



Spring 2010

Profile

An Interview with Lisa Wexler



Lisa Wexler says that after feeling miserable for years as she practiced law, she realized what she really wanted to do was host her own radio talk show. With the support of her husband, that's just what she did. After a successful audition, Wexler's local talk radio station in Fairfield County, Connecticut offered her a one-hour, Saturday morning show with one caveat: She had to procure her own advertisers. Wexler says she "hustled" and was able to bring on a dozen new sponsors in the first 18 months. The show went on the air in 2006 with Connecticut's governor as the first guest. Quickly thereafter, it was expanded to 90 minutes. And the following year, Wexler also began a weekly two-hour stint at the legendary Yale University radio station, AM-WYBC, making her the only non-student with a regular broadcast on the station.

Today, Wexler's main show airs Monday through Friday during the coveted "drive-time" slot at 4-6 p.m., as well as on Saturday mornings. The mother of two says her goal is to host a national talk radio show from her hometown station.



“I am living my dream,” she adds.

In addition to her radio gig, Wexler has a new book, *Secrets of a Jewish Mother*, coming out in April. Co-written with her sister Jill Zarin (one of the stars of the reality show *Real Housewives of New York City*) and her mother Gloria Kamen, the book offers its readers some universal but very personal truths about the importance of tradition, the art of motivation, the sanctity of family and the essence of friendship. You can read more about Wexler and listen to her shows at her Web site, www.lisawexler.com.

MM: Tell us all about your radio show. What are some of the favorite topics covered, both favorites of your audience and your own preferences? So many talk shows have a distinct political slant and agenda. What about yours? Is it strongly ideological? Describe some of your favorite guests. What has surprised you about the show - not only about the job of being a talk show host, but about the audience or even the guests? What are your goals for the show? Do you still also practice law?

LW: The show is now entitled “The Lisa Wexler Show,” having originally started as, “Lunch with Lisa,” and then, “Live! With Lisa.” Why did I change the name? Because my confidence grew. One day, I opened up a noted trade magazine and looked at all the headliners in my field. Nobody else had any exclamation points or cutesy names. I decided if the big boys (yes, most of them are boys) could name their shows after themselves, so could I.

I had a vision for a talk show that would be a cross between NPR and what was available on commercial radio stations. I had co-hosted my own radio show at college for four years, but that was when people were still playing records on phonographs. That was when people knew what the word “phonograph” meant. I knew I needed to update my skills and move into the digital age, which is why I attended the Connecticut School of Broadcasting. After completing that curriculum, I got pulled back into full-time law for a while, until my husband and friends began to “utz” me. “So, Lisa, when are you getting on the radio?”

I knew exactly what station I wanted to be on, my local talk radio station, AM 1400WSTC/1350 WNLK. The studio was only 10 minutes away, and the coverage was enormous, reaching most of Fairfield County, Westchester County and into many parts of Long Island as well, across the Long Island Sound. I called up the station, and serendipity stepped in. A longtime host had just cancelled. I auditioned by arranging an interview with a Hasidic woman who felt she was trapped in her community. The restrictions of her life depressed her. It was a wonderful segment, and the station offered to have me host a Saturday morning spot.

The show’s format is a combination of opinion, interview and call-in. Everyone’s point of view is heard, as long as it is given with respect. My audience is primarily ages 30 and over. The station says that approximately 60 percent of the listeners are women. I can’t really tell. Based on calls and e-mails I receive, I’d say more like 50/50. Audience size? Again, hard to guess. I am told the radio audience is in the range of somewhere between 40,000-75,000 but this does not include the many listeners who listen online via streaming or later, by downloading my shows from (my Web site).



Favorite topics? Politics, definitely. Also, I love reporting on medical breakthroughs, regenerative technology, scientific studies, and all kinds of stories that reveal how much we are learning about our world. Other common topics include cultural conversations on literature, theater, music and cinema. Dance is a little hard to describe on the radio - I've tried.

