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## Leaning In: Female Professionals Must Embrace Ambition

by KATHLEEN J. WU

August means two things to big-firm lawyers: goodbye to summer associates and hello to first-year associates — that and weather hot enough to melt a cheap briefcase.

### ON THE LEVEL

Before sending the summers back to law school and bringing the newly minted lawyers into the fold, here is some wisdom from an up-and-comer in whom I've taken a particular interest:

Youth lasts for only the briefest of interludes, and once it is gone, we never get it back. If we value our youth so much, then we owe it to ourselves to invest it in something meaningful. In essence, we are trading in years of our lives to be someone worth being.

Those were the words of Kathleen Wu, valedictorian of the 2011 graduating class at Daniel Hand High School in Madison, Conn., as quoted in the *Shoreline Times*. Although we're not related, a friend in the Northeast let me know that my Connecticut namesake was quite the standout.

Young Kathleen has a point, and it's one that today's young lawyers should take to heart: Don't waste your youth. Spend it doing something you love, and do it with all your heart.

That's just one of the recurring themes of commencement speeches, and I confess that I just love a good commencement speech. They're worth watching and reading year-round, not

just when crowds of young people dress up in black robes and funny hats.

And now that law firms are sending off one group of young people and welcoming another, it's as good a time as any to encapsulate what I consider to be the best advice for young women I've heard in a long time: Now is the time to "lean in."

Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, gave that advice in her commencement address this year at my (and her) alma mater, Barnard College at Columbia University.

Too many young women, she said, start scaling back their careers long before they need to. They choose less challenging jobs in less demanding professions, all in anticipation of wanting more balance in their lives once they have children. And they often do this before they're pregnant. Many times they do it before they're even in a relationship.

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"And from that moment, they start quietly leaning back," Sandberg said. "The problem is, often they don't even realize it."

So, when the time comes to make a decision about whether to continue working or to stay at home with a child, their decision practically already has been made for them, she explained.

"If several years ago you stopped

challenging yourself, you're going to be bored. If you work for some guy who you used to sit next to, and really, he should be working for you, you're going to feel undervalued, and you won't come back," she said. "So, my heartfelt message to all of you is, and start thinking about this now, do not leave before you leave. Do not lean back; lean in. Put your foot on that gas pedal and keep it there until the day you have to make a decision, and then make a decision. That's the only way, when that day comes, you'll even have a decision to make," Sandberg said, according to a transcript on the Barnard College website.

All professions need more women, especially at the highest levels — more women partners, managing partners, judges, justices, legislators, general counsel, you name it. Until women are represented in those jobs at the same level men are, we can't consider our work done.

And we have so much work to do together. So if you're a summer associate heading back to law school, give it your all. If you're a young associate just starting out, put your foot on the gas. Don't downplay your abilities or your ambition because you want to be a mommy someday. I promise, you can do both. But you'll only *want* to do both if you've started today, right now, to lean in. **TL**



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