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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

**'GIMME A BREAK'**

**JUST AS AD EXEC'S BOOK SAYS, RESPITE FROM WORK CAN BE A CAREER SAVER**

Johnna A. Pro

"We're all working too hard and we know we are. For what? Getting and spending, getting and spending and having little time to enjoy our lives." -- Lynn Cullen

When Michigan law professor Bill Miller suggested to his sister Lynn Cullen that she needed a sabbatical, she scoffed at the idea.

"This is real world," she sniffed. "In the real world, people don't take a sabbatical."

Cullen thought her brother was being unrealistic. She is, after all, the voice of her own top-rated radio talk show and the single mother of a teenage son.

Taking time off is simply, well, it just simply isn't done.

Or is it?

In a newly published book titled "Time Off For Good Behavior: How Hardworking Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives"- I explores the "Type A good girl" sociology that drives many women to strive for the perfect career, spouse, kids and home, but has left them far too exhausted to enjoy any of it.

After interviewing several thousand women and profiling 37 of them in her book, Quinlan was still surprised on a book tour to learn how many women yearned to cast aside their daily responsibilities and find time -- whether it be a week or six months -- to focus on themselves and a take a new look at their priorities.

"When I wrote the book, I knew I was talking about myself," said Quinlan, a former advertising agency executive who gave up the fast track to start a marketing company called Just Ask a Woman. "What surprised me was how many people there were who had been suffering silently. That was the shocker to me, that there are many women who harbor this dream."

Quinlan's book hits the shelves at a time when studies, including a recent one by Salary.com, show that more and more Americans -- both men and women -- would prefer time off over pay increases.

"When I start to talk about benefits, do you know what the first question is that people ask me? 'When do I qualify for vacation,' " said Bob Johnston, a longtime human resources consultant in the region. "With the rising cost of medical insurance, it's amazing that is not the main priority for people. It's vacation time."

Quinlan focused on women because her expertise is on women's issues and because women are still the primary child care providers and keepers of the home, so their stress is compounded. Plus women have a greater tendency to think it's their role to think of everyone else before themselves.

"I think that men are more comfortable with letting themselves off the hook." Quinlan said. "Women don't give themselves permission to rest."

'Hit a wall'

When she really thought about her brother's advice, Cullen realized he was right. She desperately needed a rest: not just a vacation or a few days off, but time away from the pressures of the job which she was growing to despise. Because of the presidential election, and because she is a liberal in the mostly conservative and male-dominated radio talk industry, she was cast in the role of poster girl for the left, a label she hadn't sought and came to loathe.

At work, she was losing control of her own show, letting callers dictate the increasingly sharp tone of the dialogue. At home she was staying up later just to keep up with household matters and find a few minutes alone. The days stretched from 7 a.m., when she began getting herself, her son and the dog ready for the day, to midnight when she would collapse from exhaustion.

"I felt like I hit a wall," said Cullen, who returned to work yesterday after a four-week leave of absence. "I was dreading going to work. I was hating what I enjoy. I was going to take a respite, or I was going to take a walk."

Others had begun to notice the change in her too.

Physically, she was starting to look haggard and she wasn't her same vivacious self. On air at WPTT she was becoming increasingly shrill and short-tempered.

"She was losing her temper at little things. She'd just snap out," said WPTT program director John Poister, a longtime friend and colleague who had begun to worry about Cullen. "Ordinarily, she'd laugh some things off. She has a tremendous sense of humor."

Up the corporate ladder

Mary Ann Quinlan's spiral into the insanity of all-work-and-no-play began in the mid 1970s when she took a \$9,500 a year job writing fund-raising proposals for her college

alma mater. Over the next 20 years, she worked her way up the corporate ladder, first at Avon and later in New York's cutthroat advertising agency world.

By the age of 40, she was chief executive officer of NW Ayer, the country's oldest advertising agency, a woman who by all outside appearances was the epitome of success. In reality, her life was dictated by a calendar that demanded that every 30 minutes something be penned in, from morning breakfast meetings to late night social (read business) events.

She was constantly on the road and on the job.

"My phone bill showed 60 calls to my voice mail one weekend," she wrote.

While family and friends got the short shrift in terms of her time -- she was too busy for dinners, the theater or birthday celebrations -- she connected with colleagues, treating them better than the people she loved.

She struggled unsuccessfully for years to get pregnant, but despite the mental anguish, she would rush from doctor's appointments to meetings.

And when she was hit by a car one morning, the pain of her physical injuries was eclipsed by the anger she felt after learning her assistant told clients she would have to miss a meeting about selling toilet paper. Quinlan, still strapped to a gurney, went ballistic and called her assistant screaming.

"Tell the client that I would never just 'miss' a meeting," she shrieked.

She was back at work the next day, much to her husband's chagrin.

'I need a rest'

For Cullen, the final straw came on Jan. 6 when a conservative listener called to bait her and then sunk to name-calling.

"Are you a lesbian?" he shouted.

Cullen's producer cut the man off but the damage was done. All of the frustration Cullen felt boiled over. That personal attack was simply a metaphor for all of the angry calls, the partisan screaming that now defines talk radio.

At the next commercial break, Cullen did something she has never done before: She left the broadcast booth and rushed 40 feet down the hall to Poister's office to make it clear that she wanted out.

