

For Mayer Brown's Chicago Head, Flex Work Played Key Role

By Tracey Read

Law360 (March 3, 2023, 2:42 PM EST) -- While Joanna Horsnail was still being considered for partner at Mayer Brown LLP, she was pregnant with her now 19-year-old son, Owen.

Worried about what it would be like to juggle a baby and a demanding career, she asked the firm to allow her to come back from maternity leave on a 70% alternative work schedule — a bold move at the time.

"A friend at another firm said to me, 'You're crazy that you told them you want to be part-time before you know if you've gotten promoted to partner,'" Horsnail recalled. "There was certainly an attitude at her firm that you would hide that information because you wouldn't be looked at as partner material."



Joanna Horsnail

But Horsnail said she wanted to be transparent from the start about her needs as a new mom.

In addition, she was inspired by the fact that her mentor, Rebecca Eisner, had previously been promoted to partner after being on an alternative work schedule, or AWS.

Horsnail's AWS request was approved, and she still managed to make partner while out on maternity leave.

Success Despite Adversity

A series of unexpected adversities would later require her to continue to work an alternative schedule for the next eight years, but Horsnail — a construction and government transactions partner — didn't let that stop her from increasingly experiencing success in her career.

Besides serving as chair of the diversity steering board and an office practice leader of the finance practice, Horsnail is also a member of the firm's project equity leadership and women's leadership groups. She's also been a member of its recruiting and partner promotions committees.

On Tuesday, she became managing partner at the firm's 400-attorney Chicago office after 25 years at Mayer Brown.

"I just think it is kind of incredible to be at this place where I am offered this role that I'm so enthused

about," she told Law360 Pulse. "My kids are on the other side of being little. The older one is in college and thriving, and the younger one is thriving in his own way as well. It's an interesting time in my life, a new chapter."

A self-described "type A, slightly obsessed lawyer," Horsnail discussed what a blessing the flexible AWS arrangement proved to be.

'The Strain Was Just Too Much'

Born and raised in Denver, Horsnail describes her childhood as a very happy, "Leave It to Beaver"-type upbringing.

While majoring in journalism at the University of Colorado Boulder, she realized her true calling was becoming a lawyer. She then moved to Chicago after getting a scholarship to the Chicago-Kent College of Law, and fell in love with the city.

After 18 months at the boutique firm Hodges Loizzi Eisenhammer Rodick & Kohn LLP, she joined Mayer Brown.

Once she became a midlevel associate, one thing after another tested her resiliency.

First, her mother became ill with Parkinson's disease, and died when Horsnail was in her late 20s. Right after that loss, Horsnail's father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he died a couple of years later.

Right after losing her father, Horsnail had her first child, Owen. Two years later, her second son, William, now a 17-year-old high school junior, was born with severe disabilities.

"Then when the kids were toddlers, I got divorced, and have been a single parent ever since," she said. "I was a junior partner at the time that all of this was happening. Both my parents had passed in sudden succession, and I had two small children, and one was severely disabled. I was suddenly divorced and was very interested in keeping my career going as well."

Although William seemed like a healthy baby at first, it soon became clear he had severe neurological problems.

He wasn't feeding properly. His breathing was erratic. He wasn't maintaining his body temperature. He had severe shakes. A doctor said she doubted he'd survive the night.

After two months, William was able to go home from the hospital, but he was not learning to roll, sit, stand, talk or feed himself.



Joanna Horsnail was named the new managing partner of Mayer Brown LLP's Chicago office Tuesday. The firm allowed her to work a flexible schedule for eight years so she could spend more time at home with her children, Owen, left, and William. (Courtesy of Horsnail)

And a parade of specialists were mystified as to what was wrong.

"My marriage ended. The strain was just too much," Horsnail said in her 2016 TED Talk called "The Power of Time."

By age 11, doctors still had no answers about William.

But then, genetic testing revealed he had PURA syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental disorder marked by mild to moderate developmental delays, moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, seizures and seizure-like movements, low muscle tone, feeding difficulties and breathing problems.

"He was patient No. 50 in the entire world," Horsnail said, noting she was "thrilled" to finally get a diagnosis and an answer on her son's medical issues.

Horsnail said in her days working an AWS schedule, she often was able to work at home on Fridays and Mondays with the full support of both male and female members of the firm.

She also credits reliable babysitters and nannies who helped her with the children.

"My key to success is having wonderful people who helped me with the kids who I can really count on, who have become family members," Horsnail said. "Their father's involved, but it's been me and caregivers taking care of the kids primarily."

She added that Mayer Brown may have been ahead of its time in its flexibility.

"I will give myself credit that I worked very hard and I think I built a nice book of business and created a lot of my own relationships, but I give the firm and my colleagues, mentors and sponsors so much credit because we created this together," Horsnail said.

Horsnail said she joined the firm because she immediately felt an incredible warmth and comfort level with the group's partners, who have continued to support her in her 25 years at the firm.

For instance, although Eisner, a former Chicago managing partner herself, is now retired from the firm, she immediately reached out to congratulate Horsnail on the promotion.

Eisner told Law360 Pulse in an email that Horsnail is a natural choice to lead the Chicago office.

"Even while working a part-time schedule early in her career for personal reasons, Joanna always put clients first, delivered outstanding results, and still found time to contribute to the firm and the greater Chicago community through service and leadership," Eisner said. "She is an outstanding example to others, and we are thrilled to see her assume this new role."

Moving Forward

Today, the firm has a formal policy on the books that allows employees to request AWS status for up to a year after the birth or adoption of a child, and that can be extended with practice leader approval.

"In practice, everybody's requests get accepted, and it's just a matter of working out exactly what the arrangement looks like based on the particular practice," Horsnail said. "So we've got a formal policy

that allows that in relation to having a child, but anybody can request an AWS schedule, and it's just not our culture that we would deny something like that. It is worked out on a case-by-case basis."

Horsnail added that she believes the legal profession as a whole is coming around to such work flexibility.

"I think you see more of this alternative work schedule now throughout BigLaw in order to be competitive and address concerns that people have," she said. "What I have found to be very interesting is that younger men are just as interested in this as younger women. Now I see our younger men being very interested in understanding longer paternity leave, their ability to go AWS, their ability to take leaves of other kinds and have just more work-life balance, which is really nice."

As managing partner, Horsnail said her goals include growing the Chicago office — particularly at an equity partner level — increasing the office's diversity initiatives, and finding ways to encourage attorneys and staff to be in the office three days a week when possible.

"In order to compete for the best talent and keep the best talent and grow our diversity — which helps us make the best business decisions — we have to find ways to be flexible and treat each person as they are and understand their particular needs and what they want out of their career and how they can thrive in their career," she said. "There's nothing more important than meeting people where they are and treating everybody as an individual in order to raise the collective good."

--Editing by Marygrace Anderson.