

Reader Views

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Interview with Debra Lessin

Author of **Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book**

Today we are talking with Debra Lessin, CPA, entrepreneur, speaker and author of motivational/inspirational book “Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book.” Debra is speaking with Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. Debra, you have been a highly active participant in the business world for many years. What inspired you to write your book “Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book?”

Debra: “Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book” is the creative manifestation of my own personal life journey, a journey that began when I turned 40 and my business turned 10. It’s hard to believe but that journey began almost 12 years ago. I incorporated my business name, Balancing Act Productions five years before I ever wrote a single word or promoted work/life balance workshops. I simply was obsessed with finding balance in my life. Turning 40 was enough of a milestone. Add surviving 10 years of business ownership and a workaholic attitude and I knew that it was time to ask myself some tough questions. In finding the answers to these questions, I opened my creative heart and mind to making some changes. Five years later after slowly making significant changes to my life, I downsized my business for the third time and found the time to express myself by writing a book. I wanted to share the lessons that I had learned in my journey.

Juanita: Your book is divided into four main areas – Work and Play, Friends and Family, Heart and Soul, and Mind and Body. Can you give us an idea of how “Life is a Balancing Act” will help us as we juggle these aspects of our life?

Debra: “Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book” is a compilation of 66 ideas for this balancing act we call life. Most of the ideas are not new. They are simple reminders of things that you already do and don’t give yourself credit for or things that you want to do but always find excuses for why you can’t or won’t do them.

We all have many things competing for our time and energy. And while we’d like to do them all, it’s not always feasible or possible. Yes, some people seem to be able to pull it off. But do they really? Often times, when there are too many things on your plate,

everything suffers. Wouldn't it be better to do less things well than fail at attempting to do too many things?

I want people to find some ideas that inspire them. Many people are probably already doing many of the things in the book. But we get so caught up in our day to day lives and our "to-do" lists that we don't give ourselves credit for the little things we already do. The biggest excuses that we all use are no time and no money. At the end of the book, I list the ideas that cost less than \$20 as well as the ideas that don't take much time. There are a few other "balancing activities" that make the book a functional workbook if you want to use it that way. You can create a Strategic Balance Plan or a Balance Wish List. Mostly, I want people to come away with ideas to help them enjoy their lives a little more.

Juanita: Why do you think most people struggle with maintaining balance in their lives?

Debra: All of us struggle with balancing our lives because we are so busy doing so many things. We also live in a society that encourages and rewards achievement. So at the same time that we attempt to balance everything, we also attempt to do all of it to perfection. That quest for perfection is only going to create more chaos and less balance. Most people only think of balance in terms of work/life. But if you look at all aspects of your life – work, family, friends, relationships, health, money, space, spirit and community – the balancing act can be overwhelming. It doesn't have to be if you prioritize the things that are important to you and focus on things one step at a time. The truth of the matter is that there are only 24 hours in a day, 7 days to a week and 52 weeks to a year. We have a lot to do and simply always seem to run out of time. But everything can not and should not be attempted at once. Look at your life as a lifetime of opportunities. And give yourself a break for trying to achieve everything at once. You'll be healthier, happier, less hurried and thus less harried!

Juanita: Debra, you were recognized as a distinguished scholar on the merits of your CPA examination in 1976, which afforded you the opportunity to begin your business career straight out of school. Can you tell us of your extensive business history?

Debra: Do I have to? Okay, I'm laughing as I say this because in focusing on my creative endeavors, I have tried to downplay the CPA side of my life. Amazingly what I have learned for myself is that no matter what being a CPA and more importantly an entrepreneur is very much a part of who I am.

I began my professional career in public accounting with Price Waterhouse & Co. in Chicago. Back then, it was one of "the big 8" public accounting firms. I was the only woman in Illinois to receive an Elijah Watts Sells Certificate of Honorable Mention in recognition of outstanding merit on the November, 1976 CPA examination. In 1979, I moved to the corporate sector to work as Tax Manager at Heller Financial Corporation. While at Heller, I had the opportunity to obtain a Master of Science in Taxation from DePaul University as well as cultivate a small circle of private clients. In 1984, at age 29, I founded my own small business, D. J. Lessin & Associates, Inc. to exclusively serve the tax and accounting needs of individuals and small businesses. In 1990, I began writing and speaking to business audiences imparting practical and understandable advice on a wide range of accounting and financial topics. My writings and presentations alike featured a folksy, conversational, humorous and entertaining style including a monthly column for *Today's Chicago Woman* that was featured for four years.

I was honored by the U.S. Small Business Administration as its 1995 Accountant Advocate of the Year for the State of Illinois and the entire six-state Midwest Region. This award was in recognition of meritorious service not only as an industry professional but as an educator and a small business advocate. As an elected delegate to the 1995 White House Conference on Small Business, my leadership and advocacy was focused in the areas of home office tax deductions and reforming the definition of independent contractor helped those issues become top priorities in the legislative agenda set at the conference. I served as the national issues chair for the National Association of Women Business Owners Public Policy Committee home office tax deduction legislation, testifying before the U.S. House of Representatives Small Business Committee on this issue in January, 1995. I also received the 1996 Entrepreneurial Achievement Award from the Network of Women Entrepreneurs and the 1991 Women Business Owner of the Year Award from the Chicago Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. I have also served on the board of directors of the Illinois Institute for Entrepreneurship Education for ten years including five years as board president.

