Joan Konner

'I found it hard to combine career and family'

For the first time in the 75-year history of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, its dean is a woman. Joan Konner is a veteran broadcast journalist, alumna and, since 1978, a university trustee. Konner, 57, brings 25 years' experience as a news writer, reporter and award-winning documentary producer for NBC-TV and WNET-TV, New York.

Since 1983 she had been executive producer for public television programs in partnership with Bill Moyers. Konner, a native of Paterson, N.J., who now lives in New York, is divorced; she has two daughters. In an interview with writer Darlene Gavron Stevens, Konner tells how she resolved the conflicting demands of career and family and solidified her career in journalism.

NEW YORK—I call myself neither an early bloomer nor a late bloomer. I was a middle bloomer. I liked to write. Right after graduating college [in 1951 from Sarah Lawrence College], when I was a full-time housewife and mother, I began writing poetry and essays and submitted articles on community events to our small local weekly. I also became the publicist for the League of Women Voters in Fair Lawn, N.J. Sitting down at the typewriter felt like coming home.

Writing poetry is something you do late at night, early in the morning or when the children nap. The first time I had a half-day free was when my younger daughter, Cathie, was in nursery school and my oldest, Rosemary, was in 1st grade. I used to clean the house and make sure it was finished by 9:15 in the morning, then sit down and write until 11:45. I had that little two-hour block of time every single day for a year and a half.

It soon became apparent to me that poetry was not going to be my career. It was the best I could find at the time. The producer at the station, Paterson, N.J., who now lives in New York, is divorced; she has two daughters. In an interview with writer Darlene Gavron Stevens, Konner tells how she resolved the conflicting demands of career and family and solidified her career in journalism.

It was with my children for the first five years of their lives. I don't say it can't be done otherwise. Certainly many women today are managing both of these accounts, but it is very hard, and one does have to make adjustments for the other. Those people who believe in "having it all" are kidding themselves a little bit.

When I went to work, I didn't do it. In the context young women are doing it today, I knew I wanted to work on a newspaper, to write, to get out into the world, but I didn't think about it in such terms as "career," "progression" or "ambition" that you hear today. I wanted to have a job I was interested in doing. That was the best in our region, because I wanted to be available to home. I wasn't in the job marketplace for the best job I could find at the time. The family determined where, and the family was the hub of my wheel.

At the [Bergen] Record, I started out as a feature writer and woman's page reporter and moved rapidly into editorial-page writing and column writing. When a job opened up on the editorial page, I went for it because it was one of the few daytime jobs at the paper. I submitted sample editorials for a couple of weeks and I got the job.

I was actually a reporter-at-large in my twice-a-week column. It was an unusual kind of column, because I would pick any topic I felt like was just choosing another, difficult life, and possibly a more rewarding life, but not necessarily.

I thought there was a fantasy component in Friedman's message. But it was a very important message and I think I gave it its due. I think the issues she surfaced were much more important than I recognized at the time. There was only partial view to the window women had on the world and she was really lifting the shade. I would applaud her book today much more than I did at the time.

I was working on the Record when a producer at [WNJ-TV] Channel 13, in New York City invited me to be a guest reporter for a New Jersey public affairs program. After my third appearance, he asked me if I'd be interested in producing another program at the station. And I said, "That's interesting, but what does a producer do?" He told me "producer" is just another name for broadcast reporting. At the time [1963] I was earning $90 a week and this job paid $125 a week and it sounded like a challenge. It was still on territory close to home and I had been reporting for two years, so I said yes.

As my career progressed, there were opportunities that I didn't even consider, because they would have conflicted with my home responsibilities. I remember I had been at NBC two months when the head of the local news operation said to me, "Joan, they're looking for an anchormanwoman up in Boston. I heard there was a job open at NBC."

Decisive moments

was just choosing another, difficult life, and possibly a more rewarding life, but not necessarily.

I think what was on my mind at the time was how hard I was finding it [combining career and family]. Friedman was saying, "You're frustrated at home; you shouldn't have to stay at home; go out into the world." I was out there. I was saying, "It's hard out here as well." In so saying, I think the column had a more discouraging tone to women than I would take today, because I actually believe you can do both if you are realistic about it.

I thought there was a fantasy component in Friedman's message. But it was a very important message and I think I gave it its due. I think the issues she surfaced were much more important than I recognized at the time. There was only partial view to the window women had on the world and she was really lifting the shade. I would applaud her book today much more than I did at the time.

