

Anne-Marie Shelley with sons Jack, 2, Dylan, 10 months, and Ryan, 4



Newday Photo / Alejandra Villa

By Debbe Geiger



As a part-time attorney with a Manhattan law firm, Anne-Marie Shelley of Manhasset puts in 40 hours a week — 80 percent of what a “normal” full-time attorney is expected to work, she says. “That means I

can still practice law and still be a mom. I have more flexibility to spend with my children.”

Hers is a demanding profession, with last-minute deadlines that may require her time on days off and after hours. Shelley, who has three sons, ages 4, 2 and 9½ months, has little time to network with people who share common bonds or who might present business opportunities later on.

And she knows the pressures — on both home and work fronts — will increase. “Although my [oldest] son is 4, I’m thinking, how am I going to do homework or get him to soccer practice?”

Shelley, 38, hopes to gain guidance on such issues at the first monthly meeting of a new networking and support group designed for women lawyers. The group will gather for a

THE URGE TO Network

To boost their careers and their families, working moms turn to others like themselves

brown-bag lunch at 12:30 p.m. today at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, 4 Times Square, Manhattan.

Flex-Time Lawyers (www.flextime lawyers.com) is the brainchild of Deborah Epstein Harvey, 34, a lawyer and mother of three who works reduced hours. She started the group in Philadelphia in 1999.

“I sometimes felt isolated trying to juggle career and family in a very intense and high-pressure job,” Harvey says. “When I spoke to others, I found that was an issue we all felt very strongly about. I started having occasional lunches with other

part-time litigators at my firm. When I came back [from lunch], I felt great and I’d learned a lot. It was gratifying to be able to talk to other people about what I’m trying to do in my life.”

Today, Flex-Time Lawyers has nearly 250 members in Philadelphia who work a flexible or reduced schedule. They attend monthly lunch meetings to discuss how to balance their work and home lives, and advance their careers. Epstein brings in guest speakers who offer career guidance as well as tips on being a better parent

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and lawyer. In the past, she's hosted federal judges and work-life experts; monthly topics have included career-minded subjects such as nontraditional methods of developing business or ways to pursue part-time partnerships.

Amy Roberts, a Manhattan lawyer with a 2-year-old daughter, hopes the group will open the door to new networking opportunities. "When you have kids, you're not going out evenings," she says. "This would enable part-time women to network with each other, both from a business standpoint and in terms of figuring out a way to juggle the competing demands of career and family. In law, the commodity is time. Women who are trying to juggle are short on time."

Networking comes naturally to women, says Susan Veritis, a spokeswoman for the Family and Home Network (www.familyandhome.org), which encourages women who forgo or cut back on paid employment when they have children. And it's one of the main reasons groups like Flex-Time Lawyers are popular. As women reduce their working hours, make the transition to being at-home mothers or switch to a career that frees more time for family, networking becomes "a natural way for women to come together," Veritis says.

When women want to keep a hand in their careers, professional networking becomes even more important, says Ellen Parlapiano, co-author of "Momprenuers: A Mother's Practical Step-by-Step Guide to Work-at-Home Success" (Perigee, \$14.95).

"You've got to keep up with the trends in the field, and you've got to maintain that face-to-face connection that will remind colleagues that you are a driving force. In a field like law, it's easy for partners to simply assume that because you've cut back your hours you are no longer capable enough to be on the partner track."

Building relationships and helping women pursue personal and professional success also are the goals of 85 Broads, which was founded in 1999 and now has more than 2,500 members.

"We're here to enhance the success of our members in every aspect of their lives," says Analisa Balares, who works for Milestone Capital Management in Yonkers and is the group's international coordinator. "We offer panels and forums," she says, "and have speakers talk about their dreams, visions and how they were able to attain them, whether it was to head a fund or have kids and a family."

Susan Barone of Smithtown, the mother of two boys, credits Mothers and More (www.mothersandmore.com) with helping her build her business. Barone left her job in the fashion industry six years ago when her first son was 11 months old. "I went from being a hardcore businesswoman who went 100 miles an hour to being a 100 percent mom. It was very difficult for me. I really longed for that connection with other professional women."

At the time, Mothers and More was known as Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge (FEMALE). "I looked forward to those Thursday meetings like nobody's business," Barone recalls. "It was wonderful to go there and meet with other women who had big jobs and felt like their professional life was very important but their family life was equally important."

When Barone started a fashion business, www.uniquelyme.com, which caters to plus-size women, she turned to FEMALE friends. "I hired them as freelance consultants to work around their schedules and their children's schedules. I knew how fulfilling it would be for them."

Women in virtually any field can find a networking organization that suits their needs, experts say.

"The support you can get from strangers doing the same thing you are doing is amazing," Parlapiano says. "There are no strings attached. It's not coming from a family member or a former colleague in the office who might not give you the most objective advice. It's coming from somebody who can really relate to what you are going through." ■

Debbe Geiger is a regular contributor to Newsday.