In 1994, I celebrated the milestone of my 10 year business anniversary. While I was proud of all of my achievements, the passion in growing the business was long gone. Instead, I found myself obsessed with finding more balance in my life. I had learned that in terms of business, bigger wasn't necessarily better. So I set upon a journey to find the road to balance. In doing so, I rediscovered my creativity and my passion. In 1997, I founded Balancing Act Productions, Inc. as an outlet for these creative endeavors. One of the things that I learned about myself is that being an entrepreneur is clearly a big part of who I am! I designed an interactive workshop on life balance issues which provides practical advice on how to make balance a regular part of your busy day-to-day life. And I wrote my book, "Life is a Balancing Act...a fun book".

Juanita: Please tell us about your most recent venture.

Debra: My most recent creative endeavor is the ABOV Gallery. The office of D. J. Lessin & Associates is now home to this new art gallery which features satellite imagery artwork. My biggest role with ABOV is that as a mentor to ABOV's founder Josh Schwartz. I'm also involved with the marketing and general growth planning for the business. And yes, I also the business accountant! Check out www.abovinc.com to learn more about ABOV.

Juanita: It is well known that you were not the stereotypical accountant. Can you tell us of your unique approach to business that reflected your soulful artistic spirit?

Debra: For me, people are the most important part of being a CPA not the numbers. As my clients are individuals and small businesses, many of us have been living parallel lives over the years. I have always sought out creative clients – artists, writers and other entrepreneurs. Many of these people are often afraid of financial professionals. I try to educate them by teaching them easy ways to keep good records. I can perform my "tax magic" because of the interpersonal relationships I've established. As part of my downsizing the practice, I've not sought out new business for years. Any new clients are always friends of the family, the family being my long-time clients of the firm.

Juanita: What does Debra's life look today like in contrast with the days when you were full-on building your business, and admittedly out of balance?

Debra: My life today is a combination of my professional and creative endeavors. My “day job” as a CPA engulfs my life from mid-January through April 15th. While I may work on Saturdays from February through April, I have not worked on Sundays for years. I can still remember the many years where I worked seven days a week from March 1st – April 15th. I am very, very productive during tax season, but clearly need my Sunday to recoup, both physically and mentally.

After April 15th, I try to work as a CPA three days a week (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday). During the fall extension deadline periods this is not always possible but it is always the goal. On the non-CPA days, my creative endeavors – Balancing Act Productions and ABOV Gallery fill some but not all of my time.

First let me say that whatever my life looks like today there are still times that I am out of balance. The difference now is that I am so aware of it that I try to correct it sooner, rather than later. It is that recognition and knowledge that helps me come back to center.

Juanita: How have your personal priorities and goals changed as you’ve progressed on your journey?

Debra: Without question my goals and priorities have changed. There are times in my life when I happily state that I have NO goals. That’s usually from a professional point of view as a CPA. That’s a time for me when I choose to be happy with the status quo and simply enjoy my life. As I’ve matured, I’ve realized that while I am good at what I do, it does not totally define me. I have a successful business that provides me with a comfortable income and the ability to pursue some of my creative passions. I work very hard during tax season. After April 15th, I try to only work 3 days a week as a CPA to have more time for myself and my other ventures. Try is the operative word of course. My time is more important to me than working more for money. I’ve chosen over the years to downsize my business (three times in fact) so that I can pursue other goals and dreams. I’ve also learned that as much as I may want to downplay my success as a CPA, it is very much a part of who and what I am. My success as a CPA is also why I can allow myself to be anything that I want to be, within reason of course!

Juanita: What would be the first question you would ask someone that is having a hard time managing their life and wants to make some changes?

Debra: The first thing that I would ask is what the most important aspects of their life were today. The emphasis on today is important because life could be totally different six months from now and clearly six years from now. I try to get people to focus on the most important aspects of life and then pick one or two areas that are lacking and focus on making changes in that area first. Trying to balance everything at once simply will continue to keep you out of balance.

Juanita: Who have been the influences that have helped you in keeping your own life in balance?

Debra: My friends are clearly the most the balancing forces of my life. I have a large circle of friends. And as I age, I am awed and inspired by how long I’ve known many of them. Clearly you can’t maintain close ties with everyone all the time. Knowing that, there are two people in my life (Ida and Josh) that I will always reach out to. They are

daily parts of my life, always keep me in check (and me them) and help me maintain some semblance of balance.

Juanita: With all that you've taken on in your life Debra, what do you do to calm and still your mind and soul?