I was working on the Record when a producer at [WNJ-TV] Channel 13, in New York City invited me to be a guest reporter for a New Jersey public affairs program. After my third appearance, he asked me if I'd be interested in producing another program at the station. And I said, "That's interesting, but what does a producer do?" He told me "producer" is just another name for broadcast reporting. At the time [1963] I was earning $90 a week and this job paid $125 a week and it sounded like a challenge. It was still on territory close to home and I had been reporting for two years, so I said yes.

As my career progressed, there were opportunities that I didn't even consider, because they would have conflicted with my home responsibilities. I remember I had been at NBC two months when the head of the local news operation said to me, "Joan, they're looking for an anchormanwoman up in Boston. I heard there was a job open at NBC."

Decisive moments

was just choosing another, difficult life, and possibly a more rewarding life, but not necessarily.

I think what was on my mind at the time was how hard I was finding it [combining career and family]. Friedman was saying, "You're frustrated at home; you shouldn't have to stay at home; go out into the world." I was out there. I was saying, "It's hard out here as well." In so saying, I think the column had a more discouraging tone to women than I would take today, because I actually believe you can do both if you are realistic about it.

I thought there was a fantasy component in Friedman's message. But it was a very important message and I think I gave it its due. I think the issues she surfaced were much more important than I recognized at the time. There was only partial view to the window women had on the world and she was really lifting the shade. I would applaud her book today much more than I did at the time.

I was working on the Record when a producer at [WNJ-TV] Channel 13, in New York City invited me to be a guest reporter for a New Jersey public affairs program. After my third appearance, he asked me if I'd be interested in producing another program at the station. And I said, "That's interesting, but what does a producer do?" He told me "producer" is just another name for broadcast reporting. At the time [1963] I was earning $90 a week and this job paid $125 a week and it sounded like a challenge. It was still on territory close to home and I had been reporting for two years, so I said yes.

As my career progressed, there were opportunities that I didn't even consider, because they would have conflicted with my home responsibilities. I remember I had been at NBC two months when the head of the local news operation said to me, "Joan, they're looking for an anchormanwoman up in Boston. I heard there was a job open at NBC."

Decisive moments

was just choosing another, difficult life, and possibly a more rewarding life, but not necessarily.

I think what was on my mind at the time was how hard I was finding it [combining career and family]. Friedman was saying, "You're frustrated at home; you shouldn't have to stay at home; go out into the world." I was out there. I was saying, "It's hard out here as well." In so saying, I think the column had a more discouraging tone to women than I would take today, because I actually believe you can do both if you are realistic about it.

I thought there was a fantasy component in Friedman's message. But it was a very important message and I think I gave it its due. I think the issues she surfaced were much more important than I recognized at the time. There was only partial view to the window women had on the world and she was really lifting the shade. I would applaud her book today much more than I did at the time.
As my career progressed, there were opportunities that I didn't even consider, because they would have conflicted with my home responsibilities.

(we were) two nice people who probably shouldn't have been married. Life got to a point where the children were mature enough for us to take a natural course, which was we shouldn't be together anymore. If I had never gone to work, I don't think it would have ended differently. I now have a long-term relationship with someone who is in this business and we're not married because we choose not to be, creating a more hospitable environment for me to function in.

As a documentary producer at NBC, I had an opportunity to report on most of the major social and cultural changes that were taking place in the late '60s and the '70s: the increase of drug use in the middle class, women's liberation, gay liberation, the changing roles of men and women. I'm pleased with that body of work.

did on the subject of death, which had not been treated on television before. And one of my last documentaries at NBC, about radioactive waste, was an example of reporting way in advance of its time. I'm very proud of the body of work I've done as executive producer for Bill Moyers, especially the most recent series, "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth," maybe because it's the last "baby." The response we're getting to the series is that the human spirit does exist and needs to be touched.

I had just undertaken the partnership with Bill Moyers in 1986 when the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism search committee called to meet with me. I imagine [it was because] the leaders of the journalism school were acquainted with what I was doing professionally, and felt there was a record of accomplishment and I was a woman, so they turned to me. I met with them because I was interested in the future of the school, and thought it would be a useful exchange. But I said up front that even if they would consider me for dean, I didn't know if I could accept.

As a Columbia University trustee, I was very aware of the internal philosophical debate of what the future of the school was. When finally they offered the job to me, a few factors weighed on my mind in making the decision. One was how important that school is to journalism. So many people at the school, including me, felt the school was exceptional because it had been a trade school, training practitioners.

But I understood that the marketplace has changed, as well as the nature of the problems reporters have to report on, and realized there was a need to bring in some of the expertise being taught in classrooms outside the journalism school. Basically, when the proposal the administration was coming down in favor of a practitioner. I felt it was the right thing to do to say yes.

