

# Balancing Act

Managing careers and family is possible, but don't expect guilt-free perfection.

BY LORI JOHNSTON



PHOTOS BY ALEX STAFFORD

In a perfect world, balancing work, family and a social life (yes, some people have one) would be drastically different from your current harried lifestyle. Rushing from activity to activity with coffee in hand and phone in ear is the way many operate these days, even in Southwest Florida's laid-back environment.

The demands of work and family can take a toll on everyone, from entry level to executive. But some folks are figuring out that work-life balance doesn't mean perfection. They're simply shifting focus to what's important at the time— whether it's work, family, the community or themselves.

Four local professionals shared the lessons they've learned, how they've dealt with guilt and how they're winning the work-life battle. Although they have kids of various ages, their tips can still be helpful if you don't have children but just want to find time for your favorite activities.

## Restaurant Business

### A Recipe for Happy Kids

**WHO:** Mike Hernandez, owner of Handsome Harry's Third Street Bistro in Naples. Married to Lisa; children, Zoe, 15; Mia, 11; and Zak, eight.

**DEFINING MOMENT:** Hernandez, who is 52, had his children late in life. He sold his restaurants—Aqua Grill, Bistro 821, Bistro 41, Mad Hatter, Mia's, Michael's Café, Trios and Zoe's—10 years ago and moved to Montana with his family, getting out of the business. "I did basically everything with the kids. I coached every team. I took them to school every day. I went on every field trip.

I really enjoyed that part of it.”

**HOW HE DOES IT:** Now back in the restaurant business, Hernandez still makes it to important events, such as coaching his son’s soccer team or attending piano recitals. Because he typically works on Saturdays, Sunday is a family day. Hernandez communicates with his staff when he needs to be away, and he encourages staff to spend time with their families, even if it’s just leaving for a couple of hours for a game. “The priority is finding that balance. I know people in the restaurant business (whose) priority is their business, and a lot of times afterwards it is going out with their buddies. There are a lot of people in the restaurant business that get divorced. I think part of the problem is you get used to a certain lifestyle and the family thing takes the backseat.”

**BEST TIP:** As an employer, hire people you can rely on when you are not there. It seems simple, but this can help you avoid unnecessary calls if workers are equipped and empowered to make decisions. “The times I do get calls, I feel they are important,” he said. One time during a child’s soccer game, he got a call and had to leave in the middle of the game, but that’s not typical.

**FINAL THOUGHT:** “I like being part of the equation in doing stuff with the kids, whether it’s something to do with acting or music or any type of sporting events. I love to be there. Those are times you never get back.”



Health

## Care

### Finding the Rx for Work-Life Balance

**WHO:** Dr. William Carracino, a neurosurgeon, and Dr. Marilyn Kole, a medical director for Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Myers. Kole had two children—Christina, a junior at Rollins College; and Michael, a sophomore at Stetson—during her three-year fellowship.

**HOW SHE DID IT:** Kole, who described herself as a working mom in search of the perfect job, switched positions over the years to fit with her kids’ schedules. Everything from volunteering at schools, to attending activities, to making sure they did their homework to emergency illnesses took time as well as an emotional toll. “I foolishly thought, as soon as the kids get in school,

won't it be so much easier? Oh, not true.”

As physicians, work sometimes caused them to push back activities, even putting the turkey back in the oven three times on Thanksgiving while her husband was called into the hospital. “There were some times where there was no good answer. Nothing came easy and it was really, really hard.”

The couple took all vacations to be with their children, which created strong relationships. (Kole even answered a quick call from her daughter during our interview.) She remembers asking their college-bound kids whether they'd want to go on trips with their parents anymore. “They were like, ‘No way, you're not going without us.’”

**BEST TIP:** Have backup. Find a babysitter, neighbor or family member to help out when you need to be at work. Also, have backup at work, with someone able to fill in or answer questions while you're away. “You have to ask for help, which is really, really hard to do.”

**FINAL THOUGHT:** “When they put that baby in your arms, it's over. That's your child, that's your life, that's the person you are responsible for.”



Utility

Industry

## Realizing the Power in Prioritizing

**WHO:** Karen Ryan, public relations manager for LCEC. Children: Taylor, 20; and Kacie, 19, are in college.

**DEFINING MOMENT:** Ryan became a single mom. She was fortunate to have a strong support system of family members and friends, as well as the girls' father in town and involved in their lives as they got into dance, cheerleading, student government and other activities.

**HOW SHE DID IT:** She planned when possible, whether for dance competitions or hurricanes that required her to be on the job. As soon as she got a schedule for her daughters, she put it on the calendar and made arrangements to work around the events. She also was able to bring the girls to work-related functions, such as the Lee County Heart Walk or other community events that LCEC supported.

During emergency situations, she was expected to be at work. When her children were small, she brought them to work during a storm and set up a campground in her office, but it was difficult to take care of them and focus on work. She learned to arrange for them to stay somewhere when hurricanes were approaching, until they got older. Then she was able to put them to work during emergencies.

**BEST TIP:** She placed all work and family obligations in these categories: "have to," "need to" and "want to." Separating the activities in those ways and talking with her daughters helped decisions on where to spend time. "My saving grace was I learned early on to prioritize things."

**FINAL THOUGHT:** "We are very, very close, still. I think it's because I always put family first. It's kept us close, even while they're away."

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Legal

## Field

### Not Objecting to Flexible Schedules

**WHO:** Mark Anderson, a commercial litigation attorney and shareholder at Fowler White Boggs in Fort Myers. Married to Brandy; children, Reilly, 12; Connor, nine; Elliot, six; and Shepard, three.

**DEFINING MOMENT:** Anderson, who's coached his kids' soccer teams since 2003, is simply not able to make it to everything due to the demands of his job. "You have to prioritize the family activities as well. Maybe I don't need to be there for every single game or every dentist appointment. It is a juggling act."

**HOW HE DOES IT:** His firm gives employees autonomy with schedules. "It's not a culture of face time and needing to be seen," Anderson says. But he adds that it's important to build trust with an employer, so they know they can count on you to get work done to the clients' satisfaction. Technology also has made it easier to stay connected, allowing him working from home in the early mornings, late evenings or weekends. "If I have work to finish, I just bring it home and put in a little more time in the evenings."

**BEST TIP:** Develop the right work habits, even before you have children. "If you develop in your mindset that 'I need to be here 12 hours a day' when you're single and don't have kids, what is that going to look like when you do have kids?" On days he has to

leave early for a soccer game or other family activity, he'll work through lunches. Even too much time chatting with colleagues about nonwork topics can cut into time that could be spent with family.

FINAL THOUGHT: "You have to ultimately know who you're working for, which is your family."