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First Person

Graduate School With Children

By Keith Greene

This fall, I will begin my doctoral studies in the history department of an Ivy League university. Wondering what to expect, I e-mailed a friend from my undergraduate years ("Tom"), who detailed the academic trials of his graduate career.

In the four years since joining an elite university on the West Coast, Tom had switched departments and wrestled intensively with his research interests, which now included German history and linguistics. Then he asked about my current historical interests.

The first thing that came to mind was an episode of the television program *Dora the Explorer* in which the heroine, Dora, must free her pet hamster from an Aztec pyramid. I had watched that episode the day before with my 3-year-old daughter, while simultaneously attempting to read a scholarly article about the Constitutional Convention.

Was this what graduate school was going to be like with children?

I have been away from academe for five years. In that time, I have lived in five cities on two continents and worked four jobs. I am married, and my wife and I have two young children, two cats, and an 87-pound dog.

Part of me always knew that I would return to university life, but I never let the logistics of a graduate career with a full family enter into my calculations. Now, with the harried application process behind me, those calculations are front and center.

My wife is starting a master's program this fall, albeit at a different Ivy League university, and the reality of our future course work is beginning to set in. I plan to chronicle our adventures through graduate school with children over the course of this academic year, and possibly beyond.

In the midst of organizing our cross-country move, searching for a pet-friendly apartment, and worrying about child care, I contacted a number of parents at our respective universities for advice. While their responses have been overwhelmingly friendly and encouraging, they have also done nothing to allay my anxieties.

We heard remarks such as, "I was up all night with my sick daughter while all the other grad students were studying for their prelims" and "I know food stamps weren't intended for doctoral students, but we have to survive somehow, don't we?"

In most major cities, the cost of child care now exceeds the cost of public-college tuition. My wife and I have no family in the region to which we will be moving, and the typical familial response to our fiscal worries has tended to be the laughing remark, "Ah, to be a poor graduate student again." Or, more specifically, to be a pair of poor graduate students with the financial responsibilities of child care that could put two additional students through college.

Luckily, we managed to secure a much-coveted and highly subsidized spot for our daughter at a university-affiliated preschool. When I learned of that coup, I was no less ecstatic than I had been upon receiving my initial admission to graduate school.

The moment one becomes a parent, as every parent can attest, the matter of access to schools -- in particular, to quality child care and good preschools -- becomes a primary concern. Although my wife and I still have no visible means to pay even the modest subsidized tuition at our preschool, I now feel as though we have an ace-in-the-hole: One of our children is covered.

All that's left to do is coordinate child care for our 6-month-old baby and somehow generate an additional $1,500 a month to cover the costs.

Those financial and parental concerns are precisely why I felt a nervous jag in my stomach when my old friend Tom inquired into my academic interests. Certainly, I am as passionate about my research interests and as eager to expand the breadth of knowledge in my field as any doctoral candidate.

But at the same time, I worry that when my adviser asks about my intellectual ambitions, I will respond with concerns about child-care costs or about Dora's monkey friend, Boots.

I recognize that I am beginning my graduate career from a different life stage than my peers and that there undoubtedly will be moments in which I will be forced to trade time in a library cubicle for time with Thomas the Tank Engine. But I also recognize that, at a time when a fourth of all doctoral candidates never complete their degrees, I have just as many advantages as distractions.

My time away from academe has given me an intellectual foundation and drive I could never have possessed had I entered graduate school immediately after earning my bachelor's degree. And my parental responsibilities -- while time-consuming in ways that childless students could not imagine -- have forced me to become as economical as possible with my free hours.

Much of the time-to-degree fatigue in graduate school is blamed on a lack of perspective, in which qualified students burn out as they become further and further removed from the outside world. I will not have that option. My life will contain all of the responsibilities of a doctoral student combined with the joys and sleep deprivation of parenthood.

Ultimately, as daunting as my future sounds, I wouldn't plan it differently. Yes, there will be debt -- mountains of debt -- just as there will be periods of emotional and intellectual strain, but this is the career path I have chosen.