It was very hard to say goodbye to being a working journalist, but I chose the academic world because the school was in need of leadership. I felt that what I did in journalism...
Hackensack, N.J., it was considered deviant behavior. On the other hand, there was a lot of respect for and interest in it on the part of friends of mine and women with older children. They would ask, "What is it like?"; "How are you managing your home?"; "Do you really have to work full time?"

As it happens, I was working six days a week, and reporting to work at 7 a.m. Some women were openly critical of me, even though my children were in school full time. As it turns out, the children were fine and they are fine; wonderful, in fact. I had good, outside help while the children were young. I said at the time that I did not think it could be done without good help, and I still believe that is a very important component of a smooth management of home and career.

This may be a conservative statement from a woman of my age, but I think if you have children, you

I was actually a reporter doing my twice-a-week column. It was an unusual kind of column, because I would pick any topic I felt like covering. I wasn't doing opinion pieces; I was in my late 20s and was too inexperienced to hold a lot of opinions. I was the only woman columnist at the time at the paper, and I was doing a kind of subjective reporting.

I think I always brought an individual perspective to the column, and because I'm a woman, you could call that a woman's perspective. I certainly took up women's issues at the time. I remember reviewing Betty Friedan's book "The Feminine Mystique" when it came out.

I'm absolutely certain I would not write the same column today. I wrote that if women thought they were going to go out into the marketplace and find the satisfaction and fulfillment they were not finding in their domestic lives, they'd better think twice. I wrote that it was a very, very difficult undertaking to try to manage the domestic account and the professional account together, that, in fact, there is no reason why women shouldn't do this, but they should do it realistically. I said that it

head of the local news operation said to me, "Joan, they're looking for an anchorwoman up in Boston. I recommended you; you'll be hearing from them." And I said, "That's an awful long commute from my husband; forget it." My mind-set was such that I never saw [such offers] as opportunities; I just said, "I can't travel for work now, I have young children at home."

I didn't think, "What will that mean to my later development in life?" My thoughts were on doing something I was interested in doing and that was manageable in the context of my whole life, not just my professional life. There was no conflict about that.

I think I've always operated from a domestic center. It's where my stability rests. My career was not a factor in my divorce. I was married at age 18, divorced 20 years later and I have been single since then. The breakup of the family occurred after my older daughter went to college. My husband was very supportive and encouraging at moments when I was discouraged; he always felt it was good for me and our family life that I was working.

Our difficulties had nothing to do with that. It's hard to convey that our marital difficulties started even before we had children. We were two very young people who didn't really know ourselves very well. There wasn't an explosive or troublesome environment in the household, but
term relationship with someone who is in this business and we're not married because we choose not to be.

When I was hired by NBC News [in 1965], I was the only woman in the newsroom. They used to hire one woman to work in the newsroom, and when everybody somehow developed some reason that she wasn't any good anymore, they would get the next woman in. It's interesting there was enough sensitivity at the time to allow one woman in the newsroom.

I survived, I guess because No. 1, I had a less abrasive personality, and No. 2, I had an outside domestic life, so none of that [sexual] tension could arise. For the small minority of men who were verbal about their hostility or their attitude about women I would answer them politely, but they didn't really get under my skin. I've always felt camaraderie with women and with men. I felt the world was a tough place for a lot of guys, too.

The increase of numbers of women into the workforce helped us all. I was making my way on my own, without really seeing it that way. The wave [of the women's movement] was coming along and suddenly there was a current in which you got carried. We were all beneficiaries of each other's efforts. They were a beneficiary because I was there and doing well and received well. The push that was coming from people who were thinking from the perspective of the whole was, in fact,

I think the major news media, particularly broadcasting, which I've been working in for the last 25 years, reflect a very narrow slice of reality, such that to some degree they have lost contact with their audience. People's lives and thoughts have much more dimension than television news reflects back to them.

In terms of my own work, I've always tried to explore a larger agenda than I've been covered on a regular basis in the broadcast operations. When I was working on headline [major] stories, I always tried to get at an angle of approach that perhaps addressed a different question than the one that was being addressed in what is called the hard news story. When I was younger, I had less access [to covering major stories] than men did, but I don't think I'd have been happy in any case, just being at the center of what I label "the power beat." Even if it had been open to me at the time, I don't know that that is where I would have finally been satisfied.

I was very proud of a program I was making my way on my own, without really seeing it that way. The wave [of the women's movement] was coming along and suddenly there was a current in which you got carried. We were all beneficiaries of each other's efforts. They were a beneficiary because I was there and doing well and received well. The push that was coming from people who were thinking from the perspective of the whole was, in fact,