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A Letter to My Daughters

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Synopsis

This piece is a letter to my two daughters, Susan and Nora, to explain why I am a working mother, why being a mathematician and a woman in science is important to me. I hope they will read it someday and be inspired. I hope they will realize that while the balance between family and work continually shifts, it is possible to have it all.

Dear Susan and Nora,

Right now, you're young and having too much fun to think much about what Mommy does all day while you're at school. But I'm hoping that when you're older, you'll be inspired to be the best you can be at whatever you choose to do. I've chosen to be a working mom—a mathematics professor and a mother. It's a challenge but full of rewards.

Thinking back, I can see that I've always wanted to be both a mother and a professor. Your grandfather was a professor and I thought it was fantastic that he picked us up from school and was there to play with us in the afternoons. I didn't realize that meant he worked at night to get everything done. I do the same. After you go to sleep, I often spend time grading or writing. Before that, I try to be as much of an active mom as I can be. I like to take you to activities and be part of your lives. I love to take you to the movies and on vacations. Travel was hard when you were very young, but now it's easy to bring you to new and exciting places, and I love showing you the world. The overnight transatlantic flights to see our family in Ireland don't even phase you!

My favorite part of my day is when we talk before bed time. Even though it's sometimes just a few minutes, this is when you tell me your "secrets". When I pick you up after school, everything is "fine" but at night when you are tired you are more open, and we talk about the important parts of your day—the good and bad parts. I try to be a good listener. I don't always have good answers for you, but sometimes you have good answers without realizing it.

What does being a woman in mathematics really mean? I'm hoping that, by the time you reach your careers, you'll have easier choices than I had. I certainly had more choices than my mother's generation, but I was the only woman in most of my math classes in college. I'm also hoping that you will realize that you can have a career and motherhood without compromising what is important to you. I feel like I have the best of both worlds—I'm a successful professor and a good mother at the same time. It takes planning to make that work and I couldn't do that without your Dad.

I spent most of my twenties working really hard to get the Ph.D. I needed to do this job. I studied Applied Mathematics at Rice University in Texas. After growing up in Ireland, moving to the United States was a big adventure. I think it was hard for my parents because we knew that I wouldn't return to Ireland after graduate school. When I finished graduate school, I thought I wanted to be at a research university, but the job I found was at Murray State, a masters university. I published like crazy so that I could move, but the Murray State job was so much fun. I taught classes in my field, I mentored students, and I wrote papers on problems that I found interesting. I liked my colleagues and fell in love with your Dad there. A broken blender and a sprained ankle made me fall for him.

I collaborated with lots of people over the years. Some collaborations were a success and we wrote lots of papers. Some less so, and we wrote just one before parting ways. I had a lot of flexibility to define my own success, and that was very important to me. I spent some time working on funded projects in mathematical biology and other projects involving women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). I even spent a few years working part-time for the Association for Women in Mathematics. That was a challenging time. I was half-time at two jobs but really working overtime. Nora was born while I worked for AWM. I was overwhelmed and found myself taking calls at the grocery store! I eventually went back to

working full-time for Murray State and today consider myself a leader in my department and college. I'm always looking for the next interesting project — something that will be exciting, challenging, and rewarding.

The flexibility that came with tenure has helped enormously in my role as your mother. I control my schedule and that makes it possible for me to be there for you every day after school.

Being a working mom is incredibly important to me. Growing up, I was told you could “have it all”—have a professional career and be a loving mother. My mother quit her job when she got married, so I didn't have an automatic role model. But I had significant support from my parents and from your Dad, so I felt like I could do both.

We had quite a journey to have you, but that's a story for another day. What I've learned as a mother and a professional is that it's important to do things you enjoy. I try to do things with you that I love so that we can have fun together. I try to focus on work tasks that I find rewarding. If I'm going to be incredibly busy, I want to enjoy it. There are a lot of things that aren't exciting — grading, laundry, cleaning the house. But at work, I love the great parts of being an academic: teaching, research, mentoring. I wouldn't trade it for anything. At home, making dinner is not so great, but I love to make our chocolate peppermint cake every year at Christmas. Sometimes work is really busy, and I have less time for home life. Other times, I have more time for family and I can do lots of fun things with you. People talk about work-life balance. For me it's constantly shifting, depending on the time of year.

I hope someday that you will read this and think that I did a good job at being a working mom. Not perfect, but good. When it's your turn to make this choice in life, I will support whatever you do. Love you both!

Mommy