Leanne Howell

Her day starts at 5 a.m. She leaves for school just as the rest of her family awakens for the day. Dr. Leanne Howell, an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction in Baylor University’s School of Education, is just that passionate about preparing future teachers. But it requires a lot of her time. That’s why she’s all about making the moments with her family count.

“Time is our most precious commodity,” she said. “I'm always looking for ways to save time.” She's saving it, she said, for one-on-one conversations with her husband and meaningful interactions with her teenage triplet daughters, Caroline, Morgan and Rachel.

**WACOAN:** Life at home with three teenage girls — give me a glimpse.

**Howell:** My house is fun right now. It's busy but fun. I’m the first one up, and I get up about 5:15 a.m., I leave the house at 7 a.m., just as the girls are waking up and coming downstairs. [My husband,] Brian takes them to school. We’re normally not all back home together until about 6:30 p.m. Two of our girls play soccer in the Metroplex [Dallas-Fort Worth area], so we’re usually up there a lot of weekends.

Normally, there are three different, loud music selections going on upstairs in our home. You can walk down the hallway and hear the latest, greatest Christian music coming from one room, and she’s probably singing with a hairspray bottle as a microphone. Then I can go a little farther and there’s a rap song playing just as loud. And if I keep going, there’s probably a country song playing from that room. So, busy, fun and loud.

**WACOAN:** And there will be a day when our homes are quiet, and we’ll be
sad about that, right?

_Howell_: Exactly. That's why we try to make our house the hub of activity for the girls and their friends. We encourage them to bring everyone over here.

_WACOAN_: With triplets, I'm sure your girls are referred to as a 'group' many times, but I know they have different personalities and qualities that you love. Give me a glimpse of each one.

_Howell_: Caroline is full of life, full of energy. She's passionate and compassionate. She does everything 100 percent. She's always singing in the shower. She's the first to hug someone. She's the first to say, 'Thank you for dinner.'

Morgan is very self-disciplined. She's a goal-setter. She knows exactly what she needs to do to get something done. She's a very good time manager. If she has 10 extra minutes, she will spend it studying something. She sets her own alarm.

Rachel is a very sincere person and has a very loving heart. She has always loved animals. She loves being with her family. She's reserved but very sincere. She thinks through things and arrives at conclusions on her own.

_WACOAN_: Your girls will be driving next year. Are you excited about that?

_Howell_: It excites me. I think there's a time for everything in life, and my girls are ready to spread their wings. Friends have told me that the excitement will overpower the fear we have about the driving.

_WACOAN_: I know that becoming pregnant wasn't easy for you. What did you learn from the experience of having to wait for a child?

_Howell_: I tear up thinking about this, in a good way, because this was such a turning point in my life. My pregnancy was the first time I really felt God saying, 'You're not in control of your life. My plan is the best plan.' God was saying, 'Even though you may think you want two kids and a dog, I have a better plan for you.' [Tears up.] It was a time in my life when I needed to be reminded that God is in control. I didn't know the best plan for my life. I mean, I'm a kind
of ‘I know where I’m going’ type person, but this was God’s way of saying, ‘You’re going to have to trust me.’

It was a journey in faith that changed me. I mean, I have always been a spiritual person. But it made me realize that I don’t have the best plan for my life. And I carry that with me on a daily basis, being a mother now. We think we know what we want for our children. We think we know the path we want them to take. We have dreams and aspirations for them, which I think is healthy and good. But that experience shaped my life as a mom and trying to remember that God has the best plan for them, too.

WACOAN: You got your Ph.D. at Texas A&M University in 2010. The girls were 10 years old, and the school was in another city. How did you know if it was the right time to go back to school, and how did you make it work?

Howell: Well, I didn’t know it was the right time. I didn’t know if I could successfully do it, but I was going to give it my best shot. I thought, ‘I’m going to try it, and if it’s too much, I’d be so willing to step back and postpone it because my family is my priority.’

WACOAN: Why was getting a Ph.D. important to you?

Howell: I love being a teacher, and I knew that I wanted to impact preservice teachers. My goal was to teach at the university level in a school of education.

WACOAN: Tell me about your husband, Brian. How did he help you when you were going back to school?

Howell: I was only able to do it with a very supportive husband, who picked up the girls at school and prepared dinner on the two nights a week that I had to drive to College Station. So many people said it would never get easier — go ahead and do it while they are at home and aren’t involved in so many activities yet.

WACOAN: How does your husband fit into the picture of your career?

Howell: Brian balances me so well. One of the things I respect most about him is that he’s a great dad. He’s so well-rounded, and he wants his girls to be well-rounded.

He’s an attorney during the day. He
loves the outdoors and life, and he really instills that in our girls. He’s very patient. He’s very flexible. He’s very giving. There’s just no way I could have done something like get a Ph.D. or raise three teenagers with someone who was not hands-on. He is definitely hands-on. He always asks, ‘What can I do? Do I need to pick up the girls? Do you want me to grab dinner?’ He’s easy-going and reassuring. He doesn’t sweat the small stuff.

WACOAN: When and how did you two meet?

