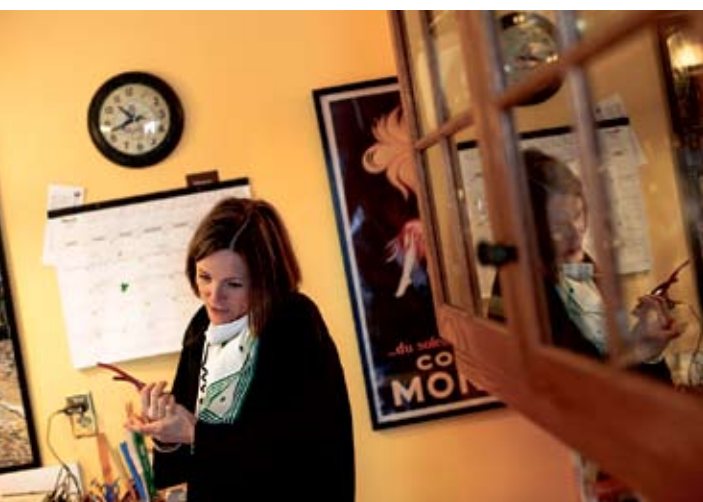


How hard is it for a mom to resume her career after nearly two decades out of the workforce? *Amy Beckett* is ready to find out.

# The return

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERONIKA LUKASOVA

Amy Beckett put away her reading glasses and file folder and stood up. ¶ It was time. It was almost past time. ¶ She tossed the empty paper cup into the trash and swung open the door to leave the deli on Rhode Island Avenue NW. As Beckett walked into an upscale office lobby, her scarf slipped from around her neck and drifted to the ground. She scooped it up and shoved it into her shoulder bag. She didn't want to arrive late for the job interview. ¶ She handed the security guard a photo ID. Once in the elevator, she looked up at the ceiling and exhaled noisily. "I'm never doing this again," she said, closing her jade-colored eyes for a moment. At the seventh floor, she opened the heavy wooden door to Suite 713, identified in gold lettering as the Law Offices of Stephen H. Marcus. The suite's unique double doors, parquet floor and crown molding signaled its former life as the ticket office for EL AL Airlines. The receptionist looked up from her desk with a smile. She took Beckett's business card and said it would be a few moments until Marcus finished with a client. ¶ With her back straight in a modern brown chair by the door, Beckett folded her hands over the bag on her knees and waited. It was March of last year, three days after she had turned 52 and 17 years since she'd last held a job.



Bottom: Amy Beckett gets ready at home for a crucial job interview and a networking lunch with Caroline Isber. Top: Beckett rides the elevator to her interview at Stephen H. Marcus law firm.

Beckett never intended to become a stay-at-home mother. The oldest of eight children, she said she left her home in Springfield, Mo., to attend Mount Holyoke College because she wanted to be somewhere that valued smart women — she was tired of feeling apologetic for her ambition. After getting her law degree from New York University in 1982, she began to forge her career: judicial clerkship, associate at a big Chicago firm, city government work and then her dream job at a small, progressive law firm representing unions in employment disputes. She met and married businessman Monte Tarbox, and the couple bought a two-bedroom bungalow on the North Side of Chicago.

“I loved the whole thing,” Beckett recalled. “I loved commuting, working downtown, using my mind, having my own money, all of those things.”

Daughter Nellie was born in 1992. During her maternity leave, Beckett interviewed a highly recommended nanny in preparation for returning to work. “What will be my duties?” the prospective nanny asked in a soft, Caribbean-accented voice.

“To love my baby,” Beckett replied. Then she burst into tears. That was it. Tarbox earned enough to support the family, so Beckett quit her job.

“It was against everything I ever thought I was going to be,” Beckett said. “Everybody I knew went right back to work, couldn’t wait to get back to work. It was hard to reach out and find people who would support me.” A few months after Nellie was born, Tarbox and Beckett had a couple over, and when Beckett said she wasn’t returning to the firm, there was silence. Then the woman said, “You’re going to make it harder for the rest of us.”

