

## Balancing Act: Marriage, family and career

As women, we tend to take upon ourselves a variety of responsibilities - whether it's at home or at the work place. If we don't accomplish the endless list of tasks, feelings of shame and failure can leave us feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. Working a full-time job, managing a family of six and maintaining a healthy, happy marriage is what some might call challenging, to say the least. It's essential to have a plan, communicate your needs and take time out for yourself - to achieve this, balance is key. In a recent interview, LaDawna Charleston, working wife and mother, shared some details about her life and the balancing act of marriage, family and career.



**Tell me a little bit about yourself. How long have you been married and how many children do you have?**

I've been married for 12 years. We met when we were doing a tour of duty in the Marine Corps. Eventually we ended up going our separate ways and it remained that way for several years. Then unexpectedly, Donald and I reconnected and it was like we never missed a beat. I moved to Georgia to be with him and we got married soon after. We have been blessed with four children - two girls and two boys, ranging from ages 7 to 17.

**What would you say are some of the keys to a successful, long-term marriage?**

I'd have to say in my experience, communication is the number one must-have in achieving a long healthy marriage. Share information about what's going on with you - your expectations, what may be bothering you, things like that. Trust is also important. You must realize that you are in this together. Also, be assured that you are with someone who will include you when it's time to make important decisions that will affect the family.

**How do you handle being a full-time wife and mother while holding down a full-time job?**

It's not easy; I get tired. I am a God-fearing, praying woman who relies on God for strength and guidance. I had to learn and accept that I couldn't do it all by myself. I had to understand that it's ok to involve my spouse in household responsibilities; I didn't have to do it all alone. I have a typical 9-5 workday. My husband works 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> shift,

which often means he is not home in the evenings. With that schedule, we have to coordinate and support each other - be each other's backbone. We have a son with sickle cell anemia, which requires monthly visits to his doctor. My husband and I alternate months. We have a tag-team partnership when it comes to things like that – doctor's appointments, school conferences and cooking dinner.

**What advice would you give to someone just starting their family and facing the challenge of keeping things balanced?**

I'd say be sure to communicate what your needs are and then formulate a plan together. Decide in advance who will do what. Be sure to let your spouse know when unexpected things arise as soon as possible so that he or she can plan adequately. Another thing I had



to learn was *how* to ask for help. In the beginning, I neglected to let my husband know when I was getting overwhelmed with things; therefore, I set precedence that his help wasn't needed. In actuality, I was struggling to keep things together. So, ask for help. None of us are superwoman.

**How do you get the kids involved in activities that involve the whole family spending time together?**

We try to choose activities that everyone likes to do, which can be a challenge, but we make it work.

**As a busy person with so many commitments and people pulling at you from several directions, how do you take time out for yourself and avoid getting burned out? Some would say that it's essential to have "me" time.**

Now I do believe it's essential but I didn't think that way early on. My husband worked the 3<sup>rd</sup> shift so everything was on me – I cooked, attended parent/teacher conferences and helped with homework. I shut down after a while. I was too tired to do anything. I would get home from work and tell the kids – "No questions. Don't bother me." I would rest for an hour with no interruptions before dealing with anyone about anything. Eventually I realized it was important to set aside time for myself before things escalated to that point. Now time for me is a priority. One way I do that is by attending a women's retreat facilitated by my church – it's a couple of days to decompress and replenish.

**After being married for so long, is it a challenge to maintain romance in the relationship?**

It can be a challenge because of the kids and working different shifts. However, we

coordinate our days off when we can so that we have a full day and evening together. We go to dinner or to the movies – things like that to enjoy time with each other. It's important to do these things – to keep dating, despite how difficult it can be sometimes. It's important that we reconnect and stay tuned in to one another.

**As a married African-American woman, what would you say to single people out there who may think that Black love and marriage is practically nonexistent or doesn't have the same value or significance it once had?**

Unfortunately, mainstream media often fails to portray real, successful black love and marriage. We hear more about divorces than happy marriages. I would advise against basing your opinions about love and marriage in the Black community on the media. Long, successful marriages are possible and should be pursued. Our grandparents did it and it's possible for us now. Also, let me just say this - people need to get to know the person they are marrying. I think a lot of times people are in lust, not love. You have to know the person you are marrying or a successful marriage may end up being extremely imbalanced and stressful. Most importantly, have a relationship with God in your life before marriage, or things will likely be even more challenging. When things are not going as smoothly as you would like, your relationship with God will sustain you.

**How would you advise someone who may be dismissing marriage and family as an option for them because they don't feel they can do marriage and maintain a successful career?**

It doesn't have to be one or the other. It can be done. But first you should know what you can handle and know what you want. It's ok to put yourself first sometimes. Typically, the expectation is that a woman graduates high school, goes to college, gets married and has children. That's fine if that's what you want. We all have the right to live our own lives. I congratulate those women who are honest about not wanting that life before they are truly ready and *know* that's what they want.