My political agenda? I like to say that I am consistently unpredictable. I slant neither left nor right, but I have a very strong core of principals that guide my politics. They include a basic distrust of authority and power, no matter who is in power. I believe in the right to privacy, and will fight for it, even in this age in which some argue the war has long been lost. I believe in free speech, a free press and free expression. I firmly hold that as moral human beings, we have the obligation to speak up for the voiceless, which include children, animals, and those who are oppressed. When it comes to government as well as big business, I am a professional cynic.

Right now, I am politically "unaffiliated," but have been a registered democrat, republican and independent. I am always shifting away from the extremes political parties seem to lean towards. As a member of the media, I intend to stay unaffiliated.

MM: Tell us about your family, including your children. What do they think of your "gig" as a talk show host? Are they involved with the show in any way?

LW: I am married to my first love, Bill Wexler, whom I met in college at Johns Hopkins University. We just celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary. Yes, I was a child bride. We have two children, Jon, who is 22 and a finance student at Northeastern University, and Joanna, who is 16 and a junior at Staples High School in Westport. Neither is involved in the radio show at all. They veer between being wildly embarrassed and a teeny bit proud. Totally normal. My husband has been my anchor from the start. When we were vacationing in Tahiti about five years ago, we had several long heart-to-hearts. He knew I had been miserable for years practicing law. After reading Po Bronson's *What Should I Do With My Life?* (which I highly recommend), I told Bill that what I really wanted to do was host my own radio show. Bill told me, "This is the time. Do it. I am earning enough money now to support the both of us for a while. Scale back law and begin your dream." So when I returned from vacation, I began, little by little, to scale back my practice and carve out enough time to attend the Connecticut School of Broadcasting for seven weeks straight, full-time. That took about a year to do. My experience taught me that big dreams don't happen overnight; they are a result of a thousand decisions along the way.

MM: You've written a book with your sister and mother. Tell us about the book - why you wrote it, how you wrote it, and what it's about. What was it like writing a book with family members? How long did it take to write, and did you have a regular writing schedule? Is this your first book? What kind of reaction have you had to the book so far? Do you plan to write other books? What about the process of getting the book published - was it difficult?

LW: The origin of *Secrets of a Jewish Mother* is sort of a fairy tale. Here is what happened: My sister



Jill became a celebrity virtually overnight. A hit TV series will do that to you, and Jill is largely the reason the show is such a hit. People knock on your doors and offer you other opportunities. During that first season, people were already asking Jill to write a book. So naturally, she came to me, the older sister, lawyer and writer in the family, and said, “Lisa, write the book.”

And I refused. I said, “I see no book here that I can write.” The second season, things changed. My mother Gloria gave some heartfelt, spontaneous advice to Bethenny Frankel, another member of the cast. As a result of those few minutes on television, Mommy was offered (an opportunity) to write an advice column in the New York Daily News. Now I had the book. I even had the title, *Secrets of a Jewish Mother*. Jill signed us with a book agent who recommended that we hire an outsider to write the proposal, since all of us were new at this game. Instead, I consulted a dear friend of mine, Ellen Whitehurst, who is the best-selling author of *Make This Your Lucky Day*. Ellen told me exactly how to do it. I followed her instructions to the letter. Our agent was very pleased and generated interest from all of the major publishers. Eventually, Dutton Books, a division of Penguin, won the bidding.

I know - it was too easy. Don’t hate me. We want no evil eyes here, kaynahorah. [Ed note: Yiddish expression meaning to ward off the evil eye.]

The book itself is divided into three main parts - what I call context, framework and action. The context is the “Secret” or lesson. For example, Mom always said “He Who Payeth Sayeth”. That was a secret whose theme we developed in the marriage section of the book, about the power struggles that occur over money. The framework is where you hear Jill, Mom and me apply that lesson to stories in our own lives. This is where the reader gets to know three separate voices in the book. The final section is called “Ask Yourself” in which the reader does some self-assessment applying the principles of the lessons to her own life. I am very grateful to my friend Virginia DeCristoforo who helped me structure the book this way. Once I had the structure, then writing the book was easy. Time management? Very hard.

