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Philly MAMA Brings Brown Bags and Play Dates to the Law

Gina Passarella

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For as much as she enjoyed them, Console Law Offices' Laura Mattiacci felt something was missing from the women in the profession committees at the various bar associations.

Either the women didn't have children or they were looking for flex-time programs — nothing that fit the employment law litigator's circumstances.

So Mattiacci, mother to a 1-year-old son, set out to search the Internet for groups of women lawyers who were full-time moms and full-time attorneys. The closest thing she found was 3,000 miles away in Seattle.

MAMAS, or Mother Attorneys Mentoring Association of Seattle, couldn't adopt her into their program, but they did offer to help her start what is now Philly MAMA.

Mattiacci sent out an e-mail to women lawyers she knew who had children, and soon she, Erin P. Gill of Flaster Greenberg's Cherry Hill, N.J., office and Natalie D'Amora of Dilworth Paxson were the start of Philly MAMA.

The group isn't nearly as formal as the one in Seattle, where there is a nonprofit connected to the 350-member association and an annual fundraiser. But it is growing, with about 10 attorneys from large firms and small firms, defense firms and plaintiffs firms, who met throughout the summer for brown-bag lunches and play dates with their kids.

Once a month, the group holds a brown-bag lunch, typically at one of the member's firms, to discuss the personal challenges they face by being full-time, working mothers. They also get together each month on a weekend at a member's house or at a park to have play dates with their kids — something they don't get to do during the week. The first brown-bag lunch was at Console Law Offices and the next one, scheduled for Oct. 7, will be at Flaster Greenberg's Philadelphia office.

The goal, Gill said, is to become a little more organized and bring in speakers a few times a year to discuss how they achieved success in both the law and in motherhood. Philly MAMA is also looking to have a program geared toward women lawyers who are thinking about having kids but unsure about how to balance a career and home life.

"There's a lot of things that we feel like we have to overcome or overcompensate," Gill said. "Whether it's actual or not, it's just a personal struggle."

Most of the attorneys in the group have come from larger firms. Gill joined Flaster Greenberg a year ago after spending two years at Morgan Lewis & Bockius. She said both firms were always very supportive and made the fact that she had three kids almost a non-issue. It's the individual looks she gets when she leaves earlier to get home for dinner with her kids that sometimes make her feel isolated from the women or men without children.

Gill had her first child, now 3 years old, right before law school, her 2-year-old while at Morgan Lewis, and four months ago gave birth to her third child. When she left to go to Flaster Greenberg, Gill said she got a lot of comments that she must be looking to slow down or work fewer hours at a smaller firm because of her kids. She said being a mother had nothing to do with her decision to switch firms. And when she had her third child, many questioned whether she was coming back at all.

Gill's husband is a litigator. They have the same job, she said, but he has never been asked those questions. While she said she understands that type of perception is just history and the way things have often operated, the individual perceptions of her peers can often weigh on her.

"This group makes you feel like you're not isolated," Gill said. "You're not a bad mom for wanting to have a career and make something of your professional life and also be a good mom."

The first meeting was a comfort for Mattiacci, too.

"The first time I walked out I felt a relief almost that, 'OK, I'm not alone, there are other people like this,'" she said.

Right now, Philly MAMA is using the Web site www.bigtent.com, a site that hosts a number of mothers groups. Philly MAMA has its own spot on the site where discussions can be held, meetings can be scheduled and contact information can be stored. The group doesn't have its own Web site yet and is thinking about creating a page on Facebook to further promote the association.

The discussions cover everything from day care to decorators and flex-time technology at their firms. Gill likened Philly MAMA to a support group for women looking to get past this personal struggle of balancing the career, motherhood and the perception.

"For me, I don't want it to be either or, and it shouldn't be, I don't think," she said.

The balancing act can be tough logistically, but like anything else in life, she just has to balance what's on her plate, Gill said. She said she just hopes her children will be proud of what she has done both professionally and personally.

For anyone interested in joining Philly MAMA, contact Mattiacci at mattiacci@consolelaw.com. •