

Dear ThirdPath Community,

This month's update highlights another wonderful family and how they made their way to an "integrated" work-family solution. Once again, this story illustrates how family decisions – and Shared Care - can be a significant part of making wider change possible.

Soon after becoming new parents, Michael and Renée learned their child had special needs. Because of this unexpected situation, the couple learned to think in new ways at home. They were also able to develop new solutions at work. And ultimately they discovered that although the couple had never imagined that Michael would play as significant a role in their care giving solution as he does, once the Shared Care pattern was established, neither parent could ever imagine doing anything different.

What we continue to see in the work we do -- whether listening to our Pioneering Leaders Group discuss the possibilities of redesigning leadership jobs to create more time for family, or learning from the mothers and fathers in working class communities who have always relied on two incomes to make ends meet -- is how much the well-being of our families is a significant motivator for change - both for men and women.

Of course, both organizational and public policy change will be required in order to make integrated work-life solutions an option for everyone. But the pioneering men and women who are making these solutions a reality today are already paving the way for the rest of us.

With Thanksgiving just past, we wanted to give our thanks to all of the pioneering men and women who have played such a powerful role in making change possible. Without you, and the brave decisions you have made at home and in the workplace, our work at ThirdPath would not be possible.

Thank you one and all ... And best wishes this holiday season,
Jessica and Hanne

Michael and Renée – Managing a Crisis by Redesigning Work and Home

Michael and Renée were faced with an unforeseeable crisis as young parents, when a few months into their new roles, their daughter was diagnosed with epilepsy. After removing Madison from daycare, they realized that they would need someone to provide both the daily care for Madison, as well as to shuttle her to her various therapies. "Her medical situation was very extreme," says Renée. In order to handle the situation, Renée immediately took a six-month leave from work.

Trying to fit this unforeseen situation into their original work-family plan was also difficult. Initially, Michael and Renée looked to hire a nanny but they got a lot of uninterested applicants, and, as Michael notes, "We were not in a position to pay more to make the job more attractive." During this time Renée also realized, "I always wanted to work at least part-time. I did not necessarily imagine myself being an at-home mom."

She also began to notice how Michael could be a key person to share the care-giving role with. “Some men are just natural with kids.”

Mulling over these facts, Renée began shaping a “crazy idea.” Perhaps together the two parents could provide the special care that Madison required. Within days the plan to Share Care then became, explains Michael, “not a question of: should we do this? It became, *can* we do this?”

Career Choices that Support Family Choices

Flexibility is the watchword in this arrangement. Renée’s job as a program analyst for the government and Michael’s job as the managing editor of a website for a division of a major corporation is what really makes this system go. The couple benefits from the fact that each employer has flexible programs. Renée works three-quarters time starting at 7 a.m. each day, while Michael works full-time from 1:30 – 10 p.m.

Since Renée is at work by 7 each morning, Michael has the task of getting the kids off and running. Madison’s therapies are from 8-9 a.m., and she must be at pre-kindergarten by 9:30 a.m. Meanwhile, the couple’s two-year old son, Nicholas, is with Michael two mornings, and on Monday, Wednesday and Friday he is in pre-school. This last part is a relatively new wrinkle in the schedule that finds Michael with an embarrassment of riches. “With Nicholas in pre-school a couple of mornings, I will have some free time, and unfortunately, Renée will have none,” Michael confesses.

School ends for Madison at 1 p.m., as it does for Nicholas on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, just in time for Renée to pick them up after work. That is when the parents shift roles, as Renée cares for them starting at about 1:30 and Michael begins his workday. Despite the stress that can come from a busy day, both parents manage to keep a sense of humor. “The afternoons can be stressful...naptime, unwinding...I tease him that he gets them when they are fresher,” Renée jokes.

A Crisis Reaps Unintended Benefits

Although Michael and Renée fashioned this Shared Care solution as a means of getting the additional care for Madison that her health required, there have been several unintended benefits. To begin with this arrangement has allowed them *both* to actively care for their children and to maintain their career paths.

In addition, Michael takes Madison to the various therapies that help her deal with the physical difficulties caused by her epilepsy. “It has been very important for us to be there for that,” says Renée. In addition, Michael gets to spend time directly with Nicholas, something he has learned to cherish in his work-family arrangement. It is time that the two can spend at the swimming pool, at the park or even just hanging out. “It is a magical time with him,” Michael beams.

