Earlier in my career, I never thought that I would leave research. Ever since I arrived in the United States as a Ph.D. student with the proverbial two bags in my hand and $50 in my pocket, my goal had been to become the best possible cancer researcher. I marched through my Ph.D. and postdoc, taking one weekend to get married followed by a honeymoon in the lab. Everything was on track as I landed a job as a tenure-track assistant professor with the requisite extramural funding.

Then, I found myself pregnant with twins who decided they wanted to enter the world early. Of course I could handle a couple of preemies as well as a lab full of grad students and postdocs, plus classes to teach! With the tenure clock ticking, I summoned my inner superwoman and worked tirelessly as both a mother and faculty member. Sleep is vastly overrated anyway!

But while my babies were growing up, doubts emerged as the pulls of motherhood competed with my work. I was missing out on valuable professional opportunities and precious time with my twins. I spoke with female colleagues who had successfully juggled a career with parenthood and other women who had focused on one or the other. My colleagues warned that an interruption in my career would mean the end of my academic life, and I worried that it might encourage naysayers to not hire women for faculty positions. My "mommy" network advised me that the time with my kids was fleeting, and the job would still be there when they were grown. I spent months anguishy over what I should do.

The moment of clarity came during my kids’ soccer game, where I had been sitting in the bleachers analyzing data. I looked up from my laptop to see that the game was done and my kids had each scored a goal—but I had missed it all. I realized then that, in my attempt to be superwoman, I was shortchanging my kids and my own "mommy" experiences. That day, I made my decision.

A few weeks later, I learned that I had been promoted to tenured associate professor. I made sure all my trainees were placed in other labs and then dropped the bomb. Some of my colleagues felt betrayed, others were outraged, and many were disappointed that I was choosing to be "barefoot in the kitchen" and was “wasting my potential.” Most tried to convince me to change my mind, but over the next 7 years, the smiles on my twins’ faces totally validated my decision.

Once the kids were grown, I inched back into academia. However, while I was ready, the academic world was not! I was no longer considered suitable for tenured faculty positions or running an independent research program. The best I could do was to get an adjunct part-time faculty position. It was exhilarating to be back, but frustrating when my new colleagues eyed me askance and doubted my renewed commitment to my career. I was fortunate to have outstanding mentors and an incredible network of professional colleagues who urged me to accept the challenges and keep pushing through. I worked my way back up the rungs of academia, undeterred by a bout of cancer. I am now a funded tenured professor, and I even crossed over to the dark side as associate provost and dean of the graduate school. This year, my twins graduated from medical school and are grounded and caring adults.

Through it all, I learned that you can’t be everything to everyone. Careers can have second, third, and fourth acts. And finally, although what worked for me may not work for others, it’s important to remember that success comes in many flavors.

Ambika Mathur is the dean of the graduate school at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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My second acts
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