Two years later, the couple had another baby girl, Rory. In 1996, with both girls old enough for preschool, Beckett felt it was time to return to work, but then Tarbox landed a job in Australia. Beckett’s U.S. law degree wasn’t much use down under, so she put her plans on hold until Tarbox found a job back in the States three years later.

About one-third of married mothers leave the labor force to care for their

children in any given year, according to Suzanne Bianchi, a sociology professor at the University of California at Los Angeles and an expert in women’s work and family choices. The Census Bureau counted 5.1 million stay-at-home moms in 2009, about 23 percent of all married mothers with children younger than 15 in their household, Census demographer Rose Kreider said.

With the nation’s jobless rate near 10 percent, long-term unemployment among women ages 45 to 64 has more than doubled in the past year, to 888,000 in February, according to the U.S. Labor Department. And the job market for lawyers is especially difficult, with the National Association for Law Placement reporting the lowest-ever rate of job offers to summer associates, and law firms delaying new hires’ start dates for the first time.

For mothers trying to get back into the workforce, a 2005 study by the Center for Work-Life Policy revealed tough odds: Forty percent of at-home moms who want to return to work land full-time positions, while another 34 percent find part-time work. Anyone with a work gap longer than a decade is likely to return at the bottom of the ladder, Bianchi said. “You’ve got to convince somebody to take a chance on you, and you have to have the self-confidence that you can do that.”

For Beckett, finding that self-confidence had become a challenge. It could be intimidating just to meet other women who balanced work and raising children with apparent ease.

When she re-started her job search in fall 2008, Beckett signed up for the Lawyer Re-Entry Program at American University’s Washington College of Law. That November, four months before her interview with Marcus, Beckett and about 120 other people — the vast majority female — gathered for a forum by iRelaunch, a company that offers strategies to people reentering the workforce.

“High-potential women and men don’t lose their potential just because they step away from their careers for a few moments,” Carol Fishman Cohen, a mother of four who herself took 11 years

out of the full-time workforce, told the crowd. “During the time you’ve been out, your self-image has diminished. The people with whom you worked and went to school don’t know about any of this. You get a big confidence boost when you get in touch with these people and hear their enthusiasm about you returning to work.”

Cohen, who says it takes from six to 12 months to land a job for most people trying to reenter the workforce, wrote a book titled, literally, “Back on the Career Track: a Guide for Stay-at-Home Moms Who Want to Return to Work.”

Beckett — a petite woman who carefully coordinates her scarves and jewelry to her outfit — had read the book. One thing was sure: For this job hunt, she wanted more formal support than she had had in the past. When she and Tarbox returned to the United States in 1999, Beckett had looked for work on

her own as the family settled into life in downtown Silver Spring with three girls. (Molly was born in 1997 in Australia.) She won admittance to the D.C. bar in 2001 and, through an acquaintance, found a law firm job working three days a week. But she was soon let go.

“The major client whose work I was hired to help with, the deal fell through. The partner who hired me said some pretty uncomplimentary things on the way out,” Beckett said. “I stopped looking for a while. I became discouraged.”

Her husband encouraged her to push forward with job hunting. With the girls in school, “she didn’t feel there was enough to do [or] that it was contributing to the family,” he said.

**Katherine Reynolds Lewis and Carol Fishman Cohen take questions on moms returning to the workforce Monday at noon at [washingtonpost.com/magazine](http://washingtonpost.com/magazine).**



**Youngest daughter Molly prepares pancakes as Beckett, dressed for her morning run, drinks black tea and reads the newspaper.**

Without a paying job, Beckett threw herself into helping out at the girls’ schools, exercise and gardening work. She is a high-energy woman who likes keeping up with current events and connecting with people. Among her friends, she’s known for remembering details about new acquaintances: where they went to high school or what their favorite hobby is.

She picked up some part-time legal contract work, but the income was unsteady, and she found working from home isolating. Then, in 2006, Tarbox lost his job. With the pressure on, Beckett started sending out résumés again and landed some interviews — but nothing resulted in a permanent position. When Tarbox found a new job based in New York, they didn’t want to uproot the family, so he stays in New York at least three days a week and works at home when he is in town.

