What advice would you give a young woman considering a career in the law today?

Law is a very good career for women. There are many opportunities, there are many challenges, and practicing law is fun, which is the thing I like most about it. It’s intellectually stimulating. It gives you some measure of independence. It is a really recognizable skill and a marketable one. Practicing law prepares you for a wide variety of surprises that life may bring your way. I mean that both professionally and personally. Lawyers are taught to think in a very critical way, they are challenged with both facts and with law and with the intersection of the two. That prepares you for a life that is really neither black nor white (but always a little gray) and helps you learn to deal with that “grayness” in the best possible way.

Some women and men will go to law school and say, “I’m not really sure what I want to do with my law degree and I feel like it’s the best thing for me to do.” Do you think this is a good idea?

It all depends on the person. I went to law school thinking that I might practice law for a while. I confess that I did not expect to do it for 28 years, and certainly not at the same place. But, now here I am — happy as a clam. I can’t say that I would have been smart enough when I entered law school to know what a rewarding and challenging career it would be. Although people coming out of college today are certainly better informed about the options available to them than I was, I think it is still hard for 22-year-olds to have the kind of foresight to select the right career path for them.
Do you think that people should go to law school directly after graduating from college? Or should they work for a few years beforehand?

People should go to law school when they’re ready to go to law school and when they want to go to law school. I’m sure you’re going to ask me what’s the right time to have a family if you’re a female practicing law. Same answer. Do it when you’re ready. And knowing when you’re ready is a complex timing issue that depends on so many factors in your life. Some people are sick of school by the time they graduate from college, other people thrive in school and they’re really curious about the next step right away, other people want to see the world a little bit, some people have financial constraints that push them in one direction or another. I think going to law school is a very distinct educational experience from going to college. I found the educational environment and the type of skills that were highlighted in the various academic arenas quite different.

Have you personally experienced any advantages or disadvantages in the legal industry because of your gender?

That is a question that’s hard to answer, because the fact of the matter is that you really don’t know. I think women bring to the practice of law some skill sets that perhaps more women than men have, but that doesn’t mean that only women have them: the ability to listen, the ability to read the room, the ability to nurture younger colleagues. All of those things we all think of as “more female” kinds of traits. That doesn’t mean that every woman has them, and that doesn’t mean that many men don’t. Do these traits represent advantages? I guess, but they are not unique to women. I also think there is a great deal of freedom in the female psyche, and that can be helpful in the practice of law. Women may be a little more likely to think outside the box. They bring a different perspective and sensibility to a problem. Some people think women might be better listeners as a group. And when you’re in a service business, listening is very important.

I think the answer is yes and no. Women tend not to have a fixated view on what they have to do when they grow up, and that is a very helpful thing in the practice of law because none of us were born doing what we are currently doing. I am a private equity M & A lawyer. That’s a field that didn’t exist when I was a young lawyer. It evolved into my life. I didn’t have in my mind when I was 23-years-old that I wanted to be a securities litigator or a criminal lawyer or a bankruptcy lawyer. I just wanted to be a lawyer, and I was far more flexible in where my experience would let me go than I think some men permit themselves to be.

What kind of steps have law firms and other legal employers taken in the last few years to create a better working environment for women? What else do you think needs to happen in this area?

I think law firms, especially ones like Debevoise — and I think Debevoise has been a leader here — have come a long way in becoming better environments for both women and men. One of the things that we have great flexibility on is maternity leave, but we also have parental leave for all parents. We give all our associates paid parental leave, so that’s good for not only the women who work here, but also the women who work elsewhere whose husbands get to take paid parental leave. We have also been leaders in having a flexible part-time schedule for female lawyers and for male lawyers as well.

Do you find that male lawyers take as much advantage of these flexible schedules as women do?

Some men do take advantage, many don’t. People of all genders have personal issues with ailing relatives. Some people have fledging professional sports careers or writing careers or whatever that makes them want to work on a reduced-time schedule. But the great thing about law firms is that they are meritocracies, and when the work gets done well everybody takes notice. And that’s what matters the most. Some of the other things that law firms such as ours do to make this a better working environment is to provide spousal benefits for same-sex domestic partners, to sponsor healthy living type of perks — we give flu shots in our office so people don’t have to schlep to the doctor. We have discounted gym memberships, all kinds of things. We try to make it as easy to work here as possible because we know how demanding this job can be.
What sort of structures need to be in place to increase the number of women law leaders at top law firms and in corporate counsel capacities?

