, I have worked a day or two from home. Having the rest of the world do it too makes it all that much easier.

**Katy Furr:** Yes, no question. If I can't fit in my morning workout and I happen to work from home that day, then I'll be working out over the lunch hour. Sometimes, taking non-client calls over lunch while the treadmill is going!

## Q: What do you still struggle with or wish you were better at?

**Kelly Preteroti:** Delegating and relinquishing control.

**Rusty Gray:** I still often obsess over work things no matter my whereabouts or situation. It's not unusual for me to lose sleep thinking about some work-related problem. In general, I struggle to leave work at the office. It seems to follow me wherever I go. It's always been that way.

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** I still feel like I'm always playing catch up, rather than being ahead of my to-do list.

**Katy Furr:** I am constantly looking for ways to not obsess about things that are not within my control. I'm working on it, but it's definitely an acquired skill set for a Type A personality!

## Q: What advice do you have for those who may be getting close to burnout?

**Michelle Zaltsberg:** Communicate your needs to your team. I'd also suggest taking inventory of your commitments and seeing what you might be able to strike off – if something doesn't add value to your life or career, you shouldn't be doing it.

**Kelly Preteroti:** Make a list of the tasks you must complete and identify which ones can be delegated to someone else (at home and work). If you need to create more space in your day, set boundaries for yourself and others. I am a huge proponent of exercise and self-care and I try not to break appointments with myself. Finally, talk to someone who can help whether it be a mentor or someone in leadership. There is always a solution, but sometimes you need the creative energy of others to find it.

**Rusty Gray:** My suggestions may seem like I am minimizing the phenomenon but stay with me. First, check your mindset. If you keep telling yourself that you are burned out, the burnout will be worse. It is like thinking over and over while running or exercising, "I'm really tired and gassed." Those thoughts exaggerate the fatigue, sometimes exponentially. My workout group calls this "listening to the bad wolves." You must get the bad wolves out of your head! You must find other positive focal points. That makes a big difference.

Second, burnout sometimes arises from being overwhelmed by particularly big tasks or a high volume of tasks. The size or volume of the tasks seems undoable. Back to an exercise analogy (sorry): So many CrossFit workouts, such as a "Murph" (run a mile, do 100 pull-ups, 200 pushups, and 300 squats, then run another mile - all while wearing a 20-pound weight vest) seem impossible as a whole. But as we say in the CrossFit world, just "chip away at it." Take the big task in small parts. Keep chipping away at the small pieces (such as just do 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups, and 15 squats for now). Before you know it, you have completed the unimaginable. Don't get overwhelmed with the total task or project. "Chip away at it" in small parts and see what happens. I often show up for work overwhelmed, particularly after looking at my to-do list. It at times seems impossible. Then I think, "Start chipping away at it." I'm often amazed and gratified by the chipping-away results.

Finally, as discussed earlier, carve out a schedule for personal and family time and make that a priority. Aside from that schedule adjustment, take time for vacations and time off. That is important. And get outside! Sit by the ocean. Take a walk in the woods. Feel the sunshine. Something about Mother Nature puts things into perspective and provides a sense of perspective and peace. Do not underestimate the power of the outdoors.