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Supporting women in their careers sometimes comes with a big move



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Sometimes in marriage, moving comes with the territory. The parent of one spouse gets sick, a job opportunity arises, a fresh start beckons. This summer, I uprooted my life for the woman I love -- and it was the right move.

Leaving my lifelong home in Champaign County to live in Chicago was something I had never planned on. At first, I resisted the idea.

Then I thought about the approach the late attorney Martin Ginsburg took on such matters, and it helped me work through my reluctance. Martin was married to the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who explained how their approach to a relationship had helped her career. "I had a life partner who thought my work was as important as his, and I think that made all the difference for me," she said.

Like many of us, I didn't get marriage right the first time. But after meeting Erica in 2020, I knew I was ready to get married again, and last year we tied the knot. When we met, Erica had spent almost a decade working for the Kellogg Company. She liked her job and was great at it. She has earned a series of promotions and was on track to become one of the company's youngest vice presidents.

Except for a brief stint in Battle Creek, Michigan, Erica had spent her entire career in Chicago. She was born in Arlington Heights, grew up in Palatine and graduated from Naperville North High School. Professionally as well as personally, Chicago is her home.

I, on the other hand, hail from Gifford, a rural central Illinois community. I come from many generations who have farmed and worked there. After college and a few years abroad, I returned home to make my life in nearby Champaign. I started a technology business, served as a county board member, county auditor and state senator. When I was elected state treasurer in 2014, I felt proud to be one of the few statewide officials from south of I-80.

With her career in Chicago and my life in Champaign, we shuttled up and down I-57 between our respective houses. When Erica became pregnant with twins, we knew we had to choose a place to settle. As we looked at our options, it became apparent that being in Champaign would have meant Erica abandoning the company's leadership track that she had worked tirelessly to be on.

My work as state treasurer matters to me, to Erica and to others. But if my wife continues to be successful at Kellogg, she could help the company grow, invest and hire more in Illinois. So, too, with all women who contribute to our companies, schools, governments and nonprofits. If my wife and women like her reach their fullest potential, we all do better because of it. Maybe this is doubly important to me because I have a daughter Ella, 14, and I want her to know that her work matters as much as any man's.

We're all familiar with the gender pay gap and the lingering inequality between men and women. Part of that is due to the attitude that a man's career should come first. About a decade ago, the Harvard Business Review surveyed multiple generations of male and female graduates of Harvard Business School. Elite business school grads are hardly a full reflection of American society, but the study provides insight into what a set of ambitious men and women believe.

The study found that a majority of men -- including young men -- believed their career should take precedence over their partners'. Meanwhile, 40% of female graduates reported finding that their careers took lower precedence than their partner's. The study also reported that female graduates had, on average, less responsibility and lower pay than male alumni.

There are multifaceted reasons for these discrepancies, but unequal expectations within marriage seem -- at least for one group of educated people -- to have contributed to unequal outcomes.

As an elected official, I tend to think in terms of public policy and often ask how government might address a problem. There's a lot that government can do to help women achieve equality at home and at work. But decisions about career and home are as much personal, domestic decisions as they are fodder for public policy.

When it comes to the career advancement of our spouses, men -- even, apparently, some of the most educated among us -- have a long way to go. Simply put, more of us need to make the sometimes-challenging sacrifices necessary to make our partner's careers as important as our own.

In late spring of 2023 right before the twins arrived, my wife was promoted to vice president, and my daughter and I moved to Chicago. To me, this move has been about true partnership.

- Michael Frerichs has served as Illinois State Treasurer since 2015 and recently, with his wife Erica, purchased a home in Chicago.