In summer 2008, Beckett heard a radio ad for the AU Lawyer Re-Entry Program. Maybe this would be the key to landing a position after nearly a decade of sporadic job-searching and unsatisfying contract work. When she told her girls she was restarting her job hunt, they cheered. “That’s great, Mom,” Nellie said. The youngest, 11-year-old Molly, scoffed at the notion that she’d need a nanny for after-school care. Like Beckett, her three daughters are petite, fine-featured and markedly poised, the kind of girls who say “as well” instead of “too” and “uneventful” instead of “boring.”

“I’ve raised them to be self-reliant,” Beckett said. “I have always made a point of living in a neighborhood where everything is walk-able. My older kids take public transportation.”

Tarbox applauded his wife’s determination to give it another shot. A second income would help put three

girls through college, and, above all, the family needed a happy mom. When Beckett told her friends about her decision, one at-home mom said wistfully: “I can’t help feeling that you’re leaving some of us behind.”

**T**hat December, Beckett saw a job posting that seemed a perfect fit. The AU law school was hiring a full-time assistant placement director specializing in public interest careers — her area of expertise. The salary range was \$51,000 to \$54,000, and candidates with a law degree were “highly preferred.” She applied for the spot and also e-mailed the chairwoman of the public interest committee, which oversees the position. She asked Linda Mercurio, her teacher from the AU program, to put in a good word for her.

Separately, she had an informational interview at the Service Employees International Union and applied for both a part-time literacy training job and a legislative director spot at the Pension Rights Center. But the AU placement job was the one she really wanted and thought she could land through her background and connections.

“I try to make at least one call or contact every day” to propel the job search forward, Beckett said. “I’m motivated and optimistic on my good days.”

Friday, Jan. 9, 2009, was not a good day. Beckett got an e-mail from the hiring manager at AU saying that they were only interviewing candidates who had had public interest internships. Beckett wasn’t even under consideration.

She was crushed. Holding her emotions at bay, Beckett took the girls out for burritos and picked up Tarbox at the Metro. Once everyone was fed, Beckett put on “Stage Door,” an old black-and-white Hollywood movie, and started a crying jag that lasted all weekend.

“I should’ve read the coded descriptor, which is ‘fast-paced,’” she said a few days later. “Since they can’t say, ‘nobody over 30,’ they say ‘fast-paced.’” Tarbox told his wife not to take it personally, but it was hard for Beckett to avoid feeling old and unemployable.

“I keep thinking, ‘I’m an appealing person, I’m smart, I’m good to talk to, I would be good at this!’” she said.



**Beckett’s husband, Monte Tarbox, gives her a kiss as he heads to New York, where he works several days a week.**

Tarbox had seen Beckett low before. “Fortunately, she was dogged enough that she would pick herself off, dust herself off and try again,” he said.

Neither the literacy training job nor the Pension Rights Center position had panned out, either, but Beckett reminded herself that only 5 percent of people who answer job ads land the position. The rule of thumb is that if you get in front of 20 decision makers, you’ll receive a job offer. She couldn’t give up, she told herself, despite these ups and downs.

**A** couple of months later, on the morning of the interview with Marcus, Beckett started to feel nervous. She took off one pair of earrings, tried on a different pair and decided that the first one coordinated with her outfit better. Then she printed out pages from the Marcus firm Web site to study on the Metro and headed for the meeting.

When Marcus came out of his office to begin the interview, Beckett greeted him with a smile and firm handshake. Smiling, too, Marcus ushered Beckett into a large room overlooking St. Matthew’s Cathedral and made a quip about the stack of résumés that hadn’t made the cut. Put at ease by his friendly manner, Beckett discussed projects she’d done and asked Marcus how he developed new business.

“She was very personable; she had good experience,” Marcus said, some weeks later. “She seemed very professional and poised. I thought she was a

very impressive candidate.”

The conversation lasted an hour and concluded with a brief tour of the suite of offices. Standing on Rhode Island Avenue outside the office building, Beckett reviewed her performance. “I think I did as well as I possibly could do,” she said. “If that’s not good enough, there’s nothing I can do about it.” Then, her thoughts turned to the family. Molly had left a voice mail saying she was at a friend’s. Tarbox sent a text message to tell her his plane was delayed. And, boy, would it feel good to take off the high heels.

Nine