

# 22 Years of Change at One Company While Raising Three Children

by  
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**Abstract:** Twenty-five years after presenting a research paper on combining work with family at the 1979 SWE conference, I am presenting again on the same topic. I trace parallel paths of progressing through an engineering career with the same company for 22 years, while raising three children, ultimately as a partially-disabled single-parent. It is a story of how flexibility, creativity, and setting priorities can lead to a manageable lifestyle that included full-time and part-time work, flexible schedules, and working at home. The key is to know and meet the job expectations while still having time for your family and yourself.

## PURSUE YOUR PASSIONS

My passion was to become an engineer and also raise three children. This is my story.

In 1971, I was a junior in high school who excelled in math classes and really enjoyed them. I picked up a brochure in the high school guidance office that said, “If you are good at math word problems, you should consider engineering.” The rest, as they say, is history. I decided to major in engineering despite my parents and guidance counselor trying to talk me out of it.

Due to some premature deaths in my family, I also knew I wanted to have three children. How was I going to balance work and family? I took the opportunity to write a research paper on the topic for one of my college classes. I later presented and published that paper at the 1979 SWE conference in San Francisco.

## COLLEGE AND EARLY CAREER

Pursuing a degree and career in engineering as a woman at that time was challenging. I was the first woman engineering student for most of my professors, and later, most of my supervisors. I did not have women role models to help me with gender issues. Nonetheless, I excelled in engineering, and loved it.

My early career, before I joined CTL, was not easy for me. Although I did well technically, I experienced what we now call sexual harassment. At the time, men in engineering were used to working in an all-male environment. I was young and did not know how to handle difficult situations. Yet, I was proud to have an engineering degree

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and to have a job in engineering. I was a structural engineer, and enjoyed designing different buildings, structures, and components. During difficult times, I found consolation in this quote, which is still on my refrigerator.

#### Think Positive

If you think you are beaten, you are.  
 If you think you dare not, you don't.  
 Success begins with your own will... It's all in your state of mind.  
 Life's battles are not always won by those who are stronger or faster;  
 Sooner or later the person who wins is the person who thinks [s]he can!  
 -Unknown

I realized early the importance of licensure. I had married my high school sweetheart during college, but decided to delay having children until I had four years' experience so I could take the test to become a licensed structural or professional engineer. This would allow me to keep my options open, should I want to stay home with my children. I passed the test to become a professional engineer and became licensed. I found this valuable in opening doors with new clients, especially since I work in the construction industry.

### CHILDREN

In 1980, after four years of working, Laura was born. After 10 days home with her, I knew I wanted to go back to work. My husband worked long hours, and although I loved my baby dearly, I had invested a lot in becoming an engineer, and enjoyed it.

In the early 1980's, day-care centers did not accept children younger than 2 years old, and there was a village ordinance against dropping off children for day care before 7:00 am. This was a bit of problem since I had to leave my house at 6:30 am to catch a train to get into downtown Chicago to start my job at 7:45 am. This was before the days of flex time, and if any of us were late, our pay was docked. We were not given the choice to arrive late and make up the time.

My first day-care arrangement was a wonderful neighbor who agreed to watch Laura. My mother and sister had passed away while I was in my teens, and we did not have any relatives willing to help out. It is probably a little easier for those who have an extended family to help out.

This was also before working mothers were common. Grocery stores did not sell meat on weekends or evenings. Doctors' offices did not have weekend or evening hours.

I was 25 years old when Laura was born, and bombarded with comments on how I was damaging her by working. Many people asked me where my daughter was and why I wasn't with her. With no extended family to help, I raised her using advice in a book written by Dr. Spock; the only recognized child-care book then available. By the age of two, Laura was the happiest, smartest, friendliest two-year-old around. At that point I realized I had not harmed her by working and that there are many ways to raise children.

I had a miscarriage in 1982, within six months of being hired at CTL as the first woman engineer. To make it worse, I actually had the miscarriage at work (my most embarrassing moment!) But I went on to have two more children: Mary in 1984 and John in 1987. In those days, maternity leave was six weeks. I would have preferred to have a three-month leave, but my children were born before family leave was available. I also realized that in a relatively small company like ours, it was difficult to rearrange workload and hold my job open while I was out on leave. To be valuable to your employer, it is best to plan how work will get done while you are gone, and come back in a reasonable time period.

### **HAPPY MOM EQUALS HAPPY FAMILY**

It didn't take me long to realize that the mother was the center of the family, at least in mine, and a happy mother meant a happy family. This meant taking care of myself, getting enough sleep, finding a work arrangement I could handle, and arranging for day care that felt right. Children grow fast and their needs change quickly. So, for me, this meant reconsidering arrangements at least once a year. I had to learn to trust my inner instincts. If my job or child care arrangements were not working well, I changed. I had to stay centered and grounded because my family depended on me.

After 17 years of marriage, I went through a divorce in 1992. I remember one weekend when I ignored my children because I was self-absorbed and not sure what was going to happen to us. By Sunday night, the kids were all fighting and I realized that I needed to pull myself together and be there for them. This did not mean I could always do everything for everyone. I did the best I could. I think my son's first words were "cup-a-while," his combined version of "in a couple minutes" and "in a little while," which I was always saying to someone.

