As with many working mothers, Kathleen M. McDonough has crayon drawings from her young children posted above her desk. They serve as omnipresent reminders of her work away from work.

Though she balances many things in her role as managing partner for national litigation firm Segal McCambridge Singer & Mahoney Ltd., she also balances a life as a wife and mother of Isabel, 10; Michael, 7; and Caroline, 4. Beginning this fall, they are for the first time all full-time students.

“Every evening during the school year, I plan the next day’s school activities,” she says. It’s tough work, but McDonough is game for it. As someone who worked to put herself through college and law school, where she sometimes had to juggle three jobs, the challenge is “consistent with the kind of person I’ve always been,” she says.

McDonough was born in Peoria and adopted at five days old to a family with five biological siblings. The family lived in Highland Park until she turned 7, at which time she moved to Racine, Wis., where they lived until she graduated high school. She’s since met her birth parents and feels “blessed because it’s like having the benefit of multiple families,” she says.

The law school seed was planted early, given the number of attorneys McDonough grew up around that she respected deeply. A few hard-fought sibling wars also contributed.

“Growing up, I had four older brothers I fought with constantly,” she says. “The only chance I had of winning any fight was through arguments. It was my ability to come up with a quick comeback that sometimes got me in trouble, but it could also be helpful.”

McDonough was the first in her family to attend college—Saint Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Ind.—for which she received an academic and need-based scholarship. She originally had designs on becoming a pediatrician, which led her to major in biology.

After two years of undergraduate work, those plans changed.

“I got tired of the constant memorization,” she says. “I wanted to start reading and actually digesting things.”

McDonough dropped biology down to a minor along with chemistry and majored in humanistic studies, under the mentorship of the late Bruno P. Schlesinger. Shortly after taking on the major, she knew she wanted to get into the legal profession, where she could apply her science background. She enrolled at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law in 1991.

Practicing in Gator Country

After her first year of law school, McDonough got a clerkship at a boutique litigation firm in Miami. In addition to sparking a career-long love of litigation, the internship also motivated her to study as a visiting student at the University of Miami School of Law in her final year of law school.

After finishing law school, she took a job at Herzfeld & Rubin, P.C., a New York-based firm with an office in Miami that’s now shut-tered. Because the firm focused in product liability, McDonough spent much of her early career on those matters.

“Most firms down there are a little laid back, but at the time Herzfeld was one of the few firms in Miami that had New York hours with New York expectations,” she says. “I learned a lot, worked very hard and got a great background.”

Doing product liability cases was not McDonough’s first choice, and she hadn’t necessarily planned to stay in Miami, but circumstances left her in a tough situation.

“I was in debt and couldn’t afford to be chooey,” she says. “I had to get a job, and fortunately I got into one I enjoyed. I liked the interaction with people that came with the depositions, court appearances and trials.”

McDonough knew she would eventually want to return to Chicago. Following a break-up that lasted eight years, she became engaged to John Mundo. They met after she saw him play in the University of Notre Dame Book-store Basketball tournament finals.

“I wanted to raise a family in the Midwest given the values here and the fact that it’s close to my family,” she says. “There are lots of great places to raise kids in Miami, but I feel like the Midwestern setting is better. Plus, kids love four seasons.”

Starting at Segal in Chicago

McDonough moved to Chicago after accepting a position at Segal McCambridge in 1996. At the time, the firm had 20 attorneys and only one office.

In her 18 years with the firm, she watched it grow on a large scale through her role as national counsel for a number of companies across the country, which has resulted in its expansion to seven offices and 175 attorneys.

“We opened offices through attorneys we knew and respected, and that was a good way to cover the map,” McDonough says. “It’s been a very exciting run for the past 18 years,”

(Continued on page 122)
and it’s been very rewarding to see the firm grow and to have some small role in helping it grow as well.”

After 14 years of trying cases with the firm, McDonough became managing partner in 2010, while she was still on maternity leave after giving birth to Caroline.

“I joked with the co-chairs, Bill Mahoney and Jeff Singer, that they were either really forward thinking or really crazy to put me in the managing partner position,” she says. “At that point I was on my third child, and I was working from home a little bit, so there was some flexibility in it.”

As managing partner, McDonough oversees the attorneys in each of the firm’s offices while also balancing her own caseload.

“The challenges are never ending,” she says. “I am never bored or looking for something to do. It’s consistent with the kind of person I’ve always been, though. I like to keep moving.”

The managing partner role takes up a significant portion of time, forcing her to step back her own practice somewhat, though it’s still “incredibly active,” she says. Her time is split up at about 60 percent for cases and 40 percent for managing partner work.

“A large part of my time is dedicated to practicing, but after five years, I’ve gotten much better at delegating,” she says. “So while the first few years of being a managing partner took up much of my time, I’ve now put systems in place that allow for a greater degree of delegation to a wonderful management staff and team.”

