

Women's Equality Day speaker: You can have it all, just not all at once

by Susan Orr

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When thinking of women's equality, one way to frame the issue is with a question: Can women really have it all?

The dean of Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, Idalene Kesner, gives a "Yes/But" answer.

"You can have it all. You just can't have it all at once," said Kesner, who was the keynote speaker Tuesday at the annual Women's Equality Day Evansville event.

Over the course of a person's career, Kesner said, there's time to build a career, spend time with family, get involved with community service and fulfill other meaningful roles.

Where women get tripped up, Kesner said, is in the unrealistic expectation that they should focus on all of these things concurrently.

"... Only the fictitious Wonder Woman or the amazing Superman gets to do it all — including fighting crime — simultaneously," Kesner told several hundred people who gathered for the luncheon event at Old National Bank Events Plaza.

"Assuming you can do it all at once — making that assumption of yourself — places an enormous amount of stress on you, and it can easily erode the effectiveness in the roles that you do play."

Everyone needs to find the right work/life balance for them, Kesner said, while keeping in mind that this equation will look different for everyone.

As an example: When Kesner gave birth to her two children, she immediately returned to her faculty position at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School. In fact, she said, she brought her briefcase to the hospital and got some work done post-delivery.

Other parents, she said, want to take time off after a birth, and that's an equally valid choice.

"It worked for me, and yet I know it won't work for everyone."

Looking ahead, Kesner said, the "having it all" question isn't just a women's issue any more. College students and young professionals of both sexes, she said, are interested in issues of work/life balance.

She advises employees to ask for what they want, with the caveat that they might not receive everything they ask for. Workers should also look for environments that are a good cultural fit, and keep an eye out for role models that might serve as mentors.

Also during Tuesday's lunch, Luzada Hayes was recognized as the 2014 Albion Fellows Bacon Honoree. Hayes is the executive director at the nonprofit organization Aurora, a position from which she plans to retire at the end of the year.

In her acceptance speech, Hayes urged those present to remember the award's namesake.

Bacon (1865-1933) was an Evansville resident known for her social welfare work in housing reform, child welfare and public health.

"She was driven by the need to do the right thing. And because of that, we remember her today," Hayes said.

Women's Equality Day, observed on Aug. 26, commemorates the anniversary of the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

A local committee organizes Evansville's annual observance.

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