

Second Shift *Shifts* Into High Gear

BY DEBORAH HEINEMAN



It has been nine years since Mara Weissmann founded Second Shift—a network of working women eager to share their hopes, fears, frustrations and successes at striking the right career/work balance. Since then the group has grown to over 600 members, two chapters—the original one in Chappaqua, and

another in lower Westchester—and has hosted nearly 50 illustrious speakers, including Hillary Rodham Clinton (Senator and former First Lady), Lisa Belkin (veteran NY Times reporter), and Ellen Galinsky (President of The Families and Work Institute).

Now, Weissmann, who has run the organization while working as Employment Counsel at White & Case LLP and then at Deloitte & Touche, has decided to leave the corporate world and devote herself full-time to Second Shift. She hopes to create “the ultimate resource” for corporations, working women, and women looking to reenter the workplace.

“I was always the one who stood on the sports field and organized the play schedule for the day,” says Weissmann, the mother of two boys. “So starting Second Shift was a natural for me. I heard so many women in Chappaqua singing the same mantra—‘I feel like a chicken with its head cut off’—when it came to the challenge of juggling work and family. I just thought to myself, we need to get some moms together.”

A Different Approach...

Thirty-three women came to that first meeting. “We laughed, we cried, we told stories, it was great,” recalls Weissmann. From the beginning, Second Shift tried to take a different approach, building the network block by block within the local community. “I have a credo that

there is no such thing as a *nonworking* mom,” she says. The goal was to foster respect for the two very real ‘jobs’ many women juggle—not to create working mom vs. nonworking mom animosity.

Now Weissmann is eager to take Second Shift to the next level and has devoted herself full time to the task. “First, of course, there’s the opportunity to take the Second Shift model into new communities beyond Westchester, but I’d like to do way more.”

During the 24 years Weissmann was associated with major corporate institutions, she served as an employment lawyer counseling high-level executives and corporate clients on the employment arena and later ran the women’s initiative for a Big Four accounting firm.

“There’s an awareness within corporations that it’s bad for business if they lose their skilled female executives because they can’t help those executives make the work/life balance work. What I’d like to do is help ‘corporate communities’ establish their own internal empowerment network and resource center built off of the Second Shift model—initially act as a consultant and facilitator, but ultimately disengage and let the members run it themselves for their corporate community.”

Weissmann has also just started a unique Third Chapter of Second Shift for women who want to *reenter* the workforce. “These women have special challenges, needs, etc. that are unique to their situation,” explains Weissmann, “and they feel so isolated. If Second Shift is to live up to its charter as a community-based organization, then we must serve all members of the community.”

The “Third Chapter” has just had its first event—a very successful lunch meeting in January attended by 25 people. Participants discussed the stages of re-entry and talked extensively about “buy in”—getting family support for their decision.

Above and beyond that, Weissmann foresees Second Shift acting as a resource center for everyone involved—providing advice and strategy on careers, and matching up interested employers and potential employees. “These services will be especially important for the re-entering moms,” explains Weissmann.

Julie Gerstein is a “case in point.” Gerstein spent nine years in the corporate consulting world before leaving to become a fulltime mom for the next nine. With her kids

now in full-day elementary school, she was really thinking about “what to do with my life” when she happened to meet Weissmann. Gerstein was already planning to attend the reentering moms’ lunch (“which was great—and got all the important issues out on the table,” she recalls), but Weissmann told her: “I already have the job for you!”

“I was put in touch with the President of Data Key Consulting right in Mt. Kisco,” says Gerstein, “and am now working part-time with a flexible schedule and a convenient location—everything I could want from my first foray into the working world in almost a decade!” What was the hardest part of the process? “Speaking up about what was realistic for me when it came to hours,” says Gerstein. “I don’t have help, so my hours had to be limited to when the kids were in school, and I wanted an employer who accepted that if my child was sick, I wouldn’t be able to come in that day.” Her boss said he understood—and, according to Gerstein, the arrangement has worked out beautifully.

Says Weissmann: “All I really care about is enhancing lives—I am really committed to that. That’s why I had to do this at this point in my life. My family and Second Shift are my two passions —and what better work/life balance could there really be than to combine the two?”

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