Debra: I try very hard to take care of myself. That includes pampering on a fairly regular basis. Getting a regular massage has clearly changed how my body reacts to and processes stress. There are simple, inexpensive things that calm my spirit too. Taking a bath is a great way to escape and relax. I'll light a candle, play some relaxing music and float my worries and aches and pains away. I also read a lot of books, mostly novels that are shared with several circle of reading friends. And in the warmer months, walking and gardening not only provide some easy exercise but visual joy in nature's surroundings. And of course, I thoroughly enjoy getting together with friends for dinner, theatre and/or shopping. If this can be combined with an out of town excursion, all the better! Believe it or not, working on my creative businesses – Balancing Act Productions and ABOV Gallery fills a lot of my non-CPA time in a fun relaxing way. These ventures spark my creative energy in a way that simply never feels like work.

Juanita: What advice do you have for entrepreneurs or home-based business owners whose lives seem to have no real separation between work and home?

Debra: Anyone running a business at home needs to create boundaries in order to achieve some work/life balance. These boundaries should be mental as well as physical (if possible). A separate work space where you can close the door and walk away from work is helpful. Setting work hours is also key. Granted, a home based entrepreneur's hours may be skewed, especially if part of the work/life balance involves child rearing. Most people have an optimal time of day when they are at their work best. For me, that time is morning. For others, it can be late at night. But working around the clock is not healthy for anyone. Take a break. Leave the office for appointments or lunch. Set a schedule that works for your life. The hardest part is for you to control your business and not for the business to control you. That isn't always easy, especially in the early years of business growth. But it can be done. And it must be done, especially if you want some balance in your life.

Family entrepreneurs have a unique situation as it is easy to simply focus on the business and let the relationship come second. You need to schedule date nights and find time to talk when no business is discussed. Someone may have to be the referee or it will be too easy to lapse into just talking about work. Couples who work together do have the added advantage of truly enjoying each others company. And that has to be a special part of their relationship. It's also important to cultivate other friendships that are not work related, both individually and as a couple. More than anything, you should cherish your unique situation. Work will always be there. Take time to nurture your personal relationship so that stays solid too.

Juanita: Do you feel it is harder for women to maintain balance in their day to day life due to varying expectations – societal and/or personal?

Debra: Yes, I do feel it is harder for women to maintain balance. But I do not think that balance is just a woman's issue. We all need balance in our lives. Women are caretakers by nature and society's expectations. We are often so busy taking care of everyone

(children, spouse, home and parents as we age) that we forget to take care of ourselves. If we don't take care of ourselves, then how can we take care of others? If you add the work component to that, the task seems impossible. It's not, but it does take some work and some concerted effort.

Juanita: Debra, what are your thoughts on goal setting in the scheme of balancing your life, and how often should one reassess their goals?

Debra: It's important to approach balance like you do any other important part of your life. Set goals and priorities. Remember the phrase – “having it all”? I believe that is possible IF you look at your life as a wealth of opportunities. We can have it all, just maybe not all at the same time. Life changes over time. So will what brings you balance. If you don't set goals for balance, it will not happen. Schedule balance into your life in the same way that you'd schedule a business meeting. Reassess things every six months to not only be sure that you are on track but to see how life has changed. And adjust your balance goals accordingly.

Juanita: Please tell us about Balancing Act Productions, Inc. and your workshops?

Debra: Balancing Act Productions is the company I created for all my creative Balance endeavors. My workshop, also entitled “Life is a Balancing Act” addresses important life balance issues that are part of each of our busy day-to-day lives. The workshop provides practical advice on how to make balance a regular part of your day-to-day life. I introduce all the components of the life balance wheel: work, play, mind, body, spirit, space, relationships and money. Each participant will examine the many things competing for their time and energy and establish a personal action plan to implement your goals and priorities. The workshop and the book complement each other but are mutually exclusive parts of Balancing Act Productions.

“Life is a Balancing Act” is an informative and enlightening workshop that will open your eyes of the participants and help them consciously evaluate life choices and priorities. It is a perfect breakout session or training workshop for an organization's meeting and/or conference. It also provides a unique break from a long day of technical or educational seminars. The workshop lasts approximately one hour depending on the time allowed for questions and the level of audience participation.

Balancing Act Productions also markets a small line of “Balancing Act Products” for your mind, body and spirit.

Juanita: What is your website?

Debra: <http://www.lifeisabalancingact.com/>

Juanita: Thank you for speaking with us today Debra. Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Debra: Balance does not happen overnight. It is a constant challenge. You need to remember that balance changes just as your life changes. What brings balance to your life today may not be what brings you balance six months from now and will probably not be what brings you balance six years from now. Change is key to balance – accepting it and seeking it. Change is hard for many people. But it can be a good experience if you welcome it with open arms. It's important to realize that it is a step by step process – and

baby steps at that. You have a lifetime of opportunities to experience. If you can find some balance in the process, you'll enjoy and appreciate each opportunity for the life lessons that you'll learn. Balance is different for each and every one of us. In that regard we each need to celebrate our uniqueness. You may need to approach time for balance just like you do a business meeting – scheduling some time for yourself. Accept up front that there is no such thing as perfect balance. And give yourself credit for the many things that you already do. Most importantly, be sure to have some fun. You work hard and deserve the best your life