



Federal Agent Lisa Richards

Finding a balance

As winner of last year's major Gold Award, the AFP hosted the official launch of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Business Council of Australia National Work and Family Awards for 2005. The following is a speech given by Federal Agent Lisa Richards which highlights her success in finding the right balance between work and home life.

I started my policing career 14 years ago after completing an undergraduate program with the AFP at Monash University, almost 300km from our family dairy farm in country Victoria.

I moved to Sydney as a young investigator, and with no relatives nearby the AFP quickly became my family; I lived for work and my colleagues.

Sydney was an eye-opener for this somewhat naïve young country girl, but I have one simple philosophy, which served me well, "There is no point doing a job unless it is done properly."

I was involved in many interesting and significant investigations in Sydney, while my spare time was spent involved with the office social club organising functions and social days; perhaps this provided for others the sense of family I felt.

In 1997 I stumbled across Mr Right, and given my surrogate relationship with the AFP, it was inevitable that he was also a member. The following year I transferred to Canberra and general duties policing. Again there were no close no friends or family, but I had Mr Right by my side and confidence in the AFP to offer me opportunities.

I quickly settled into my new family, assisted by shift work. I was also involved in long and short-term investigations, and was humbled to perform the role of Acting Sergeant on numerous occasions.

In 2000, Mr Right and I returned to my family farm to be wed by the AFP Chaplain, Father Peter Guy. Eighteen months later, Andrew received a two-year posting to Darwin. With our first child due five months later, I was faced with my first work/life balance issue. I chose not to apply for a position in Darwin, and took leave without pay expecting the organisation not to want someone to work for four months in a new location learning the ropes, then head off on maternity leave.

I was happy with my decision and it felt right.

Andrew's induction for the posting included an interview with the Manager of Northern Region where, when asked about his spouse, he explained my intention to commence LWOP. Later that day, I received an invitation from that manager to work in Darwin until I commenced maternity leave.

That really made me feel valuable to the AFP; that I was worth the effort. Once again I had a new family and more fantastic opportunities. I took carriage of three people-smuggling briefs, seeing them through court, quickly learning the legislation, and dealing with the high management, political and media interest they attracted.

Ella was born two days after I finished work. The support of the small Darwin Office and their families was remarkable, filling the void for a new mum having just finished eight years' full-time work, in a town miles from established friends or family.

Fourteen months after Ella, Will was born. Five months after that Andrew received a promotion to Team Leader in Adelaide. Haven't we been here before? No friends, no family, only the sanctuary of the AFP.

So many issues to deal with. Do I go back to work? How and when? Good country girls stay at home and look after their children and family. If I go back part-time it will affect the team I am working with, they won't like my rigid hours. It's not fair to the client if I can't be accessible. The AFP won't want an investigator in an admin role. I've been out of the game for too long.

How can I give work 100% and my family 100%?

I couldn't see how I could do both roles properly. If it kept my family happy, I would have left the AFP to stack supermarket shelves, but the key to our family (and many others I expect) is if Mum is happy, the whole family is happy.

One day a female manager from the Adelaide office came to visit me during children's sleeps. Having been in a similar situation to me, she rekindled my motivation and confidence and suggested the AFP wanted me back.

I returned to work two days a week in a data integrity role which really suited my "if you do it, you might as well do it properly" motto.

I could see the value of my role to the AFP and my colleagues; for those reasons and more, my role was valuable to me. I suspect the kids probably enjoyed their break at day care too. It was rewarding to be reminded that I am an individual and to realise that I can do a bit of both, and do it well.





In October 2004 Andrew was asked to deploy, at very short notice, to an important overseas role, unaccompanied, for six months. We quickly discussed it and agreed he would go.

My current role in our family is one of support. I chose to support Andrew in the progression of his career; I can support the AFP indirectly by supporting him on his deployment, and while the children are young I hope to continue to nurture them in their formative years. As well, I was continuing to meet my basic needs for independence and sense of self worth by working part-time for the AFP.

Management staff at the Adelaide office were fantastic, making genuine offers to help, both at work and at home.

Unfortunately, after Andrew had been away for five weeks, I was starting to lose control of the balance I had, and expected, both at home and at work.

It was not someone else's responsibility to help me feed, bath and get the kids to bed; no one else could get up to them through the night, or look after one at short notice while I took one to the doctor. My only option was to move back to the farm with Mum and Dad, which I was lucky to have.

I discussed the decision with my supervisor and management staff of the Adelaide office. To my delight I heard, "We can do whatever you want. When are you going? What do you need? "

I said I would love to continue to work from home, if that was possible. "Done. That's easy. How else can we help?"

All at once I had my cake and could eat it too. I am able to work a flexible 16-hour week and extend the hours if necessary.

While my Internet connection is a little slower from home, I do not have office interruptions and my meals are delivered, so my output is probably higher than it was in the office.

The kids don't cry when they go to day care, because now it means quality time with their grandparents, feeding calves or picking fresh vegies from the acre patch.

I feel comfortable that I have my work/life balance back and that I am performing each role properly; otherwise I might as well not do it.

This confidence is due to the AFP giving me the opportunities to do so, and I congratulate them for winning last year's award in a climate where it is too easy for people to leave an organisation seeking a better worklife balance.

I would also like to emphasise the role of middle management in not only supporting the AFP's objectives in promoting a work life balance, but actually making it possible. It is one thing to have attractive options, but another to make them work.

I think that my circumstances are but one great example of the AFP's ability, at all levels, to integrate work and family life.