The entire 350-page first draft of the manuscript was completed between June 25th and October 13th, while I was still doing a live radio show six days a week, practicing some law and managing a full household with a husband, two teenage/young adult children and Sugar, our Bichon. Although there are three distinct voices in the book reflecting our different personalities and stories, I did most of the writing, usually between the hours of 9:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. five days a week. Every chapter was e-mailed to my mother and sister for their comments, review and edits. Mommy and Jill wrote the first draft of all their stories, which is why the reader will absolutely feel she is getting to know all of us. My daughter Joanna wrote the epilogue from all the grandchildren. She is apparently a rather gifted writer herself.

For me, writing requires an atmosphere of no distractions. No telephones, no people pulling at me. I frequented every single library in our vicinity during the summer, dropping off my daughter wherever she needed to be and grabbing a few hours at the closest library until it was time to pick her up. Thank God for laptops and wireless. I took a week of vacation from my radio show in August just to devote an entire week to the book, night and day, when we were nearing a deadline. I lived in the library. Once school began again, I got into the habit of writing after I got home from the station, getting into a quiet groove around 9 p.m. and writing until I was spent. I loved writing this book. *Secrets of a Jewish Mother* is the easiest book that will ever come out of me, because the voices of our mother, aunts and grandmothers are always there. Giving those voices space on the page became



a gift that will never stop giving, as Jill and I look at this book as a legacy to the generations that will follow us.

The reaction to this book has been wonderful. Carrie Thornton, our executive editor at Dutton, has been encouraging and supportive throughout the process. She told us that every single person who has seen the manuscript has loved it, from the publisher to the lawyer to the copy editor to the publicists. *Secrets* is not a typical celebrity book, in which you can tell it was written by somebody else just to take advantage of that person's fame. Rather, it is a combination of common sense, practical wisdom and humor. Like our mother Gloria.

Will I write more books? Yes. I have at least five different ideas in my head for non-fiction works. I think my next book will be a series of essays on my political views as an extension of my radio show. Jill would like to collaborate with me on another advice book, and I am open to that as well. Because of the doors that opened wide as a result of Jill's TV career, I have found a new career for myself, as a writer.

MM: How do you find time to juggle your writing and radio career, your family and the other responsibilities of your life? What advice do you have for other mom writers (and other moms in all walks of life) trying to manage these things?

LW: I love the word "juggle." I use it all the time when I am telling my husband and kids, "Oops, sorry, I dropped one of the balls. Please forgive me. "

How do I find time? The biggest stress I have is not having enough time to accomplish my daily list of to-dos. In *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo, the narrator says of one of the main characters that her great talent was in making a to-do list every day that never had more on it than she could really accomplish. In that way, the woman always felt that she had accomplished everything she set out to do. Unfortunately, that same character trait cannot be ascribed to me. I'm always feeling as if there is more to do. But after *The Nanny* re-runs at 1:00 a.m., sleep overcomes me.

My advice for time management? Bob Seelert wrote a really nice little book, *Start with the Answer*, from which I picked up this nugget. He said that time is the thing that all of us have the exact same amount of, every day, and yet look at how all of us use it so differently. Perhaps this is not the answer you are looking for, but this thought occurs to me all the time. I'm not the best to give advice on time-management. You are talking to a woman who doesn't carry a working cell phone and actually likes to regularly escape from the "total access" world. I don't get to the gym nearly often enough, and my kids are lucky if they get a home-cooked dinner twice a week.

Here is what I know: We all find time for the things we love to do. When I practiced law, I was always behind -- maybe it wasn't just the paperwork. Maybe I procrastinated because I hated doing the work. In radio, somehow, every single day we put on a great show. Guests get booked, newspapers get read, a new Web site gets built and re-built. I love it -- and it's getting done. I loved writing *Secrets of a Jewish Mother*. We were under a tight deadline, and we got it done. So my advice is this: Do what you love, and you'll find the time to do it.

