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WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Following Their Hearts

* Four moms at the top of their professions explain how they reconciled family and career.

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It takes a lot to become a professor at Stanford University or a top entertainment reporter for a major TV network, or to isolate genes in one of the country's leading laboratories or to make partner in a Big Five accounting firm.

It takes even more to give up such a career.

Yet that's the kind of choice high-achieving women confront when they have children. Today, thanks to decades of advancement in women's rights and education, more women than ever are reaching the upper echelons of their professions. But when those women also happen to be mothers, the pull between career and home can be wrenching.

"Women in this predicament feel doomed either way they go, and the better the career, the harder the choice," said Carol Lindquist, a Laguna Beach psychotherapist writing a book on the effect of children on marriage. "For many, their career is their passion and identity.

"If these women choose to continue working, some view them as selfish and as not good mothers. If the woman gives up a flourishing career, some view them as career lightweights or as wasting the education society invested in them."

According to a 1999 survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 72% of all mothers with children younger than 18 work. Among mothers with children younger than 6, 64% are in the work force. The statistics have risen 5% and 6%, respectively, since 1992.

In California, the numbers are lower. As of 1999, 66% of women with children younger than 18 were in the work force, as were 56% of mothers

with children younger than 6.

"Much of a woman's decision depends on her developmental stage," Lindquist said. "Her age and whether she's accomplished what she's set out to do in her career have a bearing."

Studies that compare the kids of moms who work to those of moms who don't indicate that there's no significant difference between those children. But what do women gain when they walk away from hard-won careers for their children? What do they lose? Can they ever, really, have it all? And, if so, at what price?

To examine these questions, The Times spoke with four women who fit a rather rarefied profile: accomplished and fortunate, with high-profile careers and prospering husbands. We selected these women because they had the luxury of choice; they could afford to quit their jobs, unlike many single mothers and others who have to work to support their families. When finances are subtracted from the equation, the decision to work or stay home can be even more difficult. While each of the following women came to a different conclusion about her future, each followed her heart to find the best solution.

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Pamela Thomson, 43, Sherman Oaks

Mother of two: Casey, 6, and Jillian, 4

Former entertainment reporter for a local affiliate of ABC-TV

Pamela Thomson had a job that most people would kill for. She'd go to movie screenings two or three times a week and, on weekends, interview the likes of Tom Cruise, Sharon Stone and Harrison Ford. As an entertainment reporter for ABC, she got paid to tell the world what she thought of these movies and these people. Sure, she worked 60-plus hours a week, but it was so much fun she hardly noticed.

"It was a great job when I was single and even when I was married with no kids," said Thomson, who quit a little more than three years ago, after her second child was born. "I found myself going off to interview Mel Gibson on a Saturday at the Four Seasons thinking, 'But wait, I have these kids at home I haven't seen all week.' And suddenly it wasn't so fun."

After trying to go part time, eventually she just quit.

"The decision was very tough," she admitted.

In the months that followed, particularly those days when she was overwhelmed by diapers and crying kids, she often found herself questioning her decision.

"My husband would come home and talk about a great new deal, and I'd feel so jealous," she said.

Fortunately, her husband, Paul Apel, is part-owner of New Wave Entertainment, a Burbank-based movie marketing company that just took off. While its success took away the financial sting of her decision on the family finances, it did not compensate for her loss of identity.

"I completely identified myself as a TV reporter. I'd been on TV since college and almost every day since I was 21. I had to ask, 'Who am I if I'm not on TV?' "

But as she got involved with her children's preschool, their activities and a few charities, those issues resolved themselves fairly quickly.

"You have to reinvent yourself," she said. "I now say, 'OK, I'm a mom, and I help in the schools and with these charities, like Big Sisters of Los Angeles, and I'm really good at this.' "

She also "flips fixers"--that is, she buys houses that need make-overs, fixes them up and resells them. She has done three so far. It's a profitable pastime with hours she can control, but not nearly as high profile as her former life.

"I don't miss the glamour," she said. "I do miss going to the office and talking to other adults, but I find it's so much more worthwhile to be home with my kids."

As for another career when her children are older, she said, "I could definitely foresee something. I'm not sure what, but it will be an entirely new chapter."

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Paula Croutch, 38, Marina del Rey

Mother of two: Andrew, 2, and Ryan, 9 months

Partner, Arthur Andersen

Making partner is the ultimate achievement in the accounting world. It's the Holy Grail, the brass ring.

After graduating at the top of her class from Cal State Northridge in 1984, Paula Croutch took a job in the L.A. office of Arthur Andersen, one of the world's Big Five accounting firms. Twelve dedicated years later, she made partner.

That same year she got pregnant.

"While I was pregnant, I worried a lot about my job and how I was going to manage," recalled Croutch, who lives in Marina del Rey with her husband and their two sons. "I knew it would be difficult to give up work, but even more difficult to stay home."