“I initially had some concerns and guilt,” Renée admits, “but with Michael being the one home, I felt absolutely comfortable. It was a big relief.”

However there are other benefits the children have gained, that neither Michael nor Renée expected. “We play differently and we interact differently, which is no different than other parents, except that we both get to spend significant amounts of time with them,” Michael explains. “She will paint with them, and I would prefer not to make the mess...I excel at the typical dad stuff,” he adds while laughing.

Housework has also been affected by their approach to Shared Care. “There is a specific division based on interest. I do the cooking because I like it. I may start the laundry in the morning, and Renée may fold it later. I cook dinner while Nicholas naps, and we reheat it later,” explains Michael. The division of household labor has reaped unintended benefits at work, too. “I have learned not to avoid the unpleasant tasks because they are things you simply have to do, and if you put them off they get worse. Laundry is a really silly example, but if you do not just get it done, it becomes a bigger problem.”

Since flexing their schedules they have both continued to get good reviews, and Michael has even gotten a promotion. “Everyone on my team telecommutes,” Michael notes. “We’re all over the country so we never meet in person.” In addition, they both feel that part of their success has come from an increased ability to focus on their highest priority work, and look for ways to eliminate less important work. Michael also adds that the routine quiet time he has built into his workday has a huge positive impact. “When a majority of my colleagues have left for the day, I still have three or four hours to go. I get no phone calls and only a few e-mails during that time, so I can really concentrate on my projects,” says Michael.

New Families Face the Challenge of Time

Despite these benefits, Michael and Renée can see that there are still some things they would like to change. For example, the toughest part of their daily life is that they would like to have more time as a couple. “I like to think that couples with more traditional schedules have more time to talk, but that is probably not true, and they are just as frazzled as we are,” explains Michael.

Michael also acknowledges a few work-related challenges. “Renée really can never work overtime.” He also points out that because his workday does not begin until 1:30pm, it creates some unique difficulties when delivering projects. “I have to be sure that, no matter how tired I am at the end of the day, I have delivered whatever my colleagues need to work on the following day. If I don’t finish something, I won’t be able to get it until 1:30 the next day; that means not finishing it until near the end of their days.” Michael also faces some limitations regarding early morning conference calls and work-related travel. Renée agrees, “We have sort of been on hold because we do not travel or do overtime.”

However, all of these issues will likely become less problematic as the family transitions to having two school-age children. Once both children are in school, Michael and Renée will be able to revise their schedules, allowing each of them to have a few full days of work, and just as importantly, creating some time together for each other as a couple.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Michael clearly sees that in a strange way the difficult times Renée and he were forced to manage, led to some wonderful changes in their lives – both for himself and for Renée. Michael hopes that one day his children will realize, “Most dads are not home this much.” He continues, “I work at home and they can both come in and show me something that is important to them. At some point I hope they feel lucky about the time that I get to spend with them. I know I do.” Renée adds, “we are the most ‘together’ family we know.”

In summing up their situation, Michael concludes, “We were driven by pragmatic need; we needed to do what was best for Madison at the time, and this was it. If it weren’t for that, I don’t think we ever would have done Shared Care. And I would have really missed out. ... I would never, ever have wanted Madison to be sick, but we have taken that situation and made something good out of it. Given that reality, there really is a silver lining here in terms of Renée’s and my time with both our kids.”

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ThirdPath Institute is a non-profit organization that assists individuals, families and organizations in finding new ways to redesign work to create time for families, community and other life priorities.

Initially we are helping families design Shared Care work-family solutions. Shared Care parents maximize the use of parental care while staying actively engaged with work. They accomplish this by reconfiguring work around the needs of family and sharing in their involvement with work, home and children.

Our long-term goal is to organize individuals, families and communities to influence larger systemic change - both within organizations and at the public policy level. The future we hope to shape is one where no person is required to choose between work and children, work and an aging parent, or work and some other life interest. Instead they can follow a "third path," one that allows everyone to integrate work with other life priorities.

To give a tax-deductible donation to the ThirdPath Institute you can make a secure contribution on-line through our website, www.thirdpath.org , or email us and we will send you information through the mail. We'd love to add you to the ThirdPath family of donors. Together we are making a difference by helping people lead meaningful, balanced and intentional lives.

Contact Information:

ThirdPath Institute

4918 Cedar Avenue

Philadelphia PA 19143

(215) 747-8790

info@thirdpath.org

Check us out! www.thirdpath.org