In most competitive careers, employees work long hours with little flexibility in their personal lives. In academe, there is an intellectual payoff for that. I am passionate about my graduate pursuits, and I believe my familial life might actually enrich my academic potential. We'll find out if I'm right.

Keith Greene is the pseudonym of a new doctoral student in history at an Ivy League university.

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First Person

Graduate School With Children, Part 2

By Keith Greene

This wasn't so hard. By mid-October, I was congratulating myself on how well I was coordinating my graduate work with my parental responsibilities. As the father of a 3-year-old girl and an 11-month-old boy, and as a student in a competitive doctoral program, I had no free time -- none -- but everything was under control.

Never mind that my wife and I were silently accruing student-loan debt to pay for food and child care. All was well. My wife was succeeding in her master's program; she left early every morning to commute the long distance to her campus and returned home in the evenings for the dinner-and-bedtime rituals. My daily routine resembled a well-oiled machine: (1) Wake up at 5:30 a.m., drink coffee, walk the dog; (2) Wait for the nanny to arrive, then take the older child to preschool; (3) Read for graduate seminars, eat lunch, and go to class; (4) Pick up both kids, walk the dog again, fix dinner, put the kids to bed, and collapse; (5) Repeat.

In early November, however, the machine began to break down, and so did my metaphor. My life in graduate school with kids could no longer be compared to working on an assembly line. It was more like juggling bowling pins.

That month, in the middle of a busy week, my wife and I were forced to fire the nanny who was watching our infant. The details aren't important. What is important is that we suddenly found ourselves without child care, just as the pace of our course work began to intensify. My first papers were due, and I had significantly more reading than usual.

To make matters worse, the constant go-go-go of my daily routine had begun to take a toll. I had been either reading scholarly works or entertaining my children for two-and-a-half months without a break; the little sleep I got was fitful and interrupted by my daughter, who had recently learned to use the bathroom in the middle of the night -- often followed by the slam of a toilet seat at 3 a.m.

I was exhausted.

Just a week earlier, I had smugly wondered: Without kids, what were my fellow graduate students doing all day and night to fill their time? After all, here I was managing my course work, raising two children, and succeeding at both. Then, just as suddenly, it was all too much. If attending graduate school with children is like juggling, then someone was tossing in more bowling pins, and I was struggling to keep up.

My wife and I placed ads for a new nanny while we traded off staying at home with our son and working. Ultimately our connections with parents and teachers at our daughter's preschool proved useful: My wife spent more than 40 frantic hours calling and visiting day-care centers while I wrote papers. Finally, she found one with an opening. Our infant son could start immediately.

We would be paying more for child care than we did to rent our three-bedroom apartment, but it didn't matter: Without a safe place for our kids, our scholarly careers would stall before they got started.

Occasionally our lives have the illusion of stability -- that is, until I'm sitting in class and my cellphone starts to vibrate, and I am reminded of just how tough this balancing act can be. When the phone rings, I apologize and duck into the hall:

I can't ignore the call, as other students often do, because more often than not the call is from a teacher or a child-care provider: "Hello, your son/daughter threw up and is running a fever. Please pick him/her up as soon as possible."

"Of course," I reply, and, just like that, all of my work is put on hold.

Day-care centers and preschools close at 5:30 p.m. This past semester, two of my courses ended at 6:30 p.m. I thought, at first, that managing those kinds of scheduling hiccups -- the simple fact that the life of a parent and the life of a graduate student are not intended to overlap -- would be the difficult part of attending graduate school with kids. But it isn't.

What's much harder is handling the many unknowns. You simply cannot plan your study schedule around the probability of strep throat or a dishonest nanny or a snow day. The best you can do, I think, is go to bed early, work when possible, and accept that chaos and debt are integral to attending graduate school with small children.

In a way, the intensity might even help: The first paper I wrote for graduate school has been accepted for publication at a scholarly journal. I have to think that all of this will make me a better scholar someday, because if I can handle this level of stress, I can handle just about anything.

At this point, what's keeping me going is spring break.

Keith Greene is the pseudonym of a new doctoral student in history at an Ivy League university.