Howell: My freshman roommate at Baylor was in a Welcome Week group with Brian. And she came back to the dorm room one day and said, ‘I think I’ve met the guy I’m going to marry, and his name is Brian Howell.’ She told me all about him. They dated off and on our freshman year, never really seriously. That’s really how I got to know him. My sophomore year I moved into my apartment, and our next-door neighbors were Brian and his roommates. We all instantly hit it off and all started hanging out as friends. We were always having fun together. Since Brian was from Waco, he always had the insight on neat things to do that we never would have known. Eventually, we started dating that year and dated pretty exclusively for most of our time at Baylor. So, I really can say we were college sweethearts.

WACOAN: In the hustle and bustle of life with teenagers, how do you take time to show him how much he means to you?

Howell: Brian is very affectionate by nature. He really leads me to want to say, ‘I love you.’ Just this morning he said, ‘I can’t leave without a kiss.’

But I think for us, it’s finding those 30 minutes a week, at least, hopefully more, where we really can connect and talk. And just like everyone else, rarely is it over candlelight. No, actually, never is it over candlelight! It’s never a two-and-a-half-hour meal together, like it was before kids. We look for 30 minutes where the girls are at soccer practice and we can be together and talk about our week. It might be sitting outside for a
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few minutes after watering the flowers. It’s about making time to connect, regardless of where it is and making that time count.

WACOAN: You chose Waco Montessori School for your girls at the elementary level. Why was it the right school for them?

Howell: What drew us there was the Montessori philosophy of educating the whole child — the physical, social, emotional, cognitive aspects. That really appealed to us. We loved that it was not just about developing students who think critically, but also it was about helping our girls develop socially and emotionally. We loved the hands-on learning, where they learn the concrete before the abstract. And I loved the philosophy of helping children become independent thinkers.

WACOAN: You live in Waco-proper, but now your girls go to Midway ISD. How did you make that decision?

Howell: We could not be happier, and the girls could not be happier than they are at Midway. We looked all around, and I did my due diligence. We weren’t opposed to continuing on into private school, but having three girls the same age, we really felt like they needed more elbow room to be themselves. I think it’s so great that we can go from our choices of good schools. We found Midway to be a good fit. We loved the extracurriculars, the focus on academics and the peer group. The 20-minute drive has been worth every minute, especially if your kids are happy.

WACOAN: You moved fairly recently to a home in the Waco city limits. What do you love about living in town as opposed to outlying areas?

Howell: I love the homes in Waco, and I love the spirt of community here. I love the different personalities of the neighborhoods. We honestly never really looked outside Waco. We loved living in Castle Heights, and when our house went up for sale, I think people assumed that maybe we were looking to move to the Midway school district, since our kids were going there. But we like the convenience of living in town, even though sometimes the drive to school
seems long.

WACOAN: Tell me a little bit about your area of specialty in the School of Education.

Howell: I’m the University Liaison for Baylor’s newest professional development elementary school in Midway ISD, Spring Valley Elementary. Professional development schools are innovative institutions formed through partnerships between university professional education programs and P-12 [primary through secondary] schools. Their mission is multifaceted: professional preparation of teacher candidates, faculty development, inquiry directed at the improvement of practice and enhanced student learning. At Spring Valley, our Baylor students work regularly with mentor teachers on that campus to bring together experience and innovation for the preparation of new teachers and to improve educational experiences for children. I currently teach junior and senior Baylor students who are placed at Spring Valley for their field-based experiences.

WACOAN: What is the most interesting or fun day-to-day part of your job?

Howell: One of the things I love about my job is that I’m greeted at 7:30 each morning by 17-20 teacher candidates who are eager to impact the world through education. The energy in our professional development room at Spring Valley is amazing, and it’s exciting to walk into a room of students who aspire to be not only teachers but teacher-leaders.

Another fun part of my job is that I get to work with so many different professionals in the field of education — teachers, instructional specialists, campus and district administrators and content professors here at Baylor, as well as junior and senior teacher candidates.

WACOAN: What is your work schedule like?

Howell: My position at Baylor is currently full time. My mornings are very routine because I teach my junior class until midmorning on Monday through Thursday at Spring Valley. Then
on Friday mornings I teach my senior interns on the Baylor campus. My afternoons are fairly flexible but are usually spent observing interns and providing them feedback, collaborating or planning with other colleagues or conferencing with other students.

Brian always takes the girls to school, since I usually leave home around 7 a.m. each morning, and between both of us and other carpools, we get them to after-school events and activities.

**WACOAN:** Did you ever consider not working?

**Howell:** Absolutely. My last full-time job in public school education ended in May when I was pregnant with the girls. They were born that next October. I knew that my full-time job needed to be at home, managing my new family. Fortunately, Brian also felt that this was a priority.

I think I started back part time when the girls were 4 years old, when I started working as an education grant consultant at the Bill Logue Juvenile Justice Center at the Center for Learning & Development. I worked part time for a few years to get my feet back in the outside world and to see if it was something I missed or could juggle while also being a good mother.

What I discovered was that I was a better mom, a better wife and a better producer the busier that I was. I fell naturally back into the field I knew and loved before I became a mother and educator. Now I can’t envision my life not working as an educator. I’m happier when I’m helping others. I love teaching and learning and am inspired each day to go and do.

