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Double Duty: Women who make it to the top in business carry the burden of society's expectations

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The sun has not yet crested the trees in this tranquil Wellesley neighborhood, but inside the Cape Cod-style home Christine Petersen ’85 is already deep into her day.

By 7:30 Petersen is showered, dressed, and has responded to a dozen work e-mails. Petersen is chief marketing officer for TripAdvisor, the world’s largest online travel community, with almost 10 million members.

Hair still wet, coffee mug in hand, she sits at the kitchen table, scanning her laptop for messages from her 100 employees. But she also is making sure she has time for her 4-year-old daughter, Charlotte.
Across the table, Charlotte lounges in her pajamas, watching a cartoon on the kitchen television. Petersen’s husband, Robert Wells, left an hour ago for a flight to Washington, D.C., where he is developing a health-care consulting company.

In between encouraging Charlotte to finish her breakfast, Petersen makes a grocery list, fills Charlotte’s lunch box, and writes dinner instructions for the family’s 21-year-old German au pair. “It can be nuts at times,” Petersen admitted. “Inevitably, I am always working two jobs, and that is where,” she added, “it sucks to be a woman.”

As more women break the glass ceiling, pulling themselves to the top of the corporate ladder, they are learning that—despite help from a partner and grandparents, even an au pair—balancing career, motherhood, home, and a personal life can create plenty of angst.

Women have made strides in the workplace. They represented 46 percent of the workforce in 2007 compared to 30 percent in 1950. But studies show they have not made similar gains in the home. A 2006 University of Maryland report showed that working women do twice as much housework and child care as their spouses.

“What certainly women have come a long way in the workforce. But, in terms of the division of labor around parenting, there are changes, but [they’re] not that significant,” said Teresa Arendell, a sociology professor at Colby who also teaches in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. “The daily child care may be reconfigured, but someone still has to do the delegating, supervising, and management.

“Even in couples who claim to be dual parenting, who makes doctor appointments? Who takes the kid to the doctor? Who makes sure the gym clothes are clean for Tuesday morning?” Arendell asked.

The issue of working mothers sparked a national debate last fall when Alaska Governor Sarah Palin pursued the nation’s second-highest office. Some critics argued that a mother of five might not be capable of handling her duties in the home and in the White House.

Said former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, introducing Palin at the Republican National Convention: “When do they ever ask a man that question?”

Despite the hours a woman puts in at the office, society still assigns most of the child-rearing and home-care duties to the
Thirty years ago the term “glass ceiling” was a novel and unexplored notion.

Yet women like Cheryl Booker Gorman ’74 learned firsthand that they faced challenges in the corporate world. Progress in gender equity has been made in recent years, but more is needed, alumnae say. When Gorman worked as a market research analyst for Rhode Island banks in the late 1970s, she searched for mentors. “Finding women role models was difficult,” Gorman said. “Most of the women still worked as tellers. All the books said ‘dress for success,’ but even that was hard. Some of the women at the banks still wore white gloves.” Gorman had no choice but to rely on male role models and mentors. Throughout her banking career, she was often the sole female manager.

Despite making personal gains in her career and being named senior vice president of retail banking for a Boston firm in 2002, Gorman learned that the bank still relied on a 1950s mentality. “I was the only senior executive who was a female,” Gorman said. “It was an extremely white brotherhood, and it just wore me down to the point it started affecting my health.”

After leaving the bank in 2006, Gorman was left with self-doubt, wondering: “What could I have done differently?”

Now senior vice president of retail banking at Harvard University Employee Credit Union, Gorman said it took several months to restore her confidence, which got a boost from a local women’s leadership group. “These women were executive leaders from all over Boston,” she said. “They had shared experiences of working in male-dominated companies, and they helped me understand that a lot of issues I faced at the bank were not related to me.”

If banking was male-dominated, consider the seafood industry. When Kim Gorton ’87 took over Slade Gorton & Co. in 2006, the multi-million-dollar distributor founded by her grandfather, she had to deal with sniping from critics who doubted that a woman could run a male-dominated seafood business. “Don’t you have any brothers?”, her male customers wanted to know, she recalls.

“There were definitely people who questioned my ability to lead, who felt I couldn’t do it because I was a woman, a mother, or not strong enough,” Gorton said. But rather than dwell on criticism, Gorton lets her passion and knowledge speak for itself. “It’s about being confident and credible,” Gorton said. “The people who were in charge at the time were not particularly respectful of my responsibilities at home. My life was pretty miserable during that period.”

Eight years later, Shaughnessy is now a senior vice president with MFS. Though she is respected at the investment company, where her $2.4-billion MFS Utilities fund was recognized in 2006 for its outstanding 10-year performance, there are still times when family needs can overwhelm. For most of 2007 she managed her $2.4-billion MFS Utilities fund while tending to her dying father.

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“We expect top-level professional women to carry on just like their male counterparts,” Arendell said. “Family is not to interfere with work. Women are still expected to manage their children and homes, but they have to do it in a way that doesn’t impinge on their profession.”

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women must also wrestle with guilt as they compete with stay-at-home mothers who bake gourmet cupcakes, volunteer weekly in the classroom, and attend every field hockey, soccer, and football game.

“There is a lot of talk about finding the healthy balance between work and home,” said Kimberly Gorton ’87, president of the Boston-based seafood distributor Slade Gorton & Co. “But I don’t think there is a perfect balance. There are days that go well and days that don’t.”

Gorton recalls, soon after becoming president, taking a conference call with an important customer while driving to New York with a friend and their combined six kids.

The call went smoothly until she forgot to hit the mute button before scolding the children: “Get your hands off her! Keep your hands to yourself!” she shouted.

“Excuse me?” Gorton’s customer interrupted.