I think women need role models: they need mentors. We at Debevoise have a number of women in leadership positions. Mary Jo White is chair of our litigation department. Peggy Davenport and I are co-chairs of the private equity group. Mary Beth Hogan is co-chair of our associate liaison committee, and the managing partner in our Shanghai office is a woman. I’m on our firm’s management committee. We have a lot of women who are in the very highest of management ranks in our firm. We also have a diversity committee, which is very conscious of the need to have a diverse workplace. We have an associate’s liaison committee, which serves to make sure that our associates’ concerns are heard and addressed. Each associate has a partner advisor and an associate advisor, which is also true of summer associates.

We also have a program of upward reviews. Our associates are asked and encouraged to write reviews of more senior associates and partners at the firm. The associates can deliver the reviews anonymously, so we don’t know who is saying critical things. And let me tell you, in partnership decisions and in advancement decisions, these upward reviews are very carefully considered. We have an evaluation committee to track associates’ progress. I know when I served on that committee, when we saw somebody we didn’t think was living up to their potential, we made sure that some more senior lawyer tried to figure out what was going on. Sometimes you just have a person in the wrong area, or you have them working with the wrong people. So we try to take a pretty individualized view of how you can best help a lawyer succeed. I often say that one of my jobs is to help young lawyers be the very best lawyers they can be.

Some need more management than others. Some people are stars, and when they start practicing they’re stars. Sometimes these “stars” burn out before they get where they need to be. Other people have a slower trajectory, but they rise higher. We don’t have a fixed notion of how an associate will or should develop. It is a function of many things, and I think women and men sometimes show their stuff a little bit differently and a firm needs to understand that. There are a lot of women who are not as outspoken as some of their male counterparts, but that doesn’t mean they’re not as talented or that they won’t develop into better and stronger lawyers over time.

What impact has a career in law had on your personal and family life? Do you have any special techniques, methods and philosophies that help you maintain a work/life balance and be a successful lawyer?

I’m married and I have a 12-year-old daughter. I came to parenthood a little late in the game, which was not by choice. I think that just as lawyers need to make it easy for their clients, they need to make it easy for their own lives. And so anybody who’s working for a major law firm or at any well-compensated job who doesn’t take advantage of that economic freedom to make their lives easier is not, in my view, choosing wisely. So it’s sometimes hard, but I think you can make your life a lot easier by having some help in your life. That may mean a non-working spouse, it may mean a nanny, it may mean a housekeeper. It may mean some combination of both. It may mean a student who runs errands for you. I think that one of the most important things is not to feel that you have to do everything yourself.

Do you find that women lawyers have a tendency to deliberately make things hard for themselves?

Some women lawyers tend to be overachievers who have that “I can do it all” mentality. But the fact of the matter is, you can’t do it all. I always say to someone who has a sick parent or a sick spouse, you can’t take care of them unless you take care of yourself too. And I feel the same way about your clients. You can’t take care of your client’s business unless you’ve taken care of yours.

What other careers and life choices did you consider before deciding on a career in the law? If you were not practicing law and you could not be a lawyer, what would your dream career be now?

I wanted to be a history professor. I worked in early American history, did some research fellowships at Sturbridge Village, and that’s really what I wanted to do for a while.
Did you go to graduate school?

No, I did something far less spectacular. I spent my junior year in the library writing my honors thesis on the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman, who lived during the Great Awakening in the 1720s, and was a disciple of Jonathan Edwards from Northampton, Mass., near where I grew up. I became so concerned that I would never talk to another human being by burying myself in historical research that I applied to go to law school at Cornell after my junior year. And I got accepted, and I went, and I’ve never looked back.

So if you were not a lawyer, would you then choose to be a history professor?

In retrospect I’m not sure that I would actually do that. One of the things I have learned is that I like dealing with the real world, and early American history is not the best route to being part of that world. However, I am very interested in higher education and I suppose if I didn’t have to be a tenure-track professor, and didn’t have to “publish or perish,” I might still want to do it. I might also want to be a journalist, and one of the things I’ve done in my career is start a publication here at Debevoise called the Debevoise & Plimpton Private Equity Report. That has given me a little fix on the journalistic scene. And it’s been great fun. So I think I would either be a historian or a journalist.

How do you expect the practice of law will change in the next ten years?

One of the trends we’ve seen in the last 10 years is an enormous specialization among lawyers. You probably expect that I’m going to say that the specialization trend would continue to develop. It may. However, there is and will be a great premium on the well-rounded lawyer, the lawyer who can be the consigliere to the client, who can advise in a way that only those who have had a breadth of experience can do. I believe that this type of advisor will be a very limited and prized category of lawyer. One of the things we’re trying to do at Debevoise is to continue to develop that type of lawyer — to train lawyers with enough specialized expertise that they can be competitive in the specialized world, but also to educate them as well-rounded lawyers so they really can be advisors and counselors to our clients and not just drones doing deal after deal of the same sort. That’s a real danger in some of the kinds of law firms that are being built in this time of specialization.