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BIG JOB; LITTLE BLESSINGS

Attorney April Wilmar is thankful for all she has

By Matt Robinson

For a commercial real estate and corporate lawyer in any reputable firm, there is no such thing as a typical day.

From drafting documents to closing transactions to assisting clients' needs, lawyers need to be part word processor, part therapist, and all professional. And the day rarely ends when the sun goes down.

For April Wilmar, there is no typical day, but for a very different reason.

In addition to being a partner at the Boston law firm of Bernkopf

Goodman LLP, Wilmar also serves as a Town Meeting Member in Dedham, Co-founder, President, CEO, and board member of The John Thomas and Special Friends Fund, an officer of Dedham's Special Education Parent Advisory Council, a board member and director of fundraising for Dedham Youth Hockey, a PTO officer and on several fundraising committees for the Greenlodge Elementary School, a board member of Sing 2 Give, Inc., and most importantly a mother of 2 sweet boys.

The element of her life that demonstrates her greatest dedication, however, involves the life of her son, John. John

was born with a rare genetic disorder known as Toriello-Carey Syndrome. He also has Autism along with many other cognitive and physical disabilities. As a result, he requires 24-hour care. And while April and her husband Shawn are fortunate to be able to provide their son (and his brother, Ryan) with the best in medical, educational, and general support, to say that Wilmar's life is hectic would be an understatement! Still, she continues to serve with dedication and distinction at home, at work and in her community.

When asked where she finds the strength and fortitude to go to her office every day – sometimes before the sun comes up – Wilmar

explains that her passion for the law (or at least for a life that she can consider to be a success) is deep.

“Ever since I was a young girl, I always aspired to be successful in my career,” she says, admitting that, early on, she was not quite sure where this passion to achieve would take her. As she has several lawyers in her family, Wilmar was able to take inspiration and advice from them as she crafted her own life. At Boston College, she was privileged to study with the late former Governor and Ambassador Paul Cellucci, who was also both an attorney and an inspiration.

“I realized then that the logical

next step for me was law school,” Wilmar reasons, noting that she took a year, after graduating from BC in three years, to be a paralegal at a large Boston firm before returning to The Heights for law school.

“I believe that paralegal experience gave me the passion for going into the field of law,” says Wilmar, who also discovered a particular passion for real estate law while serving as a paralegal.

At Bernkopf, Wilmar has had the opportunity to work on significant commercial real estate transactions across the country.

“I am customarily involved in all phases of real estate development, finance and operations,” she says, rattling off a long list of impressive credentials with humility and poise. “I pride myself on being not only responsive to my clients, outgoing and personable, but also hard-working and a strong advocate.”

This sense of responsibility and advocacy has clearly helped Wilmar serve her family as well. In 2009, when John was nearly 5 years old, Wilmar and her husband (who is a special education teacher) started The John Thomas and Special Friends Fund (<https://johnthomasfund.org>) to support organizations that assist children and young adults with disabilities and also, among other things, to support special education programs and genetic research for a variety of rare diseases and conditions.

As there are fewer than 50 known cases of Toriello-Carey Syndrome in the world, research funding and support are in small supply. That is why the Wilmars took it upon themselves to try to help not only their own son but other children and families around the world who have various rare disorders like their sons for which there is no known cause or cure.

“Even the founding doctors of

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this syndrome are still unsure of the cause of this syndrome and have not been able to find a cure,” Wilmar explains.

Despite their son’s inability to speak or accomplish many basic activities of daily living, the Wilmars and their dedicated team of caregivers make sure that John is able to participate in all aspects of life like any other child, even if it requires assistance. “John is not lacking in activities,” Wilmar happily observes. “He plays soccer, basketball, baseball, and ice skates...swims weekly [and] does therapeutic horseback riding!” In addition, he never misses a family outing or vacation.

“He is one of the happiest, most loving little boys that we know,” his grateful mother beams. “He brings so much joy to those whose lives he touches. He makes us appreciate life in general and all that it has to offer and truly puts life into perspective, not only for us but also his younger brother, Ryan. Ryan has truly learned so many life lessons through our care for John, namely the importance of being kind, patient, tolerant and helpful toward others. Ryan assists his older brother with all aspects of his life. Ryan even assists with our fundraising efforts including working hard on a painting and auctioning it off at our events in order to raise money for our cause. We truly couldn’t imagine our family without these 2 amazing boys who love each other so much... [and] we couldn’t be more proud of both of them for very different reasons!”

In addition to the support of her husband, her younger son, Ryan,

family, friends and our large team of caregivers, Wilmar also thanks her colleagues at Bernkopf for their dedicated support.

“My colleagues have supported me since the day John was born,” Wilmar maintains, noting that her work ethic drove her to go to the office even when John was in the intensive care unit dealing with early surgeries and other challenges. “The firm was incredibly supportive of my attending all the doctor appointments in order to better understand my son’s issues and needs.”

While she still may begin work at 4 AM on days when family obligations requires her to leave earlier or to take time away from her desk, Wilmar is still able to meet all office responsibilities and to keep a job that allows her to support her family as well.

“Bernkopf Goodman has been a true supporter of my quest to not only succeed in my career but also to meet family obligations,” she says. “Having that balance between work and home life has really made me a better mom, wife and attorney!”

Through the Foundation, Wilmar is able to offer similar support to others with disabilities and to educate those outside of her office, her family, and the small community of those dealing with John’s condition and other rare conditions about it so that more research can be conducted and more support garnered.

“We bond as a group and often share war stories or important

information regarding additional therapies or opportunities for our children,” Wilmar says of the other families that, in many ways, have become like her own. “It is comforting to get together with these families knowing they are not staring at your child or judging your family.”

While to the outside world, Wilmar’s life may not seem like one worth celebrating, she is grateful for every day with John and for every bit of support she has received from family, friends, colleagues, and others. On November 15, the Foundation will host a gala at Lombardo’s in Randolph to celebrate seven years of progress and hope.

“Our quest is to keep these opportunities going for other children and young adults like John so that they can also lead the happiest and most fulfilling lives possible,” she says. “We will never give up!”

While her schedule at the firm might exhaust many others, Wilmar is dedicated to her clients, her community and, most of all, her family.

“I love my family and I love my job.” She says. “I wouldn’t trade it for the world, lack of sleep and all!”