

THE DEAN AND FAMILY LIFE

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I found plenty of reasons to be afraid when I was asked to become the interim dean five years ago. But one fear dwarfed all others: how would the job impact my family? I was thirty-six. My wife and I had four children: three girls then aged 9, 8, 5 and a son aged 3. How much would this new job interfere with my ability to be a good and involved husband and dad? How much stress would the workload place on my family?

The potential challenges to a dean's family were and are obvious. The job is demanding in many ways. Deans travel a lot—to conferences, to see alumni and donors, and to recruit students. Even when not on the road, there are bar functions, Inns of Court meetings, lectures, student organization banquets, and Board of Trustees meetings. All can take away from family life. And beyond the hectic schedule, the deanship is emotionally demanding. Deans face difficult personnel issues, wearying budget battles, and weighty decisions of all sorts. It is hard to just turn the off switch on these matters when we come home at the end of a long day. So, even when we are home, sometimes emotionally and psychologically we are not really there.

Five years have now passed since, despite my fears, I accepted the job. Looking back—and after conducting a slightly less than scientific poll of my children (now aged 14, 13, 10, and 8)—I have concluded that my worst fears were not realized. Not only hasn't being a dean hurt our family life, I think we agree as a family that my job has actually been good for us.

How can that be? In part we have employed defensive strategies to ward off some of the biggest dangers the job poses for family life. Perhaps the most important strategy is that I leave work at a reasonable hour each day so that we can have dinner together as a family. I try to leave the office between 5:30 and 5:45 pm each night. Naturally, there are some evenings where I have to stay beyond 5:45 for an evening event at the school. And also naturally, I leave work undone every day. I have decided, though, that even if I left at 9:00 pm I would leave work undone every day. The job is such that there is always more I could do. If there are particularly pressing matters that I must work on, I will still go home at 5:30, have dinner with my family, spend a couple of hours with them, and then work in the evening. But I need that family time to hear what is going on in their lives, throw a football, or just be with them.

The second strategy is that I have learned to be choosier about which events to attend. It turns out that I don't need to go to everything. I am better at knowing which events are critical to the school and which really aren't. I know better which events require my presence and those at which another professor or administrator could just as effectively represent the school. As much as possible, I coordinate

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events with my family's schedule. I have missed events or arrived a day late if they are not critical and conflict with a school award ceremony or some other event important in the life of our family. Of course, sometimes conflicts are unavoidable and I miss family events. Last year, I traveled over my oldest daughter's birthday, but we tried to make the best of it by scheduling her party for when I returned.

A third strategy is to be careful about the scheduling of trips. Like most deans I travel a lot. How that traveling is scheduled, though, makes a huge difference to my family. In perhaps my second year as dean, I had a month in which I traveled for most of the week for three weeks in a row. It was too much—for all of us. The timing on some things, like conferences, is fixed. I go when the event is held. But for others, like donor visits or recruiting trips, the timing is usually more flexible. I try to schedule these to impose the least burden on family life.

A fourth strategy—and I have had varying levels of success with this one—I try very hard not to bring work home emotionally. When I am home, I need to really be there. So I save that last e-mail check for after the kids go to bed, and we generally talk about family matters, not work concerns, over dinner.

As a final strategy, we have found it important to have another aspect of our lives (not work related) in which we all participate together. For our family that is involvement in our local church. We not only attend there, but we develop close friendships there, and we each try to use our gifts and talents to further the ministry of the church. I think our church life is another thing that protects us from my work taking over family life.

So far I have mainly shared strategies for coping—how to make sure that the deanship doesn't damage the family. But those strategies don't tell the whole (or even most of) the story. My being dean actually has great benefits for our family.

One of the greatest parts of the job is being able to visit interesting places and to meet interesting and successful people. In many ways, my family has experienced these benefits with me.

