

BALANCED ATTACK

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Or at least, that's the way it was for the last generation.

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Business in Vancouver, October 9-15, 2007

Profile : Jill Earthy

Balanced attack: The Forum for Women Entrepreneurs executive director is spearheading the movement to promote guilt-free work-life balance for women entrepreneurs in B.C.

Mission: To support women entrepreneurs, facilitate networking and mentoring and be a role model for achieving work-life balance

Assets: An MBA, experience as an entrepreneur and the confidence to limit work engagements enough to spend time with two young daughters

Yield: A new job as executive director of the Forum For Women Entrepreneurs

By Glen Korstrom

Jill Earthy knows many professional women treat work-life balance much as they do the weather: they talk about it a lot, but they don't do anything about it.

Or at least, that's the way it was for the last generation.

The mother of two aims to assuage the guilt that some women feel when they take time off from work to care for their children. She's ideally positioned for that mission both because she's executive director of the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs and because she's a work-life balance practitioner. FWE allows her to officially work 25 hours a week.

Supporting mothers who want careers and being in entrepreneurial environments has long motivated the 34-year-old serial entrepreneur and University of Victoria MBA graduate.

But before she jumped at the chance to take on her new FWE post in May, Earthy's biggest concern was that she might not be able to spend enough quality time with her daughters, now aged one and three years old.

"When Jill was thinking of taking the executive director role at FWE, she phoned me to ask about my role, how time-consuming it was and whether it could reasonably be done as a mom," said Denise Coutts, who is executive director at the Minerva Foundation for B.C. Women.

"I encouraged her to do it. It's women of Jill's age and era who will start to work a bit closer to maintaining that work-life balance."

Coutts, whose only child is now 25 years old, believes women of her generation seldom had a balance between their careers and their families. So she's hopeful that Earthy's generation will make the quest for work-life balance a reality.

Kerrisdale-raised Earthy works mostly from her East Vancouver home and by networking outside the office. But when she appears at FWE's offices, her workspace consists of a messy cubicle with boxes stacked to one side.

FWE is a non-profit association with a \$250,000 budget. So Earthy gratefully accepts Davis and Company LLP's rent-free space in a Burrard Street Class A downtown office tower.

Earthy and FWE's full-time program director Kim Appleton work in an area that the law firm didn't renovate during its last office makeover.

They also get access to the firm's boardrooms for events such as FWE's November 6 round table symposium that focuses on how women's enterprises can benefit by doing business with the Chinese.

FWE has five main program areas:

- the "e-series" entrepreneurial training sessions, which start in January and for which FWE has just started a recruitment drive to find the 15 female participants;
- the semi-annual round table fora;
- the mentor program, which launches October 10; and

- the student internship program.

“We’re looking at our existing programs to make sure we’re offering as much value as we can before we start adding programs,” Earthy said.

She’s pondering creating two alumni programs. One would be for women who have completed student internships; the other would be for e-series graduates.

The mentoring program has grown to 60 this year from 50 mentor-mentee pairs last year. Earthy wants to increase involvement to 80 pairs next year.

Half of FWE’s mentors are men and about 30% are returning from previous years. All mentees are women.

“Mentees often have a specific area that they want to address through the mentoring,” Earthy said. “So we pair entrepreneurs either with someone currently on our list or, sometimes, we seek one.”

Earthy knows what it’s like to be a mentee.

After she completed her entrepreneurship-focused MBA in 1998, she turned down job offers from major banks, because she wanted to do something entrepreneurial rather than spend her life as a banker.

Her parents let her live in their basement while she volunteered and later held a paid position at local conference and event management company Pacific Conference Group.

Owners Hilary and Brian Wooller became Earthy’s first mentors.

She left the Pacific Conference Group in 1999 to live in Toronto with new husband Cameron Dustin. There, she found a new mentor: Pat Pape, whose Powerpoint Group organized networking luncheons for professional women and provided golf lessons to give women more confidence on the greens, where many business deals are consummated.

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She resold the business for a similar amount to Vancouver’s Nasco Services Inc. in 2003, after the convention industry took another hit, this time from Toronto’s SARS crisis.

Despite the sector’s steep downturn, Earthy said she increased her Front Line Staff’s annual revenue to \$500,000 in 2003 from about \$100,000 in 2001 by broadening her human resources company’s focus from staffing events to also staffing promotional campaigns.

“We would have street-level promotional teams distribute samples, sort of like when you’re walking down the street and someone hands you a pack of gum.”

That corporate sale meant Earthy could return to Vancouver with her husband, whose work transferred him back to the West Coast.

Now that she spends most of her time caring for her daughters and working for FWE, she only has time for a hobby business.

Her momcafe (www.momcafe.net) launched its first event September 21. The \$30-per-ticket sold-out 55-person luncheon at Kitsilano's Rocky Mountain Flatbread Company featured Covenant House executive director Krista Thompson and Babylicious president Tina Barkley.

“Once you're an entrepreneur,” Earthy said, “you never get it out of your blood.” •

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