**WACOAN:** What are some of the ways your family connects regularly, when you can all be together for quality time during the school week?

**Howell:** Definitely dinner! I honestly feel like my day has not had closure until we are all together at dinner. That certainly does not mean the old-fashioned way of a perfect meal. It may mean dinner on the go or even at a fast-food place, as long as we’re all there.

**WACOAN:** Do you cook?
Howell: I do! I'm a very simple cook. I have a mother and a sister who are both gourmets, so I get lots of fun recipes from them, but normally I simplify them. By the time it gets to my table, it looks a lot different.

WACOAN: What are a few of your go-to weeknight meals?

Howell: I have easy eaters. We love pasta, so I can always count on, at least once a week, a pasta dish that I can pull out or create. I do use a crockpot sometimes. For my life, it has to be quick and easy. The time that I'm at home, I don't want to spend cleaning up.

WACOAN: With your busy schedule, how do you make time to go to the grocery store?

Howell: Normally, I head to the grocery store about 10 p.m. I like to get the girls in bed or at least for my house to be quiet. I think the key to a successful trip is having a list. It goes back to organization, and when I don't have a list, I'm not nearly as productive. Late night when no one's there, you don't get stopped by everyone in town. I think time is our most precious commodity, and I'm always looking for ways to save time.

WACOAN: What do you like to do when you can get away as a family?

Howell: We are definitely adventurous. We love being active and outdoors. Depending on the season, we like to be around the water and in the sun. We love being on the lake. We love to travel. We decided a long time ago we wanted to give our girls experiences—different cultures, different foods and different places. We take an international trip every other year with Brian's brother and his family. Last year we spent Christmas in Rome, [Italy], and that's probably been my favorite trip.

WACOAN: In what areas do you feel you struggle or wish you had better skills?

Howell: I've always wanted to be more creative. I'm so structured, so goal-oriented, so driven, and I would like to be more spontaneous and creative.

WACOAN: With such a demanding schedule, it's easy to forget about
yourself. What do you do to care for yourself?

Howell: I'm a big believer in moisturizer. As we age, I think staying hydrated — drinking lots of water and finding a good moisturizer — are musts. My best friend in my bathroom cabinet is my moisturizer.

WACOAN: Do you have one to recommend?

Howell: I love the Origins products, especially the night cream.

WACOAN: How else do you make time for yourself?

Howell: I try to work out a couple of times a week. It's usually on the machines at home. I don't have time to make a certain class each week. Or, I should say, it's not a priority. I can find a way to work out in a less structured way at a time that works for me. Sometimes it's just finding 30 minutes to walk in my neighborhood or during soccer practice. It's definitely important as we age to take care of our bodies.

WACOAN: What are you trying to teach your girls about being a woman — a wife and mother and professional? What qualities do you try to embody as an example for them?

Howell: That brings me to tears. I hope they just see me as someone with a servant's heart, someone who gives freely, someone who gives more than I take, someone who makes the world a better place. I hope they see me as a lifelong learner who inspires others.

WACOAN: Do you have a favorite organization where you serve?

Howell: What I adore in my outside life right now is our time in the National Charity League [NCL]. It gives me a chance to volunteer with the girls and really be a role model for serving others. And we get to do it together. Through NCL, we get a real perspective of how our community reaches out to others. We can choose from lots of ways to give back. We have our favorites, like Meals & Wheels and Caritas, but there are many needs in the community, and NCL gives us exposure to lots of them.

WACOAN: How do you prioritize the things that are most important to you?

Howell: My faith and my family are at
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the top of my list. One of my favorite Bible verses is 2 Corinthians 5:7, ‘Rejoice in abundance, living by faith and not by sight.’ This is beyond understanding sometimes, but it’s something I want my girls to consider.

WACOAN: Do you have a motto or a favorite quote or words you live by?

Howell: This quote is currently on my board here at work and also on my fridge at home: ‘What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal.’ — Albert Pike. I love quotes and Scripture. And a particular quote or Scripture can mean different things to me at different times of my life or even on a different day of the week, depending on what’s going on personally or professionally. I try to write quotes on the girls’ bulletin boards as inspiration for them. But it also inspires me.

WACOAN: What do you see as the most important job in your life?

Howell: I think the most important job in my life right now is to be a good mom, to be a mother who instills self-confidence and who sets both high expectations and boundaries for them. I want them to be confident women who have compassion for the people around them, especially those who are less fortunate. I want to teach them to have ambition and to develop the self-discipline it takes to be a life-long learner. I definitely think that’s my most important job.

WACOAN: What’s the most fun thing about your life?

Howell: I think the most fun thing about my life right now is that I get to wear so many different hats. I’m the mom of three very energetic, fun teenagers. I get to shop with them and plan weekend events and fun things for school. I get to be a geeky educator who loves reading about best practices and seeing what works at different universities and training future teachers who are going to impact our world. And then I get to be a wife to a spontaneous husband who’s always on the go and always outside, and he’s always coming up with new, fun things to do. ☀️