It wasn't the money. Croutch's husband, Todd, is a partner in a law firm and could easily support the family, although the loss of her salary probably would mean a smaller house and less savings for college and retirement.

The real issue was personal fulfillment.

"I really enjoy my career and what I'm doing in this era of business," said Croutch, who works with closely held e-commerce and dot-com companies helping them to get financing, go public and develop business strategies. "It's a very exciting time to do what I do."

Working also gives her a sense of personal security.

"When I was 15, my parents divorced and my mom didn't know where to start to support herself," she said. "I decided I never wanted to depend on someone else in that way."

When each child was born, Croutch worked from home a bit, then returned full time after eight weeks.

"I went through stages when I felt guilty, but I feel that the time I spend with my kids is quality time. I'm 100% devoted to them when I'm home," said Croutch, who has a live-in nanny and a housekeeper.

And when she walks in the door at 6:30 (she goes to work at 8 a.m.), she puts work aside.

"No matter how hard my day was, nothing else matters," Croutch said.

Are there days when the balancing gets to be too much and she just wants to bag her job? In fact, no.

"I wouldn't be happy with myself. I wouldn't be fulfilled. And I wouldn't be bringing anything more to my children by being home full time," Croutch said. "I'm as good a mother as the next woman is, and I trust my gut. I know inside that this is the right thing, and my boys are not neglected in any way. It's not a bad thing for a mother to want something for herself."

The hard part, Croutch admitted, is believing you're doing well at home and at work.

"I like to be an 'A' player at work. That's hard when someone is home with a 103-degree fever." But fevers come before clients, she said. That's one of her ground rules, which, she said, are essential to making the balance work. And quitting time is quitting time. What others stay late to finish she brings home and does while the kids are in bed.

Croutch said she also is gratified to know that her example has helped others at her firm.

"A lot of this I had to figure out on my own," she said. "Now I'm a mentor for other women and men who have spouses who work and young families, who are also trying for balance."

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Nannette Yount, 38, San Juan Capistrano

Mother of two: David, 3, and Katie, 1

Former postdoctoral research fellow at UC Irvine

Nannette Yount was the classic overachiever: an only child fulfilling the dreams of a genius father who never went to college but who raised Yount to believe life wasn't worth anything if you weren't contributing to the academic world.

After graduating from college with a degree in biochemistry, she got a full scholarship to earn her doctorate, a time she recalls as the most intellectually exciting in her life. She then came to UCI as a postdoctoral fellow--and met her future husband, David Weaver, an architect. She was 34. He was 10 years older and had had a vasectomy, which was OK with her because she wanted the companionship of marriage but wasn't interested in children.

Then he was. They argued over reversing the vasectomy, and she consoled herself with the thought that it probably wouldn't work. But it did. She worked through her pregnancy and was completely geared up to return to work after the baby was born. There was a new grant and the promise of a faculty position she'd long been wanting.

But as her maternity leave ended, she realized, "I'd fallen madly in love with this baby, and every time I even thought about hiring child care, I had an extreme visceral reaction. I felt I would throw up."

She followed her heart and resigned, a move that stunned everyone.

"No one could believe the change in Nannette," she said. "My husband wasn't so thrilled. He had high hopes for me as a breadwinner. He also loved saying, 'This is my wife, the molecular biologist.' "

The worst problem was the isolation she experienced.

"At work I used to talk to lots of students, other postdocs and professors. I went from 30 stimulating conversations a day to zero and thought I was going to lose my mind."

Then she read an article about Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge, a national organization for women who have left or curtailed careers to raise children. Since the organization didn't have a chapter in Orange County, she founded one.

"We had 15 women at the first meeting, and I met a bunch of other women in exactly the same boat. We were all confronting isolation, loss of identity, and loss of income and were really questioning our decisions," she said.

Yount, whose second child was born 21 months ago, now works 16 hours a week, down from 60. She teaches upper-division biology at Cal State Long Beach and spends the rest of the time in the lab at Harbor/UCLA Medical Center, where she's helping to write a National Institutes of Health grant and working on new antibiotics to fight drug-resistant bacteria and fungi.

"I used to say I'm a scientist and I also have two children. Now I say, I'm a mom and I also work part time."

Her pay is less than 10% of what it was, and since she lost her benefits and her husband is self-employed, they must pay for medical insurance. But they are managing.

"Before kids, I used to wonder about the meaning of life," she said. "I don't wonder anymore. It's about creating an energy that keeps perpetuating itself and doesn't stop with you."

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Christy Telch, 46, Palo Alto

Mother of four: Aaron, 15, stepdaughters Emily, 13, and Jordanna, 12, and James, 6 months

Assistant professor of psychiatry, Stanford University

Christy Telch has experienced motherhood just about every way possible: as a working married mom, as a single mom, as a stepmom and soon as a stay-at-home mom. The birth of her second biological child, 15 years after her first, has prompted the Stanford University assistant professor to resign her prestigious post. She will be leaving in March.

