

WORKING MOTHER

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REAL MOM Kelly Rutherford
The *Gossip Girl* star dishes on her career & life as a single mom



THE STAR OF THE HIT TV DRAMA *GOSSIP GIRL*

Kelly Rutherford

finds grace and gratitude in her role as hands-on mom to Hermes, 3, and Helena, 8 months, despite the tabloid feeding frenzy over her contentious custody battle. BY SUZANNE RISS PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM WRIGHT

How do you combine your acting career with raising two young children?

Gossip Girl has an ideal schedule for a working mom. It's an ensemble show, so I'm not in every scene, and I work two to three days a week. The show worked around my pregnancy with Helena by dressing me in big jewelry and big handbags—I think we started a fashion trend. We have three or four months off a year. I could be busier, but I want to be there for my kids.

Do you think today's pregnant working women face pressures that differ from those our mothers faced?

We work up until the last minute, whether we're throwing up or not! Then we're expected to give birth in two seconds or we get a C-section, because doctors are in a rush. We barely sleep the first months of our child's life, but we're expected to get back into our skinny jeans right away.

How have you handled the public nature of your custody case?

It's challenging. I certainly never expected the emotional roller coaster. It was tough to be pregnant and have this happen. It's made me stronger.

You were pregnant with Helena while fighting for custody of Hermes?

Yes. The stress while I was pregnant was difficult. Hermes was 2 and still nursing. But Helena was born smiling—and she latched right on!

What's your custody arrangement?

We have a 50-50 split with Hermes. With the baby, it's a step-up plan, so she's with me more now. The courts see child support as a separate issue from custody. I receive no financial support from their father.

What surprised you about the case?

My ex, who works out of the home, claimed I was a career monger. He said I worked crazy hours, when I'd only worked 40 days that entire year. I was also surprised that I didn't have my *day* in court—I had my *five minutes*.

What was the court system like?

A male judge who was retiring after spending his entire career in family law didn't agree with me that it was important for Hermes to be able to bond with his baby sister. I hope that as more women become judges—and as more *divorced* women become judges—the family courts will change.

We don't hear a lot about the strain on a marriage after a baby is born, do we?

Women often need their husband's support more than they get it. It's hard on the relationship. I saw red flags, but I was in love. We tried therapy. I stayed in the marriage as long as I could so that I could look at my son and say that I tried everything. I want Hermes to know that he's loved in both homes. I tell him every day, "Papa loves you."

OR KELLY: DAVID RYAN; HAIR: JENNIFER LEE; MAKEUP: JENNIFER LEE; STYLING: JENNIFER LEE; DRESS: J. MENDEL; JEANS: PRADA; SHOES: PRADA; RINGS: J. MENDEL; EARRINGS: J. MENDEL; NECKLACE: J. MENDEL; BRACELETS: J. MENDEL; WATCH: J. MENDEL; BAG: J. MENDEL; HAIR: JENNIFER LEE; MAKEUP: JENNIFER LEE; STYLING: JENNIFER LEE; DRESS: J. MENDEL; JEANS: PRADA; SHOES: PRADA; RINGS: J. MENDEL; EARRINGS: J. MENDEL; NECKLACE: J. MENDEL; BRACELETS: J. MENDEL; WATCH: J. MENDEL; BAG: J. MENDEL

How did you know it was over?

It's heartbreaking when you realize the person you married is not who you thought he was. Many women convince themselves to stay, but I realized staying would have been unhealthy for the children. I'm certainly not advocating divorce. It's extraordinary to share your life with someone. You need communication and respect. If you're not getting that, if you're not getting support, if your partner isn't honoring you, then you need to think about the fact that you're setting that example for your kids. I knew the alternative couldn't be any worse. I trusted that there could be something better than what I had experienced or what I could imagine.

What was that period like?

I was scared. It was very tough, and I didn't know how I'd get through it. I had incredible support from my family and friends and colleagues. It becomes one foot in front of the other. It puts you in a state of grace. You're happy for a hot shower in the morning. I had to adjust my rose-colored glasses. Now I'm thankful that I have something to offer my children.

What's it like to play one of the most glamorous moms on TV?

I'm so glad I'm not playing a frumpy mom. She's divorced, raising two kids and trying to make the right decisions. She's figuring it out as she goes along. It's inspiring to play a character who doesn't always have the right reaction. I think the best thing we can do for our kids is to work on ourselves. If we're healthy and happy and feel fulfilled, we're better moms.

When did you decide to be an actress?

People and the choices they make fascinated me from a very young age. My mother would always tell me to stop staring. I've been able to support myself as an actress since I was 19.



THOSE MAGIC MOMENTS (from left): Kelly with daughter Helena and on *Gossip Girl* with her TV daughter, played by Blake Lively.

What would you tell women who struggle with working-mom guilt?

Figure out how you can help remedy the situation. Maybe it means making sure your baby is well cared for. You need to figure out what kind of mom you want to be and then find a way to be that mom. My mom worked, but it felt like she was always there for us.

What kind of mom do you want to be?

I want my children to know that they're loved. When I'm with them, I'm fully present. I've noticed that when I get a phone call, suddenly things get louder in the house. So I call back later. Our kids want our attention—and they deserve it.

Does your son ever have a hard time when you're leaving for work?

There are tough moments when he'll hold my leg and say, "I need you! Don't go." I stop and we talk. I tell him, "I need you, too." When he acts out, I don't meet his upset with more upset. I give him a hug and say, "What can I do?" and I help him find the words to express what he's feeling.

What's a typical day like for you?

I have breakfast with my children, and I take Hermes to school. We may go to the park or to a playdate. When he wants to, he comes to the set. We love to dance to music. Hermes loves to be with his sister. We'll have dinner

and bathtime and cuddle while we watch *Diego*. We cuddle a lot—that's what gets us through all of this.

Did you know that many working moms see you as a role model?

I feel flattered. I have so many role models. I saw Gloria Steinem recently, and all I could say was "Thank you." Women are wired to do more. If you want something to get done, give it to someone who's very busy. A working mom will always get it done.

What do you want your daughter to grow up knowing?

That she's loved—and powerful as an individual. That she understands her power and how to use it.

What's it like being a single mom?

I'm realizing what I'm capable of doing emotionally and physically—at 41 years old! It's great. It gives my life as a mother a whole different meaning. I have more gratitude.

How have you handled the stress?

I talk to spiritual people who help me understand grace and how to take action and empower myself. They remind me that I can heal and give back. The idea that you choose every moment of your life means you have the power to turn things around. I think each generation passes the torch and takes things to the next level. ■



For a behind-the-scenes look at the cover shoot, go to workingmother.com.

