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Women executives struggle to balance career, family

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Kristen Green

A morning in the life of Richmond mom Katherine Wintsch looks like this:

From 6:30 to 8 a.m., it's "a clown show, an absolute chaotic mess" as she fusses at Layla, 5, and Alex, 3, from the shower to get up and get dressed in the clothes they picked out the night before. She brushes their teeth, takes orders for breakfast — frozen waffle or pancake? — and tries to get them seated to eat, while packing lunches and signing permission slips for field trips. She throws on everyone's coats and shoes and drives them to school.

Three hours later, Wintsch, a senior vice president at The Martin Agency, is boarding a corporate plane with the company president to pitch a Fortune 100 company in New Jersey. By the time she gets home, still dressed in her navy blue cotton dress with leopard high heels, Layla is asleep and Alex is in pajamas. She climbs into bed with him and tells him a story — she's too tired to



MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

Brushing teeth and fixing hair, Katherine Wintsch gets her children Alex, 3, and Layla, 5, ready for their day.

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Sometimes Wintsch, recently named one of the 30 Most Powerful Women in Advertising by Business Insider, feels like she's not doing either job particularly well. But she loves her work and didn't want to give it up after her children were born.

"I thought about it, and I thought it would be a bad idea," said Wintsch, who uses an au pair for child care. "Even though I have a big, crazy job, I think staying home with an infant would be harder."

The birth of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's first child last month brought a focus to women in powerful positions who are also raising children. Across the Richmond region, women are working as executives in corporations, at nonprofits and government agencies, and at businesses they've founded — from restaurants to furniture stores.

In 2011, women made up 47 percent of the U.S. labor force but held 14 percent of executive officer positions, according to Catalyst, a nonprofit that works to expand opportunities for women in business. U.S. Census figures from 2010 show that women own 30 percent of companies in Virginia, 1 percentage point above the national rate of female business ownership.

One of them is Karen Booth Adams, the Henrico County mother of two teenage girls and CEO of the investment group Hot Technology Holdings, which has founded 10 companies in the Richmond region since 1993. She said balancing life and work is challenging.

"Women really struggle with it because we want to be great parents and we want to be great at the office," Adams said. "You can't be 100 percent in both of those worlds all the time. We're prone to thinking constantly that we're letting one side or the other down when we're not completely focused on both."

Leadership coach Ann Deaton co-founded The Extraordinary Women Leaders Program at Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Corporate Education 18 months ago to provide a safe community for women to develop leadership skills. She said women executives who have children quickly learn they must prioritize.

"They have to say 'no' to some things that they recognize might further their career but that's not going to let them have the balance they want," Deaton said. Some mom executives say no to weekly travel for work, to transfers to other cities, even to their children — they can't attend every single field trip or sporting event.

Jennifer Owens, editorial director of Working Mother Magazine, which has a circulation of 800,000, said that since the New York-based magazine was launched in 1979, the discussion of work flexibility has become more common. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, more than half of companies now offer their employees "flex time" — the ability to start and stop the work day as needed, while others offer job sharing and telecommuting.

"A lot of these options weren't even part of the discussion 27 years ago," Owens

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said.

Judith W. Pahren, a senior vice president of home loans at Capital One and the mother of two daughters, said working for "the right company" enabled her to be a mother and an executive. For the seventh consecutive year, Capital One was named one of 100 Best Companies by Working Mother Magazine.

"I've gotten the right support, and I've gotten a lot of the right tools, too," she said, adding that she can work from anywhere because the company equips its employees with the latest technology.

Pahren, who is the president of the Maymont board of directors, said one of the lessons she learned after having children was that "you better figure out what's important to you and prioritize that."

The other lesson, she said, was that she needed to give herself permission to not be quite so achievement-oriented.

"The person who had the highest bar for me was me," she said.

For The Martin Agency's Wintsch, who describes herself as a workaholic, having children taught her some humility.

When she went on her first maternity leave, she asked The Martin Agency's information technology department to turn off her email because couldn't trust herself not to check it. When she returned to work, she realized the team she supervised had functioned well without her.

"That was a great lesson for me to not continue to work so hard and sacrifice so much," said Wintsch, 35. "It made me realize that I wasn't quite as important as I thought I was."

After having her second child, she decided she needed a more fulfilling role.

"If I'm going to dedicate so much to work, it has to be deeply meaningful to me," she said.

With the encouragement of the agency's heads Mike Hughes and John Adams, she launched a division, the Mom Complex, focused on marketing to moms. While she had been on maternity leave caring for her son, she realized how inaccurately much of television advertising portrayed moms, and she wanted to do something to change that.

Hughes said he is impressed with how much Wintsch gets done.

"There's nobody more effective at their job than a working mom," said Hughes, the company president. "They have to be so organized. ... It's amazing what they can accomplish."

Adrienne Goolsby, who moved to Richmond's South Side this spring to serve as CEO of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, said she set the ground rules when she started: family comes first. The mother of a 9-year-old, she

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builds her work schedule around her daughter's school schedule, from the daily drop off at school to evening swim meets.

"I'm going to do a great job, but I'm also going to be the best mom I can be," she tells her supervisors.

She also makes an extra effort to be organized. On Sundays, Goolsby cooks a week's worth of meals so that when a babysitter picks the third-grader up from school each afternoon, there is healthy food in the refrigerator that she can eat for dinner. Several times a week, Goolsby makes it a point to be home in time to eat dinner with her daughter.

No matter how organized she is, Goolsby, who is divorced, is almost always tired.

"I probably live off of four hours of sleep," she said.

Adams, whose investment group owns three companies and sold four in the past year, said entrepreneurship has offered her flexibility. But she thinks she is the exception, not the rule.

She worked many of the long, hard hours getting start-ups off the ground before getting married and having her daughters, now 13 and 15. She also relied on the support of her husband, who worked as a stay-at-home dad for 15 years while she started and operated a series of companies.

Adams often works from a Starbucks café, and she weaves her work and home life together. She takes one of her daughters to school in the morning before starting her work day. Then she normally has a couple of meetings and a working lunch before heading home to meet her younger daughter as she gets off the school bus.

Adams likes to spend the afternoon driving the 13-year-old to activities, and while she is taking a dance lesson, Adams schedules a quick meeting at a nearby Panera or returns phone calls from her car.

"I've got an iPhone and iPad in play a lot of the time," she said.

But she also makes sure she puts down the mobile devices at dinnertime to connect with her daughters and have family conversations.

"I desperately want to have as many of those in the next few years, before my kids graduate and go off to college, as we can," she said.

For the past 12 years, on New Year's Day, she has made a list of personal and family priorities for the coming year, such as planning a special summer vacation. She regularly pulls out the list to make sure she is accomplishing what she wants for the year and to make sure time doesn't slip away.

Deaton said some mothers find that isolation of work and home is crucial.

"Most people are not happy if they are sitting on the sidelines of a soccer game and texting back to work about how to handle an issue. I do think there's some separation that's valuable so you are fully present in celebrating your child's

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accomplishments while you're there," Deaton said.



The mom executives said they know plenty of women who are in the same boat — working high-powered jobs while raising kids. For Wintsch, that connection to other mothers is crucial.

"If I'm feeling like a bad mom, I just tell another mom. They always make me feel better, typically by telling me they're a worse mom," Wintsch said. "Then we just laugh and move on."

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