



## Moving on from the Law

[Elayne Demby]

Elayne Demby tells her story of going from a harried, full-time attorney at a high-profile New York City firm to becoming a freelance writer and stay-at-home mom, and everything that happened in between.

I have a law degree from Fordham University, and I even have an LL.M in taxation from New York University. Although I started law school anticipating a long legal career, I moved on. Ten years ago, I started to work as a freelance journalist, writing for a number of consumer and trade publications - a career that allows me to better balance working with being the primary caregiver for my children. That is not to say that the time I spent in law school or the years I practiced could have been spent better preparing myself for my ultimate career. My legal education was in no way frivolous. It proved to be a useful springboard onto another career path-one that is just as interesting and a better fit for my lifestyle.

I use my legal background every day. As an attorney, I specialized in ERISA, employee benefits, executive compensation and human resources. I now write about those topics and, due to my legal education and experience, I make more than most struggling, freelance journalists. My legal years gave me a foundation to write technical working articles for professionals, which command a premium from trade publications. Law school and a career in the big New York firms also gave me the discipline and the skills to work independently and meet deadlines.

Like most young, naïve women, I entered law school with visions of "having it all." I wanted to make partner at a big firm, marry a fabulous guy, and raise a perfect set of children (one boy and one girl, of course) in a pre-war apartment in a swanky area of Manhattan.

Well, things started to go as planned. My first job was at New York's Proskauer Rose Goetz & Mendelsohn, and I eventually moved on Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison. I even married a fabulous guy I met, of all places, when studying for the bar exam. We lived on Manhattan's Upper East Side and considered buying a classic six on the Upper West Side.

But the reality of working at a big firm made it obvious that making partner and having any kind of a family life would be difficult. My line to family and friends was that I did not have a job making \$100,000 -- I had two jobs making \$50,000 each since I routinely spent seventy to eighty hours a week in the office.

When it came time to start a family, I realized that I did not want a child just to hire an expensive nanny to raise it. Bumping up against the glass ceiling was not an issue because I did not want to hit it. I no longer wanted to continue to constantly put my husband, my family and friends on hold just because some deal needed attention. I also felt stifled creatively because work prevented me from engaging in any hobby or interest. I was eating three meals a day at my desk, had a cleaning woman clean my apartment and sent my laundry out.

With a desire to change all of this, I got a non-partnership track position at another large New York firm, with an agreement that I would only have to work four days a week. While the agreement was for four days, I had enough work to keep me in the office seven. After a month, I either popped into the

office for a few hours on my day off or took work home to catch up. I was soon dropping by the office on Saturdays and Sundays as well. When the firm started to show signs of breaking apart (which it did after I left), I jumped at an opportunity to work in-house at a Fortune 500 firm in Connecticut. My dream was revised from an apartment with Hudson River views to a house in Westport near the train station, and an easy commute to a cushy in-house position with great benefits.

While the hours in-house were definitely less than what was expected in a law firm, they still left little room for balancing work and family. My fellow lawyers typically got to the office between 7 and 7:30 in the morning, and did not leave until at least 6 pm. But I got along well with my internal clients, and found I liked the work better than anything I had ever done before. I thought I could put down roots and began calculating how much my pension would be when I retired. But within my first year my new employer announced major layoffs. This was 1992 when re-engineering was the corporate buzz word du jour, and companies could see their share price go up just by announcing they were going to lay off thousands. My company hired consultants to help with the re-engineering process, and they recommended that the legal department be outsourced to meet layoff targets.

I found myself on the street in one of the most difficult hiring climates for attorneys of the last twenty years. The boom times of the 1980's were over, and the country was in a recession. All the major New York firms were laying off hundreds of associates and



even asking partners to move on. Despite stellar credentials and a solid work history, six months after my job was terminated, I still found myself unable to get a single interview anywhere in the tri-state region.

I was also seriously questioning my willingness to continue practicing law. I had chosen law as a profession because I thought it would insulate me from unemployment, and that expectation had been shattered. I had seen friends laid off from one legal job, only to find another and be laid off again. Although unemployed, I was only half-heartedly looking to find a replacement job. I may have sent out resumes and met with recruiters, but did little else.

I also discovered that I liked being home all day. With money tight, I cooked dinner every night, and also made breakfast to save money on expensive take out coffee and muffins. I created killer recipes for morning glory carrot muffins and maple hazelnut scones. I also developed a method of cooking pizza on the barbeque that rivaled the best coal fired pizza from New Haven. I did all the cleaning, all the laundry and discovered I loved to garden. But I still could not envision myself being a full-time housewife and mother. I liked being with my children all day, but felt I needed intellectual stimulation. I also was uncomfortable with being completely economically dependent on my husband.

I had always liked to write. I began a novel, and started sending out queries and articles to magazines. Within a few months my first piece published in a gardening magazine. But, while I got a lot of satisfaction in being published for the first time (not counting my law school note), the payment did not exactly add all that much to our bank account. My first foray into professional writing garnered me \$150. Considering it took me four months of writing to get that \$150, I would have been better off working at McDonalds earning minimum wage.

But I was published and called an old friend who had published several biographies that were well received in the New York Times book review. She was enthusiastic and suggested I contact her boyfriend who was starting a trade publication targeted at in-house professionals who ran employee benefits plans. Since that was my area of legal specialization, and I had experience working directly with the people the magazine was targeted at, it was a good area for me to explore, she recommended. It certainly paid well for freelance writing-between \$1000 to \$3,500 per article. I took her advice and arranged a meeting. The boyfriend met me because I was a friend of the woman he was living with, but was very skeptical of my ability to write.

I pointed out that, as an attorney, the bulk of my time was spent researching and writing. I even had extensive experience "interviewing" since I often called government officials and other attorneys trying to track down the right answers for clients. I suggested two potential article topics, and offered to write them "on spec" with no obligation to pay me if he thought they did not meet his journalistic standards.

That was ten years ago. The boyfriend is no longer managing editor, but I still write for that publication on a regular basis. I also parlayed my published clips from that magazine into regular writing assignments for several other publications targeted at human resource and benefits professionals, and moved to financial writing as well. As I did when I practiced law, I often analyze legal developments for my clients' readers. It is somewhat akin to what I did as an associate, only now my advice is not targeted to a specific client. For example, several months ago, I wrote about what legal obligations companies would have to same sex spouses of employees married in Canada.

And, on the side, I still write about gardening, and have even managed to get articles about food, with recipes, published. My office

is an extra room in our house, and my commute begins after my son gets on the school bus and my daughter is either dropped off at pre-school or settled in with the babysitter. It's all of ten feet from the kitchen to the office. I make a lot less than I ever did as a lawyer, but I also work a lot less. And, most importantly I get to be the "Mommy" who's always home at the end of the school day. But at the same time, my work requires to speak with and, at times meet, professionals who are tops in their fields. I have interviewed US representatives and senators for comments on legislation they are proposing or opposing and I have even had discussions with White House officials.

So my vision of "having it all" has actually come to fruition. It just was not the "all" I originally had in mind.