

## *Chapter 5*

# ***Back to Work***

We arrived in San Diego, and a new chapter of my life began to unfold. For the first time since we married, John and I could live our life without thinking about a move to the next duty station. We could settle permanently in one place. We could think about buying a house and perhaps getting a dog.

We bought a house in Allied Gardens, a new development at the edge of San Diego, north of Interstate 8, located on a canyon rim above Mission Valley. It was 1956 and dairy cattle roamed the grassy meadows along the San Diego River, which wound its way through the valley between towering canyon walls. Today Mission Valley is home to two major shopping centers, the Charger's Stadium and a mass of condominium complexes in the heart of Metropolitan San Diego.

We arrived in San Diego in October and stayed with Navy friends until our new house was ready. By November, we were settling into our new home — unpacking and meeting most of our neighbors. Then we began our landscaping project: a Southern California classic of foundation shrubs, shade trees and a lawn that stayed green all year.

Bruce entered kindergarten with Cheryl following the next fall—and I began to experience schools in a new way. I volunteered for Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) at my children's school and participated in many of my kids' activities. They joined Cub Scouts and Brownies, while I took great pleasure in my budding role as a typical suburban wife and mother.



Blanchard Collection

Bruce, Cheryl and I pose for a photo before going to an after-school event. As a typical suburban mom, I joined PTA, and did my part in Cub Scouts, and Brownies.

Before long we decided to add a dog to our family. We chose a large pup with a smooth coat and floppy ears, a Weimaraner-Labrador mix. Clancy—who, despite her name

was a female—won our hearts and earned a reputation as the *neighborhood* dog. She may have been best known for her habit of eating honeybees she snatched out of the air. We thought letting Clancy have pups would be a good educational experience for Bruce and Cheryl. John ran advertisements twice in the local newspaper's pet section, promising pick of the litter to the owner of a mate for Clancy. When that failed, my husband's sense of humor took control and he ran an ad in the personals—you can imagine the responses to that! We were finally contacted by a lady who wanted her Weimaraner to, as she put it, "have some fun." A few weeks after this *one night stand*, it became apparent that Clancy was in the family way. As the due date neared, John prepared a whelping box in the garage. When the big day came, John narrated while Clancy labored to produce her twelve puppies. Early in the process, he turned his back to Clancy. As he explained that a doctor would help a woman giving birth by doing some of the things that Clancy was doing; he was completely unaware that Clancy was tending her firstborn and instinctively polishing off the placenta. John was surprised to see a look of sheer horror on Bruce's face.

Our son bolted from the scene shouting, "I never want to be a doctor!"



Once Cheryl was in first grade and in school all day, I began to feel restless. The yard was landscaped and designed for "low-maintenance." We had permanent-press clothing and a household of modern appliances. After the household chores were done, I had several hours of spare time each day. I needed to keep busy but I could only clean so many closets and endure

so many neighborhood coffee-and-gossip sessions before boredom set in. One morning, while cleaning out some old files, I found my Civil Service records. I think what happened that day can best be described as serendipity. Although I didn't have any intention of returning to work in the near future, I was curious. Was I still in the system — and employable by the government — or would I have to take a battery of tests before applying for a new position? With time on my hands and nothing better to do that morning, I decided to call and find out.

The gentleman in the personnel office told me that I was, indeed, in the system and that the Navy Electronics Laboratory (NEL, later referred to as “the Center”) had an opening for a bookkeeping machine operator. He said this position had been open for quite some time and he had been unable to send a qualified person to the Lab to apply. He asked if I would go talk to them as a favor. My afternoon was free that day, and Point Loma was a lovely place to visit. So, I decided to get out of the house and take a drive to NEL — just to talk to them. I liked the place. What's more, they liked me and made an offer. I wanted the job.

After my visit to NEL that afternoon, John and I discussed my job offer at length. I was excited and I saw this as an opportunity to enrich my life. The more we talked about it, the more I wanted to accept the job. My husband, however, being a pretty smart guy, wasn't pleased at all. Coming home to a good meal, well-tended children, an immaculate house and a manicured yard would be hard to give up. I didn't blame him, and I promised that I would not ask him for help with the household. We finally came to an agreement with the “no help” stipulation guaranteed.

In the two weeks between my acceptance and actually going to work, neighbors and friends almost went into panic mode.

The coffee clutch gals were appalled that I would even think of going to work. It just wasn't done in our neighborhood, they said — men supported their families and women stayed home with their children. A male friend of ours took me aside for a "heart to heart." Ignoring the fact that operating a bookkeeping machine was considered women's work, he scolded me for taking a job a man could be doing and thus snatching food from the mouths of babes. Another friend of John's said that by going to work, I made it look like John was not able to provide for his family. He said John would be shamed in front of his male friends.

I never did receive encouragement from family or friends. Still, I knew what my decision had to be. Operating a bookkeeping machine may not sound very exciting, but I enjoyed it, and I wanted to do it. I was bored and going back to work was something I felt I had to do for myself.

At that time, two thirds of working women were employed in clerical, service and sales positions. Bookkeeping, a clerical duty, was on the right side of the gender gap. So-called "women's work," however, had always extended into the professions: nursing and teaching.

Of course, history has recorded a few exceptions in most professions. By the late 1950s, a growing number of women were earning professional degrees, becoming physicians, dentists, lawyers and politicians. We had women occupying seats in the U.S. House and Senate. In fact, Senator Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine, ran in several Republican presidential primaries in 1964 and became the first woman to have her name placed in nomination for the presidency at the national convention of a major political party. When the roll was called that year, Senator Smith came in second to Barry Goldwater.

As women gained political clout, advances in equal rights and opportunities came slowly. After an eighteen year effort, John F. Kennedy signed an equal pay bill into law in 1963. At that time, the wage gap was 59%: women earned 59 cents for every dollar men earned. By 2006, women had moved ahead but still lagged behind with a 77% wage gap.



As I prepared to go back to work, leaving the kids in someone else's care was a great concern. I did not want them to feel neglected or disadvantaged because their mother worked. At first, they went to a trusted neighbor's house after school and stayed in her care until we arrived home from work. During that hour, they enjoyed a snack and played with the neighborhood kids just as they did when I was home. Later we hired a sitter until we felt Bruce and Cheryl were mature enough to stay home on their own. I never saw any evidence that my working damaged the kids in any way.

One afternoon when I arrived home early, Bruce made a point of hugging me and telling me that he missed me. Then he dashed out to play. His brief adoring display lost its flavor when he stayed out past dinnertime, and I had to comb the neighborhood and bring him home. As an adult, Cheryl said that the main thing she remembered about me going to work was that she earned big money — a whopping \$5 per week — for doing chores. She also said that she enjoyed the freedom she had as a so-called "latchkey kid."

I kept my promise and didn't ask John for help around the house. We bought a dryer and I cut back on closet cleaning. I organized my housework with a tight weekend schedule. Saturday, I cleaned house and did the laundry. I cooked on