

A tale of two mothers

by Elizabeth Fitzsimons

Their mothers worked, and so would they. These two women went to college, studied hard and charged into careers, riding a trajectory of success that surprised no one who knew them.

Eventually each married, and had a child.

A MOM'S CHOICE - Carla Slater Kettrick plays with her daughter Danielle, 21 months, at their home in El Cajon, Calif. Kettrick had been an electrical engineer before she decided to become a stay-at-home mom. CNS Photo by Dan Trevan. Then their paths diverged. One left the work force, devoting herself to mothering. The other is balancing motherhood with her work outside the home.

Two mothers, two choices. Each has found that her decision brings its own challenges, though neither regrets having made it.

Many mothers don't have the luxury of choosing; they must have jobs to provide for their families. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in May that 70.9 percent of all mothers were part of the nation's work force last year, down from a peak of 72.3 percent in 2000. The participation rate of married mothers was 68.6 percent in 2006.

Carla Slater Kettrick, 40, of El Cajon, Calif., is one of the ones who left.

At 35, Kettrick was an electrical engineer, traveling across the country and around the world, making more money than her husband.

Then she got pregnant, and soon realized that her work wouldn't be compatible with a baby. "I never thought I'd be a stay-at-home mom," said Kettrick.

She knew, though, that she couldn't be a happy mother if she was away from her children. Carmen is 4; Danielle, 21 months. A third child is due in October.

"You feel the pressure to perform at work, you feel the pressure to perform at home and in your marriage," she said.

Kim Kennedy of Coronado, Calif., felt similar pressures, but decided she couldn't be happy if her life revolved only around home.

Both women were raised by mothers who worked long hours at their jobs. Kettrick's mother wonders whether her daughter eventually will miss working.

FINDING THEIR ROLES

Kettrick freelances Web development work when she has time. At 4 p.m. Monday, her house was unusually quiet. Carmen and Danielle were napping. Soon Carmen was up, dropping toys from the second-story landing. Her little sister then awoke and Kettrick carried her, sleepily nuzzling her mother's neck, downstairs.

The three then headed into the kitchen for their post-nap ritual: juice and a snack.

Before Kettrick married Mitch, also an engineer, she owned her own home. Saying goodbye to her income and independence was a blow to her ego, as well as a financial adjustment. She and Mitch no longer could spend money as they had, and they started to worry about paying the bills.

They argued about the chores, about who should get up in the middle of the night to care for the baby. By the time Danielle was born, they had settled into new roles, understanding each other's contributions and expectations.

Having left her career, Kettrick decided she had better be a good mother. Some nights she lies awake, replaying the day's events and wondering whether she handled them right.

Kettrick's mother, Jean Slater, 70, of Kearny, Ariz., never thought Kettrick would be a stay-at-home mom, either.

"She had such a work ethic about her, such a push. I thought ... she would be a professional for the rest of her life," Slater said.

Then she saw Kettrick with Carmen, and what a nurturing mother her daughter had become.

"It didn't surprise me that she wanted to stay home," Slater said.

Still, she wonders if Kettrick will someday miss the thrill of workplace competition.

Slater was the first in her immediate family to go to college. Upon graduating, she became a nurse, in a clinic, then a school. There was a lot of rushing around among work, extracurricular activities and the family's auto-parts store.

"She didn't have the personality to stay home and do the projects with the kids," Kettrick said of her mother. "She's not the one who sits and plays jacks with you. She prefers to be out there with the adults."

FINDING PATIENCE

Kim Kennedy is a mother who does both.

Kennedy, 42, is the director of marketing and communications for the Rady School of Management at the University of California San Diego and the mother of two: Grace, 4, and Miles, 5.

Before taking the job at the university a year ago, she was head of communications at Deutsche Bank in London, where she managed 207 employees around the world. Kennedy spent a week a month in New York, and traveled to Germany every two weeks.

Despite her success, the corporate world wasn't where Kennedy wanted to spend the rest of her professional life. So she persuaded her architect husband, Patrick, to move to his hometown, San Diego.

"My job was extremely stressful, and I don't think I realized how stressful it was until I left," Kennedy said. "We never had a full-time nanny. I'm a complete control freak and I didn't want to outsource my kids."

At Rady, she puts in up to 45 hours a week at the office, answers e-mails from home between 5:30 and 6 a.m., and works more after the children go to bed.

Growing up, Kennedy never wanted to be married and living in the suburbs, shuttling her kids to soccer in a Volvo. She wanted more.

Now, her greatest challenge is finding patience when she is being pulled in different directions. When the children want to play, dinner needs to be cooked and there is laundry piling up.

"It's giving everything the right amount of attention," Kennedy said. "I always think I can do it better if I had the time to do it."

She knows, though, that she wouldn't feel fulfilled if she gave up her job, or had a career without children.

Wednesday afternoon, Kennedy left the conference she had organized - featuring a Nobel laureate in economics - and returned to her office to finish some work. The walls were bare, but on the board over her work space she had tacked enlarged photos of Grace and Miles.

She soon was out the door, behind the wheel of her Volvo station wagon (yes, she ended up with a Volvo).

At Mission Bay Montessori Academy in San Diego, Grace spotted her mother and ran into her open arms. Grace then pulled Kennedy to her classroom, where her artwork was on the wall.

Then it was back in the car to Francis Parker School for Miles, who when he spotted his mother darted into a classroom and playfully hid behind a desk.

The three then went to the school library to read a couple of books before heading home. They typically arrived two hours after Kennedy left the office.

BALANCE IS THE ANSWER

Kennedy's mother wonders whether her daughter is being challenged enough at work.

JoAnne Kennedy is the chief executive officer of John W. Kennedy Co. Inc., a petroleum equipment supplier based in Rhode Island, where Kim Kennedy and her sister and brother were raised.

JoAnne Kennedy took over the business when her husband died. She knew nothing about petroleum equipment supply. For the first two years, she read nothing but trade journals.

By the fourth year, she found her footing, hired a good accountant and put the business on a computer system. It grew from one branch to five, from 17 employees to 77.

JoAnne never pushed Kim Kennedy to pursue one career over another, just to follow her interests.

"I don't think she had a view of what successful was," Kim Kennedy said.

"She was actually in some ways enlightened. She felt that if you had enough experience working in high school and college it would find its even level."

Kennedy seems to have found that even level. And so has Kettrick. Two mothers, two choices, both balancing the often competing desires and demands experienced by millions of mothers - and probably their daughters, too.

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