

BALANCING LIFE AND LEADERSHIP: THRIVING AT WORK AND HOME

by Maricel Gentile

Life is never perfectly balanced, and I'm living proof of that. I started my business, Maricel's Kitchen, in my fifties, an age when many might think about slowing down. But for me, it was the beginning of a dream I'd held close for decades. My journey wasn't one of instant success or superhero-like perfection. It's been about perseverance, embracing chaos, and finding joy in the little moments. I'm a mom of two amazing sons, Paul Martin and Paul Michael, and the wife of a supportive husband, Paul. Together, they've been my backbone and cheerleaders. When I first decided to start Maricel's Kitchen, it wasn't just my dream—it became our family's adventure. From deliveries to washing dishes when a staff member called out, my family stepped up in ways that touched my heart and strengthened our bond.

Too often, we expect people to be superheroes, winning at everything. It's a beautiful idea but far from reality. Life isn't always balanced. There are long hours, sleepless nights, and moments when I question if I can keep going. But I've learned it's okay to step back, take a breath, and prioritize what truly matters: my family and our well-being. The parable of the big rocks is something I think about often. If you're not familiar, it's the idea that if you don't put the big rocks in first—the things that truly matter—you'll never fit them in among the smaller rocks, sand, and water of life. For me, those big rocks are making sure my cooking classes are prepped, my family has dinner, or that we have time for a family event. Most days, the beds in my house aren't made, and I'm okay with that because it's a small rock. Focusing on the big rocks ensures that the truly important things get done, even if the little things don't.

As a business owner, I don't work 9-to-5 anymore, it's a 24/7 commitment. But I've never been more passionate. There's a unique rhythm to our family life that blends home, work, and business into one. It's not about separating the two but about finding ways to connect within the chaos. For us, even household chores become moments to share a laugh or catch up on each other's lives. Whether it's my husband loading the washer, my youngest son Paul Michael feeding the dog, or my oldest son Paul Martin helping with deliveries, we find connection in the everyday tasks.

One of my favorite things to say is that the idea of "quality time" is a fallacy without quantity time. Families need to spend time together, whether it's over lunch, dinner, or even while folding laundry. At least once a week, we make it a point to sit down for dinner as a family. It's not always extravagant—sometimes it's a simple meal—but it's time for us to laugh, share stories, and simply be together.

My oldest son, Paul Martin, runs two businesses of his own (IRL Game Shop and Miruku Bubble Tea), and my youngest, Paul Michael, is busy with college and only comes home on weekends. Even so, they both find time to contribute to our family business, whether it's working alongside me or helping their brother. My husband, Paul, works a full-time job but still manages to support me and our family. Sometimes it feels like we're all juggling a hundred things at once, but somehow, it just works. Maybe we're all a little crazy, but it's our kind of crazy.

Starting a business later in life has been a rollercoaster of emotions. There's the joy of seeing my dream come to life, the stress of managing a team, and the exhaustion of long days and nights. But there's also the incredible fulfillment of knowing that my work is making an impact—not just for my customers but for my family. My sons have learned the value of hard work, resilience, and community, and my husband has shown me the depth of his love and support in ways I never imagined. My vision for Maricel's Kitchen has always been about more than just serving food; it's about creating a space where people can connect through the flavors and stories of Filipino and Asian cuisines. I dream of promoting Filipino food as a way to celebrate our culture and heritage, showing the world how rich and diverse it is. Beyond that, I want to share the beauty of Asian cuisine in all its forms, helping people appreciate the traditions, ingredients, and techniques that make it so special. Maricel's Kitchen is my way of bringing people together, one plate at a time, and fostering a love for these cuisines that have shaped my life and my family's story. Although next year I will turn 60, I feel as energized, if not more so, than when I was younger.



A lot of my inspiration comes from the strong women in my life, especially my mom and my Lola. My mom is a doctor and was a hospital administrator in Manila. Even now, in her eighties, she still runs her practice. Because she was so busy, my Lola raised me and taught me how to cook. But my mom always found ways to make time for me. My mom made sure to create special moments—we would go out for meals together, enjoy shopping trips, and even plan regular vacations.

My Lola was a trailblazer in her own right. In the 1950s, she came to America and happened to learn about hair perming. When she returned to the Philippines, she started a business making and selling chemicals for salons. It was truly a family effort—my mom often told us stories about when she was a kid how they'd mix chemicals, fill bottles, deliver, and still manage to get to school. My Lola and my mom were successful businesswomen long before the internet and today's opportunities for young women. They achieved so much while always prioritizing family. They weren't superheroes; they just knew how to focus on the big rocks and lean on family when the load became too heavy.

It's the same today with my family. It's not always a bed of roses. We argue, we disagree, we tease each other. But at the end of the day, we come together and make it work. Leadership, whether at work or home, thrives on love and connection. It's about showing up authentically, being willing to admit when you need help, and finding joy in the journey—even when it's messy.

Balancing life and leadership means accepting that you can't do it all, all the time. Some days, work takes precedence. Other days, it's family. And sometimes, you need to pause everything for self-care. It's a dance, not a perfect routine. For me, the key has been to stay present in the moment—whether I'm in the kitchen, at a family dinner, or simply folding towels with my husband.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that success isn't measured by perfect balance. It's measured by the love and laughter we share along the way. So, to all the women out there juggling life, work, and family: you don't need to be a superhero. Just be you. Embrace the chaos, laugh often, and remember that it's okay to lean on your loved ones. Together, we can thrive—not because we're perfect, but because we're perfectly imperfect.

At the end of the day, our family motto might as well be: there is no work-life balance. There's just life, and we're living it to the fullest.

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