"She said, 'John, we've got to talk. I just can't take this anymore. I need a rest,'" Poister recalled. "I could see in her eyes that day that this was not just idle talk like, 'I need a few days off.' This was her saying, 'John, I need help.' "

Cullen went back to finish the show. Poister went to see General Manager Tony Renda Jr.

"I said, 'We have a situation. Lynn is on her last nerve and needs time off,' " Poister said. "I was scared. I adore Lynn. My worst nightmare is that she comes to me and says, 'I can't do this anymore. Goodbye.' That was really my fear."

Off the treadmill

Quinlan finally stepped back from work in 1998 when a friend suggested she needed time off. The notion was foreign, but made sense.

"It was as if she had dumped a bucket of ice water on me to wake me up out of my stressed-out dream world. Once awake, I was determined to stay that way. I didn't want anyone to talk me out of it."

Her husband and her parents supported the idea and, within days, she went to her boss and asked for five weeks off, the middle ground between the month she was owed and the "six weeks that might seem sort of Betty Ford-ish."

She was shocked when he told her, "Make this the most selfish time of your life."

By week's end, she divided her duties among three executives, bought casual clothes and prepared to face life with a blank calendar. She reconnected with family, took craft classes, treated herself to spa days and came to the conclusion that it was time to get off the corporate treadmill.

She knew she made the right decision when she returned to work feeling mellow and calm while her colleagues "seemed as if they were all in the same bad meeting they were in when I left."

'I did nothing extraordinary'

Cullen's decision to take a month-long break was not as spur-of-the-moment as it may have seemed. She mulled the idea for weeks.

Unlike most single mothers -- the unspoken victims of overwork, Quinlan calls them -- Cullen's financial situation was such that she could afford to be off for several months if necessary.

And even though Cullen was upset when she approached Poister, she was willing to be reasonable. She wanted to find a solution short of quitting that would give her the time she needed and not put Renda Broadcasting, her employer, in an untenable situation.

"There was never a question. Never did we say, 'She can't do this,' Poister said. "We said, 'How can we make it happen?' One of the things we pride ourselves on is having an open door. The message I hope this sends to other employees is that when someone has a problem, we'll listen and try to find a solution."

Renda was of a like mind.

"Lynn is a very fair person. John Poister is one of the fairest people I know. I think I'm a fair guy," Renda said. "When people have one goal, you're going to find a way to work through issues."

For her part, Cullen agreed to stay on the air so a solution could be worked out, and she gave her bosses what she thought was a reasonable request: four weeks away from the job.

"That was the pragmatic part of me," Cullen said. "I wanted to ask for something that was doable."

Using the Family Medical Leave Act, the company was able to let Cullen go and still pay her health benefits. John McIntire agreed to host in her place two days a week, and a syndicated show was brought in for the other three days.

While friends were supportive, many thought Cullen should have left town for a rest. But her plan wasn't to escape, it was to refocus. She spent time with her son, cleaned her house, shopped leisurely, connected with friends and visited her parents in Palm Springs.

"I did nothing extraordinary," Cullen said. "I did what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it."

Even so, Cullen wishes she had taken a longer break.

"I feel pretty rested and I think it was restorative but it wasn't enough time. It wasn't. I still can't quite connect with the part of me that needs to be there for me to do this show well. I still can't work up a head of steam about anything. I almost feel I'm in a self-protective mode. There's something about doing that radio show that doesn't fit comfortably with self-protection."

Although Cullen remains unsure about the future, the time off did give her the chance to crystallize her thoughts about her show. She wants to be less partisan and promote a dialogue among people with varying points of view. She is looking for more balance on the air.

"I want to wrest control," she said. "I want to go back to more rational and more reasonable. I can't let it get out of hand like it did. I just can't."

Lynn Cullen can be heard from noon to 3 p.m. daily on 1360 WPTT radio. Mary Mary Lou Quinlan's book is available at bookstores nationwide. For more information, visit her Web site, [www.timeoff4goodbehavior.com](http://www.timeoff4goodbehavior.com).

### **Tips for taking a sabbatical**

#### **Signs that you need time off**

Health: You are skipping mammograms and other doctors' appointments.

Fitness and Diet: Your exercise routine has fallen by the wayside. You're eating fast food and takeout on a regular basis.

Sleep: You wake up in the middle of the night worrying.

Relationships: Your colleagues replace your friends and family.

Mirror Mirror: It doesn't lie. Ask yourself. How do I really look? How do I really feel?

#### **Some strategies for taking time off**

Finances: Get your finances in order. Money worries are what keep most people from taking time off. Make a plan for saving money and stick to it.

Company policy: Know your company policy. Do you have vacation time, unused sick days or personal time? Are there options for a sabbatical that is partially or fully paid or in which your benefits are covered? Will they hold your job for you?

Ask. Ask. Ask: Human resources experts say that companies invest time and money training people and don't want to lose them. If you're feeling too much pressure, talk to your supervisor, your department manager or the human resources staff about taking time off. If time off isn't an option for now, many companies offer flex time, compressed work weeks, and telecommuting, strategies that help you balance work and personal time.

Be reasonable: Present your boss with a realistic plan, one that takes into account the company's needs as well as your own. Let's face it, if you're asking for three weeks time during a peak period, you're probably not going to get it. Be willing to negotiate.