While McDonough has no immediate plans to move away from her role as managing partner, she feels the role needs to be refreshed every few years to keep new blood in the position.

“It’s probably best for everyone involved to have people coming in and out of the position,” she says, “although you certainly can’t do it too often because there is so much institutional knowledge involved in the role. For continuity and stability, it’s good to have at least several years committed to the role.”

“On the other hand, if you have someone in the position for years and years who never comes out of it, you run some risk of stagnation and lack of fresh ideas.”

Unique Approach to Family Life

The occasions for “me time” that are part of anyone’s routine are very few and far between for McDonough. After putting in a long day at the office, she comes home to three eager young children ready to greet her. And she would have it no other way.

“The only way I get anything done for myself is by waking up at 5:30 before the kids get up,” she says. “If I want to work out or run, it’s got to be at that time, and that is OK. I just don’t waste a lot of time.

Quite often as late, stories and editorial “think pieces” on the topic of working mothers pop up on the Internet. Most focus on women very similar to McDonough.

“It’s interesting that after so many years, people talk about work-life balance for mothers and not for fathers,” she says. “There are two parents in relationship typically, but there’s a greater degree of unfair criticism on the mom.”

Indeed, she and Mundo approach parenting as a team effort. He used to practice law but now works for a family business with a more flexible schedule than his former mergers and acquisitions practice. With him and a dedicated nanny, McDonough deflectly manages both careers effectively.

“I know that being home with children is hard work and can be incredibly rewarding, and the same thing can be said about a job,” she adds. “But it’s such an individual decision, and everyone is unique, so I’m in no position to judge anyone else’s decision. And they shouldn’t judge me because no one else could possibly fully understand my situation.”

McDonough admits that her lifestyle and family choices are not for everyone, especially those looking to advance in law firms.

“People wonder why more women aren’t becoming partners. It isn’t easy. It’s a lot of work,” she says. “It’s ultimately a personal decision in regards to what you want your life to look like.

Still, she wishes more women were practicing law and moving up the ranks. When she started with Segal McCambridge in 1996, she was surprised by the lack of female attorneys at one of her first motion calls at the Daley Center.

“Maybe that is a function of the type of law. But not a ton of women go into litigation, and beyond that not many stay over time,” she says. “I wish there were more who did.”

Litigation Work Tied to Medicine

McDonough says some of her most memorable cases involved working as national counsel in cases involving the drugs fen-phen and echephen. Such cases allowed her to oversee litigation across the country and apply her undergraduate science background.

“Most of my cases involve medical issues, and I take doctor and expert depositions on a regular basis, so having that background is really helpful,” she says. “It’s always interesting. There’s never a dull case because each one presents a unique set of facts.”

She has also enjoyed chairing product liability trials with the firm’s founding partner Donald Segal.

“He has always been a great mentor, always available to assist with questions, and a good resource for any possible ethical dilemma that might arise,” she says.

Keya Rajput Milla, a former associate with Segal McCambridge and current in-house attorney with pharmaceutical company AbbVie, handled litigated matters with McDonough for about five years. She says McDonough dedicated the care and attention to each case that “very few would have the capacity to execute.”

“In Kathleen, I found an inspirational role model who tackles complex legal issues with creativity and courage, manages a firm through a highly curated vision, and contributes to the advancement of women in the legal profession,” Milla says. “Kathleen sets the bar high and continues to inspire me and others to handle the practice of law in similar stride.”

McDonough has appeared before Cook County Circuit Judge Mark J. Ballard, but they are longtime friends.

“She has a great reputation among other lawyers,” Ballard says. “She is a remarkable woman. She balances family, work, volunteering, lecturing, writing—I don’t know how she does it.”

Robert Fitzsimmons, claims supervisor for Skokie-based Alltown Law Service, first met McDonough 10 years ago when she was assigned to one of their claims involving a serious pedestrian accident.

“Over the years, I have been exposed to many attorneys, in both civil and criminal cases,” Fitzsimmons says. “Kathleen is simply at an elite level. She has always been the most talented person in the courtroom or at a deposition. It has been incredibly impressive to witness.”

Her Passion for Inclusion

Just as she’s wanted to see more women in the profession, McDonough has made it a point in her career to advocate for diversity on all levels. She founded Segal McCambridge’s diversity committee, focusing more on the issue of inclusion as a means to stoke diversity.

“Everyone agrees that diversity is important for many reasons, but unless there’s a good degree of inclusion, you won’t be able to keep diversity at your firm,” she says.

“That’s the bigger challenge.”

McDonough organizes events that allow partners to mingle with associates over coffee and lunch, offering them feedback where necessary.

“Inclusion helps to keep associates at the firm and also helps bring them in the ranks to someday become partners in the firm,” she says.

She also dedicates time to mentoring junior attorneys inside and outside of the firm—something she started while working in Miami.

“The most important thing I try to convey to them is to be genuine and to be real,” she says. “Otherwise you’ll create more challenges for yourself.”