
Chief justice's wife juggles law, 2 children

By Bronislaus B. Kush TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Posted May 27, 2007 at 12:52 AM

John G. and Jane Sullivan Roberts don't have a lot of time in their lives to spend a night out on the town or to entertain friends at home.

First of all, the Roberts are busy with their two adorable, though spunky, 6-year-old children.

Then, Mrs. Roberts has to balance the management of the family household with the demands of her job as a partner in a prestigious law firm.

Not to mention the consuming pressures that Mr. Roberts faces as chief justice of the United States Supreme Court.

"When all is said and done, there's not a lot of time," said Mrs. Roberts, who was in town last week to attend her husband's commencement address at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester.

The Roberts' world turned "topsy-turvy" last fall when Mr. Roberts was nominated by President Bush to become the 17th chief justice in the nation's history.

But Mrs. Roberts, a 1976 graduate of Holy Cross and a trustee at the Jesuit institution, said life has settled down again, though there are the occasional bumps that high-profile D.C. beltway residents have to put up with.

Situations such as the invitation earlier this month to that white-tie affair at the White House honoring Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth.

“There’s no question our lives changed when my husband became chief justice,” said Mrs. Roberts. “But we still manage to be a family.”

That means dinner at home, and helping the kids with homework.

By the way, the chief justice packs the lunches that Jack and Josephine -- the children that the couple adopted in 2000 -- take to school.

President Bush’s nomination of Mr. Roberts, a conservative jurist with impeccable credentials, to replace Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist didn’t surprise many in Washington.

A Harvard University Law School graduate, Mr. Roberts had actually clerked for Justice Rehnquist when the former served as an associate on the Supreme Court.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Mr. Roberts worked at the White House in a number of capacities in the administrations of President Ronald W. Reagan and President George H.W. Bush before becoming a justice to the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington D.C., a plum appointment for judges.

While Mr. Roberts worked his way up the political establishment, his wife, who earned a law degree at the Georgetown University Law Center, built up her own impressive résumé, eventually becoming a high-powered lawyer specializing in sophisticated technologies such as satellite systems.

Mrs. Roberts said she didn’t think she’d become a lawyer when she studied mathematics at Holy Cross.

“But like most people, my life was filled with twists and turns,” she said.

Mrs. Roberts grew up in an Irish-Italian neighborhood in New York City and attended an all-girls Catholic high school.

Her father, John Sullivan, was a technician for the U.S. Postal Service in Manhattan and her mother, Kathleen, was an administrative assistant at Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center in the Bronx.

She was the oldest of four children.

Mrs. Roberts said her early years were anchored by family, school and the neighborhood.

“Believe it or not, I remember swimming in the East River,” she said. “Back then, people didn’t talk about how polluted it was. We actually had to pay to get to the beach.”

In her senior year, she decided to attend Holy Cross to study math, unaware that her freshmen class would include the first women ever admitted to the school.

“No, I didn’t think I’d be a pioneer,” said Mrs. Roberts. “I decided on Holy Cross because of its academics and didn’t know that it was previously an all-male school until a classmate had mentioned it.”

She said she made a good choice.

During her stay at Mount St. James, she made close friends and grew to admire many of the faculty.

Besides her studies, Mrs. Roberts joined the cheerleading squad and the women’s crew team.

With a laugh, she said the women rowers used a “cast-away” boat that had been used by the junior varsity men.

Mrs. Roberts said she has recollections of many special times at the Cross.

She said she remembers skating “around and around” the Hart Center and recalls one very memorable school Winter Ball. She said she loved to swing dance and she and her classmates convinced some of the male students to practice for several nights prior to the “big day.”

“We had practiced hard every night after we had done our schoolwork, and so we ended up having so much fun at the ball,” she said.

Mrs. Roberts said she and her husband exhibited their swing dance skills at the dinner honoring the queen, but only after former Secretary of State George P. Schultz and his wife had first taken the floor.

“We would not have gone out there by ourselves,” she said.

Mrs. Roberts praised Holy Cross officials for going out of their way to make the first women on campus comfortable. About a third of the freshmen class was female, Mrs. Roberts estimated.

“Holy Cross did the right thing,” she said. “Unlike other schools accepting women for the first time, they didn’t just put a toe in the water. It was the little things that sometimes counted, like introducing diet soda, salads and yogurt in the cafeteria. The administration was always taking the pulse on campus.”

After receiving a degree from Holy Cross in 1976, Mrs. Roberts received some scholarship money and studied education at the University of Melbourne.

She loved Australia so much that she stayed for three years before her mother convinced her it was time to come home.

Once back in the United States, she resumed her studies at Brown University, where she decided not to pursue a degree in math.

“I loved math, but I didn’t have a passion for it,” she explained.

She decided that a law career might be in order, and she set out for Georgetown.

“Law is very attractive because it offers you an opportunity to become involved with public policy and service,” she said.

After graduation, she was a judicial clerk for Judge James M. Sprouse of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

A devout Catholic, she also worked for a time for the anti-abortion Feminists for Life.

She later joined Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman in Washington, where she argued a number of matters before various courts and judicial bodies.

Eventually, she became a partner in the firm’s Global Technology Group, focusing on information-technology sourcing and the procurement of satellite systems.

In 2003, Mrs. Roberts, who was named to the Holy Cross Board of Trustees in 2001, became the firm’s professional development partner and the executive partner for talent development.

She soon will be officially joining another Washington law firm, Major, Lindsey & Africa.

Mrs. Roberts said she met her future husband in the late 1980s but didn’t begin dating him until around 1991. The couple was married on July 27, 1996, at St. Patrick’s Church in Washington.

One of the groomsmen was J. Michael Luttig, a U.S. appeals court judge who made the short list of Supreme Court nominees in the 1990s.

Mrs. Roberts said life has settled down for the Roberts family since her husband was confirmed by the U.S. Senate last September.

She said there's little time for socializing.

"The kids give us a good grounding," she explained. "Everything revolves around them: Getting them up, getting them ready for school, homework."

However, reading is one joy she said she still has time for.

"Even then, I'm usually reading something work-related or picking up a book on parenting," she said. She noted that her husband rarely has the time to pursue a passion of his own: golf.

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