As often as I can, I take my family with me to events I attend. Conferences can be great for families. My kids, for instance, are huge fans of the AALS annual meeting. They get their own conference name badges and wander the exhibit hall shamelessly looking for the best freebies. While I am in a conference session on International Human Rights, my kids are enjoying the AALS afternoon ice cream social. And we always take some time to visit area sites on an off morning or afternoon. The Southeastern Association of Law Schools Conference likewise is scheduled in a family-friendly way. Organizers place it at a nice beach resort and schedule talks and receptions to allow for both great substantive interaction and networking and time for family life.

Of course, I can't take my family on all of my trips. Frequently the kids are in school and my wife has responsibilities at home. But by trying to involve family whenever possible, we have been able to experience London together, and my wife and I have traveled to Hawaii and Costa Rica.

We don't just involve family in trips to exotic places. This spring I had a Saturday evening alumni reception in Raleigh, North Carolina. I could have driven down Saturday afternoon alone and returned Sunday morning. But we chose to make a family event out of it. We left on Saturday morning, spent the afternoon playing in the hotel pool, attended the reception (my wife and oldest daughter

participated in the event along with me), spent Sunday morning back in the hotel pool, and drove back that afternoon. What could have been another time of dad being gone on business turned into a relaxing family weekend.

Even more than the places, though, I am thankful for the people that we have come to know through this job. In a slight exception to our “don’t bring work home” coping strategy, we use our home to entertain guests of the law school. So, over dinner, my children are exposed to fascinating people and ideas.

A highlight of family life each year is the annual visit of our Jurist-in-Residence, Virginia Supreme Court Chief Justice Leroy Hassell. Chief Justice Hassell spends a week at the law school teaching classes and meeting with student leaders and faculty. He also spends one evening in our home. A devoted family man himself, the Chief Justice has become a friend to my wife and children while offering to become my children’s advocate on grievances they have with us. His “clients” are delighted to see him each year. I don’t think they yet grasp how unique is their opportunity to spend time like this with a brilliant and powerful, yet humble, man. I am thankful for his role in their lives.

I am just as thankful for the role students play in our family’s life. My job gives all of us an outstanding opportunity to know and interact with students. This part of the job is one of the most gratifying and the most fun. We host students at receptions in our home, invite student attendees of our church for dinner, and on occasion go to student events hosted in their homes. We missed Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake during this year’s Super Bowl Half-Time Show. Our family was at a Super Bowl party organized by SBA leaders and others. For our half-time show I joined a group of only semi-sane law students in a quick plunge into the February Atlantic Ocean as part of the students’ “February Freeze.” The event was lots of fun for the whole family. Some students we have grown to know have remained friends of our family for years after they have become alumni.

I am particularly gratified by the role of students in our lives as my daughters have gotten older. Cyndi, Melissa, and Christina have gotten to know women law students who have taken them under their wings. As a dad of teenagers, I can’t say how important it has been for my daughters to have bright, capable, and committed women as role models.

The ways we have chosen to involve our family in the life of the law school in my job as dean of course reflect a couple of things that are unique about our family. For one, among deans I have relatively young children. Undoubtedly, ice cream socials in the AALS exhibit hall aren’t likely to produce the same thrill in a college student as they are in my eight-year-old son, Jeffrey.

Most important, my wife Becky views involvement in the life of the law school as part of her personal calling and ministry. She loves law students. She interacts with them in many ways. Formally, she is the faculty advisor to the Law Wives, an organization that holds events for and helps build relationships among spouses of law students. Becky helps with some of the events, but mostly she encourages the spouses and their families. Less formally, Becky goes out of her way to build relationships with law students. She mentors them, encourages them, and challenges them.

Becky frequently participates in another part of my job—networking. She attends bar functions, trustee dinners, and student banquets. She has an outgoing

personality and naturally builds friendships. Within minutes at a banquet, she will have a table of lawyers and judges laughing. I am much better at my job because we do this part of it together.

So looking back after five years, I would have to say that, while my fears were real, we have successfully employed defensive strategies to address those fears. But more than that, my job as dean has actually proved to be a benefit to our whole family. The places we have gone, the people we have met, and the way we have enjoyed them together have more than compensated for the burdens we have felt.