When her first child was born, Telch was 31 and had just finished her doctorate in psychology at Stanford. She took a six-month break and then returned to the university.

"I still remember my first day. I propped an 8-by-10 of my baby on my desk, then put my head down and cried. That's pretty much how I went through the day."

But quitting a job she had worked years to attain was not in her plan.

"I'm a straight-A kind of person. I'm focused, intense, love learning and love classes," Telch said. "Getting my PhD and working in academics gave me everything I wanted. I could do research, see patients, teach. I could do it all. The problem was that's a lot, and it got to be a lot at my own and my family's expense."

In 1988, when her son was 4, her marriage fell apart and her career demands increased.

"Things got tougher as a single mom, and it was hard to feel I was doing both things [mothering and working] well, even though I was, at the expense of my own personal exhaustion."

She says she feels she made the right decision then.

"I also felt that, after all my education, to not do something

meaningful to help human beings would have been a waste," she said.

Telch is well-known for her groundbreaking work on eating disorders, and her treatment programs are used throughout the country.

She remarried in 1995 and gained two stepdaughters, who were 8 and 9 at the time, and who live with the couple part time.

"I was always aware that my family was being sacrificed for my career. While that produced sadness and conflict, I was so used to the career path, I didn't often stop to see how it was all going," Telch said. Then, at 43, she started feeling deeply that she wanted another baby.

"I was aware of my age and also aware that the best thing that ever happened to me was not on my vitae and that was the birth of my son, Aaron. I thought, 'Here I am married to a man I'd really like to have children with, and maybe I've missed the boat.'

"I began to wonder whether I was being carried downstream by the grants and all my publications, or whether these were choices I really wanted to make."

Thus, the birth of James Robert, when Telch was 46, was very much planned. Even so, she didn't expect he would affect her career too much.

"I figured I'd take six months off, then go back to work like I did with Aaron."

Instead, she resigned.

Her husband, Bob Forman, who is president of a printing company, fully supported her decision, which was not without a significant financial impact. For example, Stanford would have paid half of the tuition to Stanford, or the equivalent to any other college or university, for her four children for four years. She also gave up a generous retirement plan.

Why give that up now? Because that's the woman she is today.

"I remember thinking with Aaron, 'If only I could be two people.' Well, in a way, this baby gives me the chance to be that other person." She plans to start a private practice. "I'll let the practice grow as James grows and experience other opportunities as they come."

The difficulty women have, she said, sounding more like a therapist than a mother, is knowing themselves.

"That's not a simple thing, because it can be dangerous. You could discover that who you are is in conflict with who others want you to be. This is why many women wind up in therapy."

The baby triggered that soul-searching in Telch.

"He just reopened my awareness and made me ask, 'Who am I versus what do I believe others want me to be?' "

Support for Mothers on the Edge

The 12-year-old Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge has 175 chapters nationwide and a growing membership of more than 7,000 women. At the twice-monthly chapter meetings, women confront shared issues stemming from isolation; loss of income, identity and prestige; the impact kids have on marital roles at home; and even how to reenter the work force when kids are older.

For more information about the group, log on to <http://www.femalehome.org>. To find the chapter nearest you or to start your own, call (800) 223-9399.

Determining Your Stay-at-Home Quotient

In a new book, "Women in Career & Life Transitions" (Jist Publishing, 2000), psychologist and mother Sandy Anderson offers new or expectant mothers a quiz they can take to see whether they will be happier working, staying at home or creating some sort of part-time or home-based business.

Answer yes or no. The first answer that strikes you is likely to be your true feeling.

* Do you dread spending long periods of time on your own without adult interaction?

* Do you have support from others who will help with child care, or are you willing to pay someone to care for your child while you work?

* Do you thrive in environments where you're constantly learning and seeking new information?

* Will your employer work with you to create a flexible work arrangement to help you meet your new demands (e.g., job sharing, part-time work, telecommuting)?

* Which would you rather have more of--time or money?

If you answered no to at least two of the first four questions and answered "time" to the fifth question, you'll probably be happier staying home with your baby.

If you answered yes to at least two of the first four questions and answered "money" to question 5, you'll probably be happier if you continue to work after you have your baby.

If you don't want to work full time, talk to your employer about flexible work options or consider a home-based business.

PHOTO: Christy Telch of Palo Alto snuggles with her 6-month-old son, James, one of her four children. She left her teaching position at Stanford.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

PHOTO: Pamela Thomson of Sherman Oaks, a former TV entertainment reporter with an ABC affiliate, gave up her job to stay home with Jillian, 4, left, and Casey, 6. Thomson said her work was fun before she had kids, but then it lost its charm.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: KEN HIVELY / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Paula Crutch, left, of Marina del Rey, a partner with an accounting firm, chats in her L.A. office. The mother of two works full time because this is "a very exciting time" in her career and because her job gives her a sense of personal security.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Nannette Yount of San Juan Capistrano, a mother of two, gave up her job as a research fellow at UC Irvine but went back to work part time.

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