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FIRST PERSON

Graduate School With Children, Part 3

It's time to dispel the graduate-school myth that family time is wasted time

By KEITH GREENE

Now that I have completed my first year in a top doctoral program in history, while balancing my responsibilities as the father of two young children, I can say with certainty that they weren't the drain on my productivity that everyone seemed to predict they would be. In fact, I think my kids have actually made me a better scholar.

I've gotten used to hearing a range of reactions when faculty members and fellow graduate students learn that I have a 4-year-old daughter and a 1-year-old son. But the typical response has been astonishment: "I don't know how you manage it!"

What people without young children may not realize is just how much of their free time is spent in pursuits such as checking e-mail and watching movies. To keep up with my course work, I've been forced to carve out my time differently and clarify my priorities.

Every moment I spend watching a monkey wash a cat on YouTube is a moment that I won't have to read and write for my courses or a moment I won't have with my children. Either way, it's a vicious trickle-down effect.

Working as both a graduate student and a father has imposed a discipline in my life that has made me better at both. That brings me to the second, more troubling response I have noticed from colleagues when they hear I have young children: jealousy.

Rather than being envious of my children or my work per se, some colleagues seem jealous of my general stage of life. Many graduate students feel professionally pressured to delay starting a family and remain childless. One professor even told me that it was good that I "got it out of the way before beginning the program" — "it" being my family.

Early in a graduate seminar, I made the mistake of suggesting that there is no "right" time to have children and that each family makes its individual situation work. A woman in the class responded that she would be waiting until after she earned tenure to have children. It would be virtually impossible, she suggested, to achieve tenure while raising young children. "Starting a family sooner," she said, "would be professional suicide."

Eventually, most of the class agreed that the "best" times to have children are either before you enter graduate school or after you have received tenure. I fall into that first camp, hence the jealous reactions. Resentment is the ugly side effect of a university culture that actively discourages young scholars — especially women — from having children.

You barely have to glance at the parental-leave and child-care policies at most universities to realize that much of academe believes that a family is a drain on scholarly productivity. The availability of day care at my university is a case in point: Roughly 20 spaces are available for children under the age of 3 at our campus day-care center, which is intended to serve the children of the entire university.

The waiting list is so long that only now — after I have been a student at the university for a year — is there an opening

for my son. In fact, as the program's director advised me last summer, I should have reserved a spot prior to conception. So, presumably, I should have applied to the day-care center before applying to the graduate school.

Because I worked for several years at a major corporation (while helping to raise my daughter) before returning to graduate school, I recognize that the financial squeeze of day-care costs on young families is widespread in many sectors. And yet, many graduate students — including me — expect more from our wealthy universities.

Not long ago, my wife received an e-mail message from a student-mother who had been admitted to my wife's graduate program (she is a full-time graduate student at a different university). Because my wife had just completed her first year of course work in the program, she agreed to act as a mentor of sorts for the entering student. The woman asked my wife what child-care support she could expect from her university. The short answer, unfortunately: little to none.

Although both my university and my wife's are thought of as "liberal" institutions, neither one provides financial support for graduate students with children. The cliché of the impoverished graduate student takes on new meaning when you have extra mouths to feed and insure. Financial hardship has been the greatest challenge in my first year of graduate course work. More significant child-care support from well-endowed universities would go a long way toward helping graduate students find a better balance between work and family. It would also encourage young female scholars to have children while they are in graduate school rather than put it off until a point at which getting pregnant can prove difficult.

There is something unhealthy and backward about the belief that children are an impediment to scholarly advancement. I work harder and produce more than some of my peers precisely because I have young children. I must succeed, not simply to please my own ambitions, but to provide a better life for my family.

The students who labor in the library from sunup to sundown every day are the same students most at risk of burning out. My children have kept me grounded and sane throughout my first year of graduate school, and it's time that the myth of family time as wasted time is dispelled. We shouldn't have to earn tenure to appreciate that.

Keith Greene is the pseudonym of a new doctoral student in history at an Ivy League university. Read Part 1 and Part 2 of this series.
