

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Doctor and Parent: The Single Moms Who Do It

Damage control. That's how Dr. Maria J. Canizares, a mother of two boys, describes her life since leaving her marriage in July of 2006. The event coincided with the start of her duties as chief resident in the division of dermatology at Washington University, St. Louis. Her residency ends in June.

"The hardest thing for me is time management," she said. "How do I get everything accomplished in 1 day or 1 week that I'm expected to do for being a resident, chief resident, my future practice, and boards, let alone for being a single parent of two boys? Often you have responsibilities to take your kids to ball practice, to a party, or to a school function. You either don't have time to do those things or you let go of your studying, which is what I have chosen to do for the majority of this year, for the first time in my life, really."

She and her ex-husband have joint custody of their sons, 15-year-old Drew and 5-year-old Bryce, "which helps significantly," she said.

The weekends that her ex-husband has the boys free Dr. Canizares up to get her chief resident duties, family duties, and errands accomplished but leave little time for much else. "That's where the burden comes in," Dr. Canizares said.

She tries her best to squeeze in some "me time" now and then, "even if it just means that you drop the kids off at a play date and you have an hour to get your hair done, shop, or go out with friends," she explained.

Despite the challenges of being a single mom, Dr. Canizares said that she has developed a new level of confidence in being self-sufficient. She's also learning new skills, such as how to cook, which her husband did previously. "Once you become a single parent, don't beat yourself up that the marriage failed or feel like you've made this huge mistake," she advised.

"Realize that there are other people in your shoes who have done it and can do it successfully. Look to the people around you [who] will support you. Realize that you can get through it. The children will still be okay and so will you."

Visualizing her life after residency and board examination is something she thinks about "24/7," she said. At this point in her life, "I'm truly waiting to exhale. It's relentless. First, I want to take my children on a trip—probably to Disney World or



"The children will be still be okay and so will you," said Dr. Maria J. Canizares on being a single parent. She is pictured above with her two children (Drew, top, and Bryce, middle).

Hawaii—to spend time with them. Then, I look forward to getting into my practice. My ultimate goal is to travel and spend time with my children, my family, and my friends."

Keeping Her Priorities

Dr. Denise C. Santucci was finishing her family medicine residency when her marriage ended in divorce in June of 2002. The couple's only child, Frank, was 5 months old at the time.

Seventeen months later, Frank was diagnosed with severe autism and mild mental retardation. Now, he's 5 years old and "very high functioning," said Dr. Santucci, medical director of HIP Health Plan of New York, a managed care organization that serves patients in the Northeast. "He's communicative; he can speak. Cognitively, he's probably on a normal 2 1/2-year-old level. But he has progressed very far in a short time."

Dr. Santucci is raising Frank on her own with occasional help from her parents, siblings, and a nanny. She said she's been fortunate to have a flexible work schedule that allows her to attend meetings with teachers, therapists, and physicians involved in Frank's care. She also finds support from members of the Autism Society of America, the National Alliance for Autism Research, and other groups that assist families with special-needs children.

The way she sees it, being a parent, a physician, and a wife "are three different things," said Dr. Santucci, who also has a private practice in Levittown, N.Y., visiting patients in nursing homes and group homes. "I'm fortunate enough to have to do only two of the three. I've been able to channel most of my free time and energy into working with my son and being a parent for him as well as satisfying my career goals and not worrying about having to maintain a relationship. Some might say that's sad, but to me it worked out to be very rewarding, particularly because my son is doing so well now. So am I."

She maintains that anything is achievable if you manage time appropriately and keep your priorities. Frank and her patients "have always been my priorities," said Dr. Santucci, who earned an executive master's degree in business administration

from Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., this spring.

'Amazed' by What She Did
During her ob.gyn. residency in Philadelphia, Dr. Genester S. Wilson-King learned to "do whatever was asked...no matter what." So when her 7-year marriage ended in divorce in 1987, she applied that mantra to her new responsibilities as a single parent.

At the time, she was a public-health scholarship recipient working in Fort Pierce, Fla. Her son Brandon was 3 years old and her daughter Sylvanna was 1 year old. "I tried to make it my business to be the

first one they would see in the morning and the last one they would see before they went to sleep," said Dr. Wilson-King, who now practices ob.gyn. in Mount Dora, Fla.

She accomplished that goal with help from her mother and from two women who assumed nannylike roles for the children, preparing meals, driving them to and from school and to their soccer or basketball games. "Once I was finished at the office, I would run over to the soccer game or basketball game," Dr. Wilson-King recalled. "Then we'd go home, have dinner, go over homework, and spend quality time."

A self-described tireless worker, she did not take a lengthy vacation with her children until 1995. The purpose of the trip was to accompany Brandon's Amateur Athletic Union baseball team to the AAU National Championship in Burnsville, Minn., where his team won the title.

Until that time, "my children had summer vacations with other family members but not with me," she said. "I had this sense of obligation that I was supposed to deliver [babies for] every one of my patients, because that's what they came to me for."

After that trip, she made it a point to work more family vacation time into her schedule.

Once her children left home for college (Brandon is a college graduate, and Sylvanna graduates from college this May), she was able to "have a life" outside of family and work.

"I'm amazed at what I did," said Dr. Wilson-King, who remarried in 2005. "Always take time for your kids, because you can't get it back."

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

Resident Counts Her Many Blessings

I am a fourth-year ob.gyn. resident and a single mom. Although it is not an easy lifestyle that I've chosen, I feel so blessed to be able to have my son, Jacob, and do what I love.

I married at 18—dropping out of college and giving up a full scholarship to do so—and had my son at 19. I was a stay-at-home mom for almost 2 years and then slowly started going back to school. This caused a lot of trouble with my marriage, and I was divorced at age 24, the summer between my sophomore and junior year in college. My son and I struggled those first 6 months, but with the help

of some wonderfully encouraging friends, I managed to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Two years later, I was accepted into medical school.

Being a single parent is not easy some days, but I am so grateful for the joy that my son brings to my life. Jacob is 14 years old now, and I can't imagine my life without him. Although my family lives 3,000 miles away and has never been able to help much, my son and I have been blessed with friends and colleagues who form our supportive network.

As I think about this year and about finishing my residency, I once again feel both proud and lucky. I have a child whom I adore and a job that I can't imagine not doing. I currently am the chief resident of the gynecologic oncology service and definitely am pushing my 80 hours, and Jacob has picked up the slack at home. He does his laundry, takes care of the dogs, and even vacuums, all so that I can have the time necessary to be successful at this residency.

Some days I worry that I am not the best mom that I could be for him. But each day when I come home, he's here, waiting with a smile and a hug and encouraging me to take on another day.

DR. JENSEN is a fourth-year resident in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the Medical College of Georgia, Augusta.



Dr. Deborah Jensen and her son, Jacob.

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Do you find time to fit exercise into your everyday work schedule?

If so, send an e-mail to column writer Doug Brunk at d.brunk@elsevier.com.