

# BUSINESS

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## BALANCING ACT

### Grad degree doesn't have to be used

Sharmila Melwani gave birth to her now-burgeoning cookie business when she began planning her daughter Liana's first birthday party. Her cookie party favors were a hit. And so, Melwani shelved her MBA, abandoned her career as a financial consultant and began baking and icing treats.

"People I worked with thought I was nutty for doing something so drastic," Melwani said. "I know it sounds corny, but I feel so balanced. My daughter enjoys watching me, and I can incorporate it into my day."

Like rebalancing your financial



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portfolio, refocusing your life in key areas also is necessary from time to time. That's why some people choose to forgo using advanced degrees and the accompanying compensation to seek jobs that give them the work-life fit they need. Most often these are women whose spouse is the breadwinner.

Today, American women are more educated than ever. In 1971, fewer than 10 percent of graduate degrees in the United States went

to women. Thirty years later, women get nearly half of all graduate degrees.

But even after spending time and money to earn these degrees, more of these highly educated women consider alternative career plans.

Stacey Wadle, for example, earned an MBA from the University of Miami and worked in the purchasing department of a computer company. Later, she used her MBA knowledge and budgeting skills writing grants for Miami Dade College. Now a mother of two, Wadle earned a master's in

\*TURN TO BALANCING ACT, 5C



MARSHA HALPER/HERALD STAFF

**SWEET MOMENTS:** Sharmila Melwani's cookie business enables her to spend time with her daughter, Liana.

## Grad degrees can be placed on back burner

\*BALANCING ACT, FROM 1C

education and teaches second grade at Sunset Preparatory, a private school in Miami where her children attend classes.

"I'm off work at 3:15. I have the same vacations as my kids," Wadle says. "I can't imagine working a job where I work long hours and only get two weeks vacation a year."

Perhaps one day, Wadle says, she'll use her MBA again — possibly teaching business courses.

Like Wadle, Janet Molson pursued an advanced degree. First she earned a law degree from Nova Southeastern University. She capped her education with a master's in law from University of Missouri-Kansas City.

But Molson, mother of 6-year-old Jennifer, prefers the lifestyle of a bridge instructor over that of a full-time lawyer. Though she makes more on a per-hour basis teaching bridge, she earns less annually than if she practiced corporate law. She usually works about four hours a day and travels for tournaments when she chooses.

"I can make my own hours" Molson says. "Off and on I toy with the idea of using my law degree again, but this is a better job at this point in my life."

Several trends are at work. Today's highly-educated mothers, many of whom already have rewarding careers, face a bigger adaptation to motherhood than women in the past. For some, finding a low-pressure alternative to staying home is appealing.

Lynn Johnson had been a public defender and corporate lawyer before she became a mother. She says

finding part-time work became more important to her than using her law degree. When offered a job in South Florida as a marketing director for a Bahamas resort, Johnson jumped at the chance.

"I knew I'd go back to law sooner or later, but the first 10 years of a child's life are

*Having a graduate degree is better than not having one — it broadens career options.*

important," Johnson said.

Recently, with her daughters Jennifer and Julie Saperstein both now 11, Johnson returned to law, practicing full time and commanding a high salary but well below those who stayed on the partner track.

"I'm gone 12 hours a day," she says. "I am lucky I have a wonderful support system, but I'm giving up the comfort of knowing they are brushing their teeth every morning and their hair looks good."

Still, all these women admit having a graduate degree is better than not having one — it broadens their career options.

Melwani now applies her business experience to her cookie company (Cookies By Shar in Plantation). She says earning an MBA taught her discipline, how to participate in group projects, public speaking skills and how to work on deadline.

"It gave me more confidence," she says.

Rebecca Cardozo-Pfeiffer recently put her law degree

and master's in public health on the back burner but still finds benefits to having them. She runs a small business training exercise instructors in Poolates, a water-based version of Pilates that she has trademarked in the United States and Canada.

"I wanted something that was not all-consuming," she said. "I create my own hours and can lay out by the pool if I want to."

Cardozo-Pfeiffer says the time and money spent on her advanced degree from Georgetown University were well worth it.

"If I hadn't gone to law school," she says, "I wouldn't know that trademarking existed and would have lost my whole market advantage."