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Working moms speak outBY ERIN GRACE AND JUDITH NYGREN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITERS

As a widowed mother of five and a trial attorney for Union Pacific Railroad, Anne Marie O'Brien has heard it: You can't be a good mom *and* a good lawyer.



Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is the unofficial star at the Republican National Convention, where delegates argue that the young governor, elected in 2006, has more experience than Democrat Barack Obama.

But the 47-year-old maintains that she is good at both roles and that her children have benefited from having a mother with the kind of career that puts food on the table and interesting discussion around it.

So O'Brien won't venture to predict how Sarah Palin will fare in the presidential campaign or whether the 44-year-old Alaska governor and mother of five can perform as No. 2 to the man who, if elected, would be America's oldest president entering office.

Like a number of women interviewed for this story, O'Brien greeted the news of Palin's surprise ascendancy with a mixture of "You go, girl!" and anger that yet another woman has to field questions about the juggling act — questions never asked of her male counterparts.

Since mothers continue to be most children's primary caregivers, the working women acknowledged that succeeding at home and work requires drive, a good support network, flexible boss and the ability to function on little sleep.

Stay-at-home mom Annie Emig, 46, of Omaha said she believed the choice was Palin's to make.

Emig left a nursing and management job to stay home to raise her four daughters, now ages 16, 15, 12 and 9. She said Palin's gifts may lie in "what she can give to the country."

"We all have different gifts," she said, adding that she doesn't think "in this day and age" the mother is necessarily the person best suited to parent at home.

Palin has added a new wrinkle to the old career-versus-family debate given the additional responsibilities she faces with a pregnant teenage daughter and an infant son with Down syndrome.

Juggling work and home is a familiar practice to Midlands women, who tend to work more and sooner after the birth of their children than women in most other states.

About 67 percent of Nebraska mothers are back at work within a year of giving birth — a rate topped by only five other states, including Iowa, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In married couples where fathers work, 63.1 percent of Nebraska mothers also hold down jobs. Only South Dakota holds a higher rate.

No one claims this is easy in ordinary life, not to mention doing so under the klieg lights of a big campaign or with the demands of the nation's second-highest office.

"It's hard," said former Lt. Gov. Kim Robak, who served under Ben Nelson starting in 1993, when her daughters were ages 2 and 5.

At the time, Robak would leave work for dinner and bedtime and return to her office until midnight or later.

A Democrat, Robak considered running for governor a decade ago and raised the idea with her family. Robak's younger daughter asked her not to. The family already had experienced the time commitment, extensive travel and negative campaign ads during Nelson's failed 1996 bid for the U.S. Senate.

Robak, 52, of Lincoln, now a lobbyist, does not judge Palin's different choice.

"That's her decision," Robak said. "She obviously has a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm."

Attorney Bernadette Tate, 46, of Omaha had both qualities following the birth of her twin sons 11 years ago.

With a husband working part-time from home, Tate still put in 12-hour days at Kutak Rock and would rise at 4 a.m. on weekends to work before her sons awoke.

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Tate later took a different, less demanding position at Mutual of Omaha but was struck when other women still asked: Couldn't she scale back? Didn't she want to be home?

Her response: "I am your husband. I'm as ambitious as he is."

Hearing that conversation echoed nationally regarding Palin is disappointing, she said.

"Because she's a mother she can't do both?" Tate asked. "Obama also has small children. Why can he do both?"

Kathleen Lenzen, 59, a Lincoln nurse who home-schooled her three children until they left for college and now serves as president of the Nebraska Christian Home Educators Association, said she also is offended.

She said Palin's dual role as mom and candidate is a nonissue. "I do believe it's sexist."

A child's upbringing is a joint venture, she said, and dad's role shouldn't be diminished nor mom's role narrowly defined.

When her children were young and she worked part time at night, she resented being asked: Does your husband baby-sit for you when you're at work?

"I'd tell them, 'No, he doesn't baby-sit. He is home parenting his children.'"

Kimberly Aichinger would prefer not to be a working mom.

But someone has to pay the bills, and the 28-year-old single mother tacks on two hours to her workday as a veterinary lab technician getting her 8½-month-old daughter dressed, out the door to her mother's Elkhorn-area home and then to work in midtown Omaha and back.

"And the rest of the time with me, she's sleeping," Aichinger said. "It's stressful and it's frustrating."

She questioned Palin's decision to join the ticket, given her infant son's Down syndrome.

"She's got an obligation to this baby first and foremost," Aichinger said.

But two other working mothers of children with Down syndrome see it differently.

Mary McHale, 53, of Omaha returned to work following her son's birth 10 years ago because her employer provided the family's health insurance. Daniel, at four months old, went to day care attached to feeding and oxygen tubes.

McHale saw the choice as necessary to immerse Daniel in an environment of typically developing children and because she was "not a good candidate to be a stay-at-home mom."

Elaine Adams, 39, of Omaha also returned to work after she had a daughter with Down syndrome. Addison came home with hospice care because of an inoperable heart defect. Now 3½, she is healthy enough to attend preschool.

It hasn't always been easy juggling Addison's needs, especially when she received educational services at home.

"You ask yourself, 'Am I really there for my child?'"

Both mothers said that if Palin becomes vice president, she could help address issues involving children with disabilities.

O'Brien said she wants to know about Palin. But she won't judge her on the juggling act.

"I certainly admire her, knowing the amount of energy it takes," O'Brien said. "Who knows if she can do it? Only Sarah."

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