

New Job? New Baby? It's Not a Problem

Pamela Rothenberg of Womble manages lawyers, daughters, and deals, apparently with energy to spare.

When Pamela Rothenberg traveled to Guatemala to adopt her baby girl last year, almost no one at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice had any idea that she was adding an infant to her family.

"I went to Guatemala on a Friday, came back and took the baby to the pediatrician on a Tuesday, and was back in the office—with the baby—on a Wednesday," says the managing partner of Womble's D.C. office.

"I'm standing there, talking to people with a baby on my hip," she recalls, smiling. "No one knows what's going on."

Balancing Act

Debra Bruno

When they finally asked Rothenberg whose baby was sleeping peacefully in her office, she said, "It's mine!"

People just about passed out, she remembers.

But then you sense that Rothenberg was going for the big reaction. She says she wants other attorneys to see that having a family is not incompatible with being a successful lawyer. She especially wants to send a strong message to younger women.

Because little Mia spent the first few months of her U.S. life more or less at the law firm, she soon became known as Baby Womble. "The only thing I didn't do was breast-feed at the partners' table," notes Rothenberg.

Apparently, she does do everything else. Besides running the D.C. office and serving as a kind of mentor/den mother to Womble associates, Rothenberg, 48, handles close to a billion dollars' worth of real estate deals annually and seems to have her hand in just about everything. She calls herself "the third-hardest-working lawyer in the firm." What that means, she says, is that her total hours this year—both billable and firm-development work—place her among Womble's three busiest equity partners.

She thrives on activity, she says.

Rothenberg is tiny—4 feet, 10 inches and a size 0—with a hummingbird's darting moves.

She comes across as indefatigable, the kind of person who makes the rest of us feel like lazy slugs. You might resent her, except that she also works very hard at connecting. In the course of a one-hour lunch, she grabs my arm for emphasis four or five times. She makes repeated eye contact. She wants you to like her—and it seems that she won't give up until that happens.

Traditionally, women have not been drawn to the glad-handing, back-slapping, old-boy variety of networking. But Rothenberg has no such hesitation. She tells her associates: "Nothing is more fun than going out to a client meeting and understanding them and having them hire you, being able to communicate what you do."

Rothenberg feels so strongly that women lawyers in particular have not been given useful training in marketing and client development that she's formed a "sales club" at Womble. The club meets every other week to brainstorm about marketing and compare notes on ways to bring in new clients. Rothenberg feels that understanding how to sell your services represents the key to the corporate kingdom.

Ask her more generally how she manages the 45-lawyer D.C. office and she launches into an impassioned speech about the



YES, WE CAN: As a D.C. managing partner and mother of three, Pamela Rothenberg shows associates that career and family aren't incompatible.

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book *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, written by two consultants for the Gallup Organization. The book includes a test that helps people discover their top five strengths. The folks in Womble's D.C. office have been so taken with the test that they've posted their lists of strengths on their office doors, which comes in handy when Rothenberg is rounding up help on a project. "I'll ask, 'Who's futuristic? I need someone for the horizons committee,'" she says.

By now, you might get the idea there are ups and downs to Rothenberg's ability to dip-dip-dip into every last detail of office life. She admits, "People shudder when they get an e-mail from me with the subject line 'I have an idea.'"

Rothenberg says she never actively sought the management role. But when she was offered the job in 2004, she saw it as a chance to shape the direction of the firm, especially for the associates.

"I decided to take this on because I wanted to create an environment that I wanted to work in," she says.

Rothenberg doesn't seem to worry that she might wake up one day and find she has taken on too much. Indeed, it wasn't long after she became managing partner that she learned the long-awaited baby girl was ready for adoption in Guatemala. The timing wasn't ideal, she acknowledges, but she had already made up her mind, so it was just a matter of logistics. "I don't have a problem—I have a challenge," she says.

Why would she go to those lengths for another child when she already has a full plate? It's not the first time she's been asked this question. "I always wanted a big family," she explains, "and I had two kids, and I got old." In other words, rather than having a third biological child, Rothenberg looked into adoption.

She approached it with the same intensity with which she approaches a real estate deal: She read every book she could find on the subject; she decided that she wanted an international adoption; she picked Guatemala. She also brought her two older daughters, now 10 and 12, into the process. The girls were so excited about the prospect of a new baby that they drew pictures in school of the little sister they hadn't yet met.

Even as Rothenberg, her husband, and the two girls set out for Guatemala, Rothenberg didn't slow down. "From the Guatemala City Marriott I closed \$30 million worth of deals," she says. (She notes that her husband, an architect, is "wonderful.")

Back in the States, when the infant landed in the hospital with a case of pneumonia, Rothenberg was lying in the bed by her side. But she was also "negotiating a \$250 million deal."

Lisa Ruddy, a fifth-year Womble associate, says that Rothenberg "makes me feel it would be more manageable to balance a legal career and having a family." Ruddy, 32, doesn't have a family yet, but she says that she knows, when she does have children, "I don't have to hide them in a closet somewhere and pretend I don't have them."

Back when she was trying to imagine how a third, adopted child could fit into her hectic world, Rothenberg says she would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. But then she'd tell herself: "This is my life goal. I cannot not do one of my life goals because this is where we're at."

Balancing Act, a column exploring the lives of women in the law, appears in *Legal Times* each month. Debra Bruno can be contacted at dbruno@alm.com.