

opinion

How to Navigate a Two-Lawyer Household

BY CHAD GOLDER

JUSTICE RUTH BADER GINSBURG IS A PATHMAKER, a cultural icon known as “The Notorious R.B.G.” The U.S. Supreme Court justice was a law student when women constituted only 3 percent of lawyers in the United States and co-founder of the ACLU Women’s Rights Project and the leading advocate for gender equality.

Any one of these trailblazing achievements would be enough to explain why Ginsburg is a hero in my home—and why my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter has the T-shirts to prove it. But Ginsburg is a legal waypaver for another reason: While I do not have the data to support this hunch, I would guess that Justice Ginsburg and her late husband Marty Ginsburg were among the first two-lawyer families in the bar. Their story provides inspiration to today’s two-lawyer families. And boy do we need it.

My wife and I do not have all the answers about how to survive as a two-lawyer family. On most days, it feels like we have none of them. Almost every morning, one of us is struggling to make breakfast for our daughter before her nanny-share buddy arrives, while the other is 20 minutes late getting ready for work or frantically trying to respond to an urgent email that came in over night.

Almost every evening, we are trying to balance brief-writing with bedtime. Add to this unexpected



work travel, a snow day, or any other crisis that can throw off our best-laid routines, and the baseline stresses that come with being a lawyer skyrocket. Perhaps this is why I’m either totally ill-equipped or perfectly situated to write this column.

I also know that we are not alone in this experience. Whether it is shared tolerance for argument or a love of scintillating dinner table conversation about stare decisis, lawyers just seem to marry other lawyers. Many of our friends and law school classmates are part of two-lawyer families. Nearly three-quarters of the lawyers in my small law office have a spouse or significant other who is a lawyer. According to several recent annual U.S. Census Bureau surveys, lawyers

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are disproportionately likely to marry other lawyers. I'd bet that a good number of those reading this column are part of a two-lawyer family. So, like my wife and me, you might benefit from some advice from the Ginsburgs:

"I think that the most important thing I have done is to enable Ruth to do what she has done." (NPR) Although this quote is obviously Marty Ginsburg's, Justice Ginsburg felt the same way about her husband, who was a leading tax lawyer and law professor. What I take from this quote is that two-lawyer families thrive when each spouse

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views himself or herself as an enabler of the other's success. We need not reach the pinnacle of our fields like Justice Ginsburg and her husband; all of us might flourish just a little more at the workplace and at home if we treat the other's work as important as our own.

"In the course of a marriage, one accommodates the other." (*The Rachel Maddow Show*) Justice Ginsburg's pearl of wisdom is a corollary to her husband's advice about enabling your spouse's success. Any member of a two-lawyer family will tell you that one person will have to bend his or her schedule from time to time, or even make a major life decision so that the other can follow a dream. As Justice Ginsburg explained, she was the primary caretaker when Marty Ginsburg was trying to make partner at his law firm, and, knowing how important her work was, Marty Ginsburg stepped up when she started up

the ACLU Women's Rights Project. We can all agree that, having accommodated the other at different times in their careers, life turned out pretty well for both of them.

"Early on in our marriage, it became clear to him that cooking was not my strong suit. ... Marty made the kitchen his domain and became chef supreme in our home." (*The New York Times*) Lawyers often think they can do everything themselves. Few of us delegate well at the office, and too many bring that quality home. Justice Ginsburg's quote reminds us that it can be best to divide and conquer—and certainly to not assume where certain responsibilities rest. There will always be too much to do and too little time to do it. Find your domain and share the load. Some of us might even eat better because of it.

In all seriousness, our profession has not systematically grappled with the rise in two-lawyer families. Many issues facing two-lawyer families warrant closer attention. For example, do certain recusal rules make sense as more and more attorneys choose to spend their lives together? In a profession where lawyers suffer from substance abuse issues at twice the national rate, do particular concerns arise when there are two lawyers at home? Do law firm policies adequately address two-lawyer families? Our profession should think hard about questions like these. Until then, we members of two-lawyer families should always remember Marty Ginsburg's wise words: "I have been supportive of my wife since the beginning of time, and she has been supportive of me. It's not sacrifice; it's family."

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