

# Okanagan-Shuswap Moms Strive for Balance

By Leila Meyer

**BEING A MOM IS HARD WORK**, but it's worth it. That's the message from three Okanagan-Shuswap mothers living in very different circumstances as they strive to balance motherhood with other responsibilities.

Ingrid van de Leest is a single working mother living in Vernon with her four kids, two aged 13 and 11, and eight-year-old twins. She starts her day by getting them ready for school. Once they're out the door, she has a few minutes to straighten up before heading off to her full-time job as an office administrator at a strata management company. At the end of the day, her kids get home before she does, but her oldest daughter has her CPR and babysitting certificates and looks after the younger ones until van de Leest gets home from work. After supper, it's time to drive the kids to dance or soccer practice, or whatever activity is going on that evening. Once the kids are in bed, she might have an hour to herself to "watch TV, read a book, or go on the computer, and then off to bed myself because I'm usually so darn tired!" she says. Because her ex-husband lives out of town, he's only able to take the kids for one night on the weekend, once or twice a month. The rest of the time, they're van de Leest's responsibility.

Van de Leest's biggest struggle is finding enough time for herself. "For me, it's trying to find the balance between making sure everybody is tended to and that they're not feeling neglected in any way, and finding enough time for myself to sleep and exercise. You can only do so much, and you have to realize your own limitations," she says. For van de Leest, time for herself often means cleaning the house or doing yard work. "For me, that's therapeutic," she says.

Her kids are her reward for all her hard work. "They really, truly are great people," she says. "As exhausting and tiring as things are, suddenly one of them will come and give me a hug and say, 'Mom, I love you,' and it just gives me that little extra boost to keep going. They're just joyful people, and I like being with them. Period."

Cheryl Harris is a stay-at-home mother who lives in Kelowna with her husband and three kids, aged 14, 7, and 20 months. As a stay-at-home mom, it's easy to assume that she has time for everything. That's what she thought it would be like when she left her full-time job as a software installation coordinator at a medical software company to stay at home with her kids after her last baby was born. "I always thought if I was a stay-at-home mom, everything would be perfect. The house would be clean and everything would get done, but the reality is that it's not going to be like that until my youngest gets older."

Harris's biggest challenge is balancing the needs of her three kids, who are six to seven years apart. "You get pulled in so many directions with three kids," she says, "and they always fight for attention. That was a big part of the reason for staying at home because I find that as the kids are getting older, they need me more."

When she first became a stay-at-home mom, she struggled with the lack of adult interaction. At her job, she had been used to talking to people all day, and suddenly she was home alone with a baby. Since then, she has joined a group for moms and babies. "It was definitely a lifesaver to have somebody else to talk to or just to know that I'd be going out that day, once a week, to talk to other moms. They're really welcoming, and I don't feel so isolated anymore."

Harris's wish is that people, and especially husbands, would realize that being a stay-at-home mom is a lot of work. "It may not seem tough, but it is. It has its own challenges." But even though being a stay-at-home mom isn't as easy as she thought it would be, she's happy with her new career. "It's rewarding to me just knowing that my kids are happy," she says.

Leanne Morton is a self-employed mother of a three-and-a-half-year-old, who lives in Salmon Arm. She has a little studio on her property where she works as a massage practitioner three days a week. The other two days a week, she does financial bookkeeping for companies. Her son is in part-time daycare and her husband has gone back to school for retraining, so he's home enough to help out. When Morton's son was born, she decided to continue working. "I love being a parent, but I like my work. It would have been hard for me to cut back on my clientele because I had spent 10 years building up my business."

For Morton, the biggest challenge is finding the balance between parenting and work. Self-employment helps her achieve that balance. "Being self-employed, I have flexibility," she says. "My clients are great. If I wake up tomorrow and my son is sick, I can phone everyone and cancel. They're very understanding that way." Working from home also sometimes allows her to squeeze in time with her son during the workday. "Yesterday afternoon I had a half-hour break between clients, and I was out bouncing on the trampoline with him for half an hour," she says. Still, she does struggle to balance her time between her son, her work, her other responsibilities, and still find time for herself. "But it's all worth it," she says. "When he comes up to me and says, 'I love you, Mommy,' that's what it's all about."