

# 5 Life Lessons From Making Partner As A Solo Parent

By **Laranda Walker** (September 19, 2023)

It was October 2016, and life was good.

I was married to my college sweetheart, Chris, and we had two adorable and energetic young boys — John Luke was five and Lincoln was three. I had just completed a clerkship on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit and was looking forward to returning to litigation boutique Susman Godfrey as the first person in firm history to climb from staff attorney to partnership-track associate.



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Because I had practiced law for several years before joining Susman Godfrey, I knew the road ahead would be challenging. The life of a lawyer is demanding; it often comes with unpredictable hours and high stress. Factor in the additional full-time job of parenting two children, and I would be juggling a lot. It wouldn't be easy, but I was excited.

Life took a jolting turn when, just weeks later, in December, Chris passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. I was heartbroken, stunned and unprepared.

In the nearly seven years since losing Chris, I've learned some lessons about getting through hard times while trying to balance my family and career. I share five of those lessons here — not because I have this all figured out. Indeed, I'm still learning. But though we all have unique life journeys, I hope others in the legal profession can gain something from my experience.

## 1. You're stronger than you think.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that you don't really know your strength until it's tested.

I never imagined I would be raising two children alone. And I certainly didn't envision single parenting while practicing high-stakes commercial litigation and pursuing partnership. As I mentioned earlier, the legal profession can be tough and intense. My job requires long hours, regular travel — sometimes with little notice — and trials that can last weeks or even months.

How would I juggle it all on my own? Could I find trustworthy and dependable childcare? Would I be able to give my boys the time and attention they need and deserve? Did I have what it takes to do all this alone?

These are just a few of the many questions that flooded my mind in the days and weeks after Chris died. I had no idea if I could make it work, or even where to start.

What I did know is that I had an amazing career opportunity in front of me — an opportunity that would allow me to not only provide for my children, but to also show them what grit and hard work look like, and how far they can take you.

The next four years were difficult. There were stressful days and restless nights. There were times I felt overwhelmed, inadequate and flat-out exhausted. But thankfully, I didn't give

up. In December 2020, I was elected to my firm's partnership.

I was honored, grateful and relieved. John Luke and Lincoln were ecstatic. They had spent many hours playing with Legos and board games on my office floor while I worked. They had watched me practice oral arguments and opening statements while they ate dinner. As we neared the end, they had counted down the days.

What started as my goal eventually became our goal. We were a team.

As proud as I am to have accomplished this and call myself a partner, I have to be honest: It's still hard at times. I still struggle to find enough hours in the day, and I still wonder how I will get through a particularly stressful week. I still worry that, despite my efforts, I'm not giving enough time to my family or growing my practice quickly enough.

However, coming out on the other side of what seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle allows you to see how resilient you can be. You gain confidence in knowing that even though you don't know how you will get through a particular challenge, you will get through it.

## **2. Community is key to success.**

The second lesson I learned is the importance of community. I am grateful to have an ever-expanding village of folks who encourage and support me and my boys. My parents, brother and in-laws are wonderful; they visit as often as they can and are huge parts of our lives. When work requires me to travel for extended periods of time, my family rearranges their schedules to come from Mississippi to Houston to help care for my boys.

I was also fortunate to find a reliable nanny, Maria, who loves our family and, having been with us for over five years, is now like a third grandmother to my boys. In addition to helping me with practical things like laundry and carpool, Maria's consistent presence provides the flexibility and peace that enable me to stay late in the office when necessary, take potential clients to dinner and travel on the fly.

On top of this, I have friends and colleagues who believe in me, inspire me, and routinely offer help and reassurance. My community has been critical to my success.

## **3. Be honest enough to accept support.**

Third lesson: It's OK to let people help you.

I'll admit that I had to work on being vulnerable and allowing my village to support me. I had to learn that it's sometimes OK — and necessary — to answer, "How are you?" with, "I'm struggling today." I had to learn that, even though I feel guilty about the time I don't get to spend with my children, it's OK to accept a friend's offer to take them for a few hours so that I can focus on a project or, honestly, just hear myself think.

I also believe it's important to find mentors — whether formal or informal — you can trust, and to be honest with them about where you're struggling. It's hard for people to help you if you don't speak up.

When I was an associate, my partner mentor diligently took me to lunch at least once a month and probed to see how I was doing, both at work and at home. If I shared concerns over a case I was working on, she offered practical advice on how to address the issue. If I

mentioned a parenting challenge I was facing, she reassured me by sharing her own experiences.

I would not have benefited as much from that relationship if I had not been willing to lower my guard and allow her to help me.

#### **4. Forgive yourself for not being able to do everything.**

Fourth, I've learned to give myself grace.

Regardless of how hard I fight it, there are only 24 hours in a day, and I can be in just one place at a time. The reality is that I'm not always going to be home for dinner, nor will I be at every single one of my kids' practices or games. But I do my best to be there as much as I can, and I try to be honest with my kids about what I can and cannot do.

I also try to accommodate the things that may seem insignificant to me, but really matter to my boys.

For example, it's important to John Luke and Lincoln that I, rather than our nanny, drive them to school in the mornings. I would never have guessed that a four-minute car ride would be so meaningful. But there's something about the consistency of that morning mile that makes them feel safe and loved. So, unless I'm traveling or have an earlier-than-usual meeting, I drive them to school.

#### **5. Focus on gratitude.**

Lastly, I discovered the importance of practicing gratitude. No matter how badly I'd like to be someone who pops out of bed high-spirited and raring to go, I'm just not. I typically wake up tired, wondering where the night went, and at least a little bit anxious about what the day will bring.

I've found that gratitude is an antidote to my anxiety. As I lie there trying to force my feet from the bed to the floor, I reflect on a handful of the many things I'm grateful for: my kids, my home, my health, my job. I try to shift my thinking from, "I have to get out of bed" to "I'm able to get out of bed." Instead of, "I have to go to work," I try to think, "I get to go to work."

These are just a few of the lessons I have learned while navigating life as a single working mom. The next person's journey may be similar to mine, or it may be completely different. But what's important is to approach the journey knowing that although the ride may be bumpy, uncertain and even scary, you'll come through with a better sense of who you are and that you have what it takes to tackle whatever comes your way.

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