Gorton laughs now but has also concluded: “It was ridiculous to think I could pull off a conference call with six kids in the back seat.”

She has learned that balancing motherhood and a company with $330 million in annual revenue requires a lot of organization, flexibility—and humor. “I have a great management team and I’ve learned I have to use that support,” Gorton said. “It’s difficult for a lot of hard-charging women executives to rely on others. They think you have to do it all—but you can’t.”

When Gorton became president of her family-owned company in 2006, she knew it was important to talk honestly about her responsibilities as a mother (to Brinley, 12, Lily, 10, and Will, 8). “I am the president of this company,” Gorton recalls telling her leadership team. “But I also am the mother of three young children who need me, and I view that as my number-one job.”

Though her employees respect Gorton’s honesty and devotion to her children, she said, there are moments when her parental duties prompt difficult decisions. “I’ll have a board meeting, and someone wakes up at four a.m. throwing up,” Gorton said. “I am constantly having to react quickly and roll with the punches. But it’s not always easy to hear disappointment in someone’s voice when I have to cancel a meeting because one of my kids is sick.”

Despite support from family, a nanny, and her ex-husband, who takes the children for half the week, “I feel,” Gorton said, “like I’m pulled in a million directions.” School assemblies are followed by quick exits back to work. Some business trips are avoided or compressed.

Still, racing from the minute she gets up until the retail reports, homework, bedtime stories, and goodnight kisses are done is sometimes not enough. There are phone calls, Gorton said: “We don’t want the nanny. We want you!” or “Mom, you missed it! I scored my first goal!”

They sting, but the seafood company executive knows she cannot let guilt overwhelm her. “I try to remind myself that two months from now my child isn’t going to remember that I didn’t see that goal,” Gorton said. “The challenge is to feel good about the things you are there for.”

She takes comfort in knowing her kids see her as a role model, someone passionate and proud about leading a business that employs 170 people and buys and sells more than a 100 million pounds of fish annually.

“The challenge is to feel good about the things you are there for. ... They know I’m doing the best I can and that has got to be good enough.”

—Kimberly Gorton ’87
“My kids understand that I love them but I also love what I do,” Gorton said. “They know I’m doing the best I can and that has got to be good enough.”

Imagine being five months pregnant with a 4-year-old son and working a job that requires living in two cities 1,200 miles apart.

“It does sound crazy, and I admit there are times when I ask myself: ‘What am I doing?’” said Felise Glantz Kissell ’91, newly hired senior vice president of investor relations and strategy for Home Shopping Network.

This year Kissell and her family will alternate living in Tampa, where HSN is based, and New York, where she will manage the company’s Wall Street operations. “You can look at the dual-city issue and think of it as complicated,” she said. “Or you can embrace it and it can be an adventure for our family.”

The opportunity to take a senior position in a company with more than $3 billion in annual sales convinced Kissell that the career boost outweighed the difficulties of juggling a new job, two homes, a preschooler, and a baby due in March.

“The easier path would have been to stay in New York City with Maidenform, a company I loved,” Kissell said. “But Home Shopping Network represented the next level of career growth, so I just had to go for it.”

A self-described “adrenaline junkie” who thrives on challenges, Kissell admits it is difficult to balance ambition and family obligations. “You want to conquer the world, but life can get complicated.”

She does not cook or clean and splits the responsibility of relieving the nanny with her husband, Robert, who heads quantitative trading strategy for J.P. Morgan. “There’s no gender dynamic in the household,” Kissell said. “Why should I cook? I’m working equally as hard as my husband.”

But she also fought through pregnancy nausea on the job and works through lunch so she can get home to read bedtime stories to her son, Landon. “We’d talk and catch up on life,” Kissell said. “He understands mommy works, and I like that he has a strong female role model in his life.”

Still, working-mom status has its downside. Many of her son’s classmates were children of diplomats, and the majority of their mothers did not work outside the home. “I’m the outcast,” Kissell said. “And that can be hard on the soul.”

To compensate, she picked up or dropped off her son off at school once a month. She also took him to school his first day. “I wanted to experience that with him. Certain things you have to make choices on how important it is for you to be there. I didn’t want Landon to feel like the odd man out.”

She’s already trying to figure out how she will continue to work once her second child is born in March. “It will be hard to for me to disengage,” Kissell said. “I don’t want to lose traction. If you disconnect, you’re out of the loop, and it shows your gender. If you want to keep building your career momentum, it’s hard to take time off.”

Over the next few months, Kissell will immerse herself in developing relationships with Wall Street investors and researching growth strategies for HSN. And, in between shuttling back and forth, caring for her son, and contending with swollen ankles and pregnancy fatigue, Kissell will do what she has always done in her career: “I’ll take it day by day and keep my game face on.”

A cup of coffee on her desk, iPhone within reach, Christine Petersen sits before her computer at TripAdvisor’s Newton, Mass., office.

Named one of the travel industry’s 25 most influential women for 2008 in ForbesLife Executive Woman magazine, Petersen has overseen rapid growth at TripAdvisor, which boasts more than 20 million monthly visitors to its Web site and 35 million to related sites.

At TripAdvisor, which netted nearly $150 million in profits last year, Petersen is responsible for public relations, revenue/traffic growth, and global market expansion and for launching innovative online travel tools and guides.

But Petersen’s screensaver also flashes a photograph of 4-year-old Charlotte taking a bite of a chocolate chip cookie that is bigger than her face.

“I got married in my mid-thirties and my daughter was born when I was forty,” Petersen said. “My life has been defined by my work, so staying at home would be very difficult. And, I also really, really love what I do.”

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Felise Glantz Kissell ’91, discussing the challenges of balancing a career and a newborn child