

## “WE CAN HAVE IT ALL”

People have very different philosophies about whether women can effectively balance a successful legal career with being a great mom. As lawyers and mothers of very young children, we've heard it all: “*You can't have it all!*”; “*You can't do everything well – something's got to give!*”; “*You can have it all, just not at the same time!*”, etc. Notwithstanding all of this well meaning advice, our philosophy is much more optimistic. Our credo is simple – “You can have it all!” – and we do.

As co-founders of Nukk-Freeman & Cerra, P.C. (NFC), a women owned law firm, our goal – like our tag line – was to create a better workplace. What started out as a goal of creating a better workplace for our attorneys, ended up serving as the basis for a new type of law firm that also provides much better service to its clients. Our intention is for NFC to become a standard bearer for other law firms, as proof that there really is a better way.

Prior to starting NFC, we had witnessed the mass exodus of talented and experienced female attorneys from the legal profession, often just as their careers were taking off. Most of these women were over-achievers and perfectionists who, after enduring grueling works hours and punishing demands for many years, decided to have children and needed some semblance of balance (*i.e.*, sanity) in their lives. What we heard from many of these women is that they were playing by a set of rules under which they could never win. Even for the select group of women who were fortunate enough to work for a firm that allowed part-time schedules, there was always the unspoken pressure to return to a regular schedule rather than continue indefinitely on a part-time basis. Additionally, many of these part-timers no longer felt like “A” players because, although their work quality remained constant, their firms still used maximizing billable hours as the primary standard by which to measure them. Moreover, many of these women, though ostensibly on “part-time” schedules with part-time pay, were working almost full-time hours because of their commitment to their clients and in an attempt to live up to the high standards they had set for themselves.

It is only natural for over-achievers, like so many of us women lawyers, to want to excel at everything

we do. The same women who strove to be at the top of their law school class, to get the most prestigious clerkships, and to obtain the best possible jobs are the same women who strive to be phenomenal parents. These same women are, at alarming rates, opting out of the legal profession because they feel they cannot do everything at a level that meets the high standards they have set for themselves. For many of these women, raising children while trying to thrive in a typical law firm environment leaves them feeling like failures both at home and at work. In short, these women are leaving the legal profession because the “system” has left them with an untenable choice: sacrificing their standards of excellence with their children or in their profession.

This predicament is what led us on our personal journey to create a revolution of sorts, a new way (a better way) of practicing law. We started a law firm in early 2006 founded on a novel concept. We would create a work environment that would enable our attorneys to not only be exceptional attorneys, but also exceptional people, with fulfilling personal lives as parents, community leaders, friends and volunteers. As former law school roommates, partners at prestigious law firms and mothers of kids ranging in age from 5 months to 6 years, we set out to create what we felt would be the “perfect” law firm for over-achievers like us; one that



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would allow attorneys to excel in their professional and personal lives at the same time.

The components of this new fangled type of law firm are shockingly simple. First, we value the people who work at NFC based on the *quality* of their work, not the quantity. By way of example, we have an attorney who bills fifteen hours a week who is adored by our clients and an invaluable asset to our firm. Second, we compensate people fairly and think outside of the box. We moved away from the traditional formula of a base salary based on billable hours. We pay people based on their output; the more they work, the more they make. It is a fair system for everyone and allows attorneys who work fewer billable hours to still be viewed as truly indispensable members of our "A" team. Third, we provide the option of flexible work arrangements to every single attorney from day one. This, of course, requires hiring experienced, motivated, type A attorneys who make client service their top priority. However, we have found there to be no shortage of over-achievers out there! In fact, our flexible work program has greatly enhanced our ability to attract top legal talent. Finally, we use a structured team approach for servicing our clients. This not only optimizes attorney flexibility, but also greatly benefits

clients by dramatically improving response time. Clients do not need to wait for one of our attorneys to finish up a deposition or get of a mediation because there are always at least two or three other members of the client's team available to assist them.

The proof that NFC's model works is in its success. The firm has grown exponentially in just three short years, building from two attorneys and one administrative assistant to its current roster of fourteen attorneys and six support staff members (and growing). The firm's fourteen working-mom attorneys have a total of 31 children (all under 10 years of age) and 150+ years of collective employment law experience among them. The firm boasts a 0% attrition rate among its attorneys since its inception in January 2006, which we attribute to our unique firm culture and the benefits described above. The firm has tripled its client base and our revenues have more than doubled each year. In essence, our dream has become reality.

We felt particularly validated recently when a client, who heads the Employment Law Department at a Fortune 100 company, asked us, "Why has it taken so long for law firms to figure this out?" We told him we did not know. We could not imagine doing it any other way.

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