MM: How has motherhood affected your career - not only in writing the book, but as a talk show host and lawyer?



LW: Interesting question. Motherhood started for me at age 26. I was by far the youngest of my peers to have a child. Motherhood affected my career enormously because for the first 18 years of my son's life, my career took second and third place to the challenges of raising a family. In fact, I quit my job at Milbank, Tweed, a very prestigious Wall Street law firm, because I knew there would be no way I would get pregnant while working there. The stress was just too much, and the hours were too demanding.

I always wanted to be a mother. I knew I would always work. It was ingrained into me never to "waste my brains." Plus I needed to earn my own money, so I would not have to account to my husband for every little thing. Money brings independence.

I very consciously learned two areas of law that I could practice on my own from home -- real estate and trusts, estates and probate. I took over our beautiful sunroom on the main floor of the house and turned it into a full-time law office, from which I could literally see the bus pull in when the kids came home from school. Bill resented that move for years, but I refused to be in the basement. I like the sunshine.

From about 1987 to 2005, I grew my practice into a well-respected, small firm, always working from my home. At the same time, I became very involved in town politics, serving on the Planning and Zoning Commission and getting elected to our Zoning Board of Appeals. I adored that volunteer service and felt I was really contributing to the direction of our town. My schedule was my own. I didn't practice much litigation because I didn't want to be subject to court calendars and specific demands on my time. When you are a real estate attorney, you set the closing dates and times yourself. Juggling is a lot easier.

After Jon went off to college, I began to rethink my career and plunge into doing something I loved. Unfortunately for Joanna, she has suffered the effects of my success in that I am not as accessible as I used to be. But she is very proud of that success and very supportive of me in general. We make time to travel together, to cook together and to hang out in the bed. We are big bed people. I think my family knows they come first. At the same time, I am not saying no to career opportunities right now because my kids are of an age where they can manage without me. And they also have their dad, who is 24/7 accessible and totally involved in their lives.

MM: Who are some of your favorite authors? Do you always have more books piled on your nightstand than you can read? Do you feature authors on your show?

LW: Some of my favorite authors include those I read as a kid for pleasure such as Agatha Christie, contributing authors to the Ellery Queen series and Frances Hodgson Burnett. My favorite books are Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*.

I do always have more books piled on my nightstand than I can read. I even have a "nightstand" section of my Web site in which I list my favorite books of the year and summarize what I am reading lately. Authors of all kinds are featured regularly on the show, including for fiction, Katharine Weber, Jane Green, Dani Shapiro, Meredith Hall, David Baldacci, Daniel Silva, Jeannette Walls, Linda Fairstein - the list is too long to mention every one. The majority of authors that do come on the show



have produced works of non-fiction on topics that are of interest to me, such as politics, sociology, sexuality and business. I adore writers. I adore books.

MM: What else would you like us to know about you?

LW: Aren't you exhausted already? Hmmm. I love dogs. Love them. I'll never live without a dog again. We only have one dog now, Sugar, but when time opens up, we'll get another. Dogs are like babies, they need a lot of time to love and socialize them.

I am extremely grateful for my life. I am extremely grateful that I was born into love. If you are born into parents that love you, you have already been given more than half of what you need in life. I am extremely grateful that I chose a guy who has never stopped loving me, even when he has stopped liking me once in a while. I am so thankful that my children are healthy, and I say little prayers all day long asking God to keep everyone I love healthy and strong.

What makes me either joyful or blue is the quality of my relationships with the people I care about. I can't stand to be "in a fight" with someone. I look at the world around me and truly believe that we are here on this earth to learn how to love each other. Forget about wars - let's start with domestic tranquility. To the extent that we as individuals can figure out how to forgive, or accept, or simply move on, we have learned what we are meant to learn.