

# Job Market

MB Section 10

LIFE'S WORK/LISA BELKIN

## Trying to Bridge Needs of Work and Home

**N**EGOTIATIONS to avoid a war met with success in an arena far from Iraq last week. The talks were in a back room at the Chappaqua Public Library, and the combatants came in full uniform — the stay-at-home-mothers wore jeans and sweaters; the mothers-who-work-outside-the-home came in suits and heels.

The three dozen women (and two or three men) gathered over pastry, fruit and coffee at the request of Mara Weissmann, a lawyer at White & Case in Manhattan. In 1998, Ms. Weissmann was feeling very alone in her community, a place where real mothers — so it seemed to her — stayed at home and raised the children. Determined to find others like herself, she handed out fliers at the railroad station one day, inviting working mothers to a local restaurant for dinner.

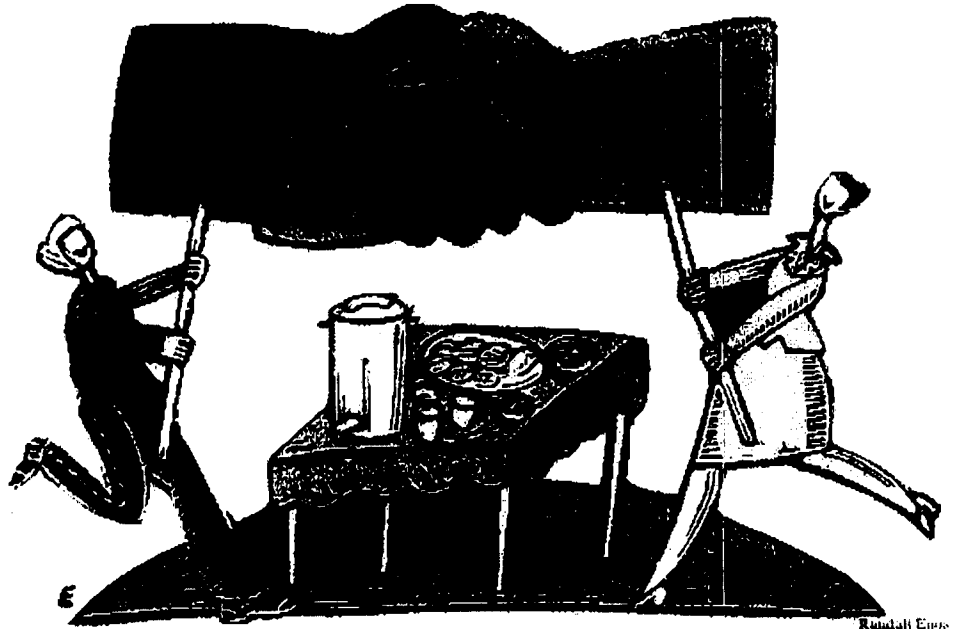
From that dinner came a group, Second Shift, which now has more than 250 members and helps working mothers find a place in a community that hums on while they are at the office. The gap between the worlds has been the subject of magazine articles and best-selling books. All the articles and books bothered Ms. Weissmann.

"It makes it look as if women are at each other's throats," she said. "But most women who are at home now were in an office once or plan to go to an office again, and most women who are still working are also extremely involved in their children's lives, so we need to look at what we have in common, instead."

Hence the meeting. On the theory that the locus of maternal power still rests with the PTA, Ms. Weissmann invited its leaders to a meeting with members of Second Shift, hoping to bring the two sides closer.

"We were surprised to hear that many working parents felt that they were excluded from participating in the PTA," said Randi Kreisler, who was a member of Second Shift when she was working as a health care consultant and who is now the chairwoman of the PTA for Grafflin Elementary School in Chappaqua. "But we certainly wanted to listen to what they had to say."

At the start of the evening, most of what they listened to were tales of frustration from working women who were trying to be in touch with their children's school lives. Ms. Weissmann told of volunteering in her youngest son's classroom for an hour and 20



minutes every Friday — her telecommuting day — which was all the time she could steal and still be at her desk in her home office by 9:30. "Every week the teacher would look at me and say, 'Oh dear, can't you stay until 10?'" Ms. Weissmann said. "She stopped asking that the morning that I took three calls from a client on my cellphone."

Another mother told of trying to accompany her son on a class trip. "The class mothers are all at-home moms, and they all know each other, and even though I talked to the teacher and volunteered, I never got a call," she said. "This year, I was determined. I called and I bugged people and I got to go on a trip. One hour at the water treatment plant."

As the stories unfurled, the PTA officers, all stay-at-home mothers, started asking questions. "When should we schedule things so you can attend?" they asked. "Is the evening better? Or first thing in the morning before you go to work?"

That last suggestion met with laughter. "A meeting in the morning means the earliest train I could get is the 9:30," someone explained. "And at that hour, there'd be no place to park at the station."

But the same woman offered: "Why not make one of the meetings on the same day as parent-teacher conferences? We all take time off for those." With that, the sugges-

tions began to flow.

"List PTA meetings on the school calendar at the start of the year; that way, I can put them all on my office calendar."

"Post fliers announcing PTA events on the train platform," rather than just at the kaffeeklatsch spots, because although working mothers drink lots of coffee, they rarely klatsch.

"Sign up for committees you can do from home."

One mother told of joining the publishing committee, which binds student compositions into books. "I sent my baby sitter to learn how to do the sewing part, then she taught me, and now I do it at night."

Knowing a recruitment opportunity when they saw one, the PTA leaders circulated committee sign-up sheets. Ms. Weissmann volunteered for the social committee at the middle school "so I can keep an eye on my son and his friends at the dances," and for the gender equity committee, "because, as an employment lawyer, I thought my services would be useful."

All around her, other working mothers were signing on, too. The incongruity was not lost on Ms. Weissmann. "Here is a room full of people who are already too busy," she said, "but they've all come out on a school night, asking for the chance to do something else that they don't have time for."

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week. E-mail: [Belkin@nytimes.com](mailto:Belkin@nytimes.com).