As a side note, we all adjusted to life-after-divorce. I found that if I loved my children and was there for them, life flowed relatively smoothly. My children and I emerged as a team of creative, problem-solving individuals.

### **KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN**

From day care to work schedules, and travel to teenagers, my best tool has been my ability to develop creative options.

#### **Work Schedule**

I was the first at CTL to ask for flexible hours and, later, part-time hours. The key is to convince your employer that your option will still result in getting work done, and will not cause additional work for them. Dependability and flexibility are key. I did what I said I would, and I switched my hours on occasion to do what was needed. In my mind, my children come first and my job second. However, the job requirements are still a high priority. Here is what worked for my employer and my family:

1982-1984: I worked full-time.

1985: I worked full-time but came in early and left early.

1986: I switched to part-time, working three days a week.<sup>1</sup>

1990: I increased my hours to 30 hours a week to get benefits; and worked three 10-hour days.

1992: As a single parent, 10-hour days were too long to be away from home, so I switched to three 8-hour days and a 6-hour day.

1993: I was promoted to a Principal Engineer while working part-time. I had not expected a promotion while working part-time, but this shows the value of understanding your company's needs and meeting them.

1993-1998: I gradually increased my hours to full-time to meet project demand and company responsibilities. I was promoted to manager in 1998.

High speed internet access has allowed more flexibility for working from home.

However, I was rarely able to work at home while the children were actually in the house and awake.

### **Child Care**

Once again the key is to trust your inner instincts as to what is best for your child and to change if things aren't right. Here is what we used:

- Care in another person's home
- Caregiver in our home
- A day-care center
- Before and after care at school
- Summer camp (both day camp and overnight camp)

### **HELPFUL HINTS**

Time is precious when you work while raising children. I have found the following invaluable:

- A housecleaning service at least every other week. I hired the first one when I went back to work after my first child, and have kept one no matter how tight my finances were.
- A fast and dependable catalog / website. I have used JC Penney for years for everything from towels to a white shirt Mary needed for her elementary school band concert.
- A grocery delivery service. I use Peapod, which allows changes and additions to orders until the night before delivery.
- A rule that Mom closes at 9:00 pm. I rarely help with homework, fix the printer, sign teacher's notes, or talk after 9:00 pm. I am available before 9:00 pm or during breakfast (and, of course, for illnesses and emergencies). This is my way of getting much-needed rest.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>After a month when Laura had the chicken pox, my husband had surgery, and then my baby Mary contracted chicken pox, I realized I could not do it all.

<sup>2</sup> My children commented that I am more compassionate than this sounds.

## **DISABILITIES**

In 1999, I experienced extreme lower back pain so severe that I could not sit in a chair. Since I was undiagnosed (they still do not know the cause), I could not get disability pay either from my company or from the government. So, I needed to go back to work. Creativity and help from my company's human resources department was key. I worked lying down on a rented couch, using a tilted hospital tray table with a laptop computer velcroed to it. Co-workers drove me to and from work. I hired people to make dinner and drive my children in the late afternoon.

Since 2001, I have been able to sit but in a reclined position. I have a chair at work that reclines, and take a folding reclining chair on my out-of-town trips. The box used for checking the chair deteriorated after 10 or so trips, so I replaced it with an expandable art portfolio case. Since I have health problems, it is important that I exercise, eat right, and get enough sleep. Balance will always be a part of my life even after my children are out of the house.

## **THINGS WORK OUT**

I am a principal engineer and manager for CTL, a consulting firm, where I have been for 22 years. My projects are related to green buildings, building energy use, and moisture problems in buildings. I have had 10 supervisors over 22 years who have trusted me and let me have flexible work arrangements because they know I am dependable and add value to the company.

Laura is now 24 years old and an art teacher. She graduated from the University of Illinois with a BA degree in Art Education and BS in Liberal Arts and Sciences. She spent four years of high school in competitive marching band and dance, and was in the Marching Illini for four years in college. She is getting married this December.

Mary is 20 years old and gets straight A's as a junior majoring in Special Education at the University of Illinois. She was in competitive ballet, tap, and jazz in high school. She helped me the most, and was inconvenienced the most, when I was unable to sit or drive while she was in high school.

John is 17 years old and a senior in high school. He is musically blessed and composes and arranges music. When I was first contacted about presenting here, I agreed to Saturday, October 16. But, then I learned John had a major band competition that same day, and after a lot of mixed feelings, I notified SWE I was unable to present. They contacted me and asked me if I could present on Thursday. I agreed and will fly to his band competition in St. Louis Friday, and then to Atlanta Sunday for another work-related presentation. This illustrates how my creativity and others' flexibility help me find a way to achieve balance between work and family.



How do my children feel? They are proud of their mom and think they have turned out fine, although my son wishes I had more time to fix large home-cooked meals.

Life isn't easy, but I was able to achieve what I wanted: a career in engineering while raising three wonderful children. By being flexible, using my creativity, loving my children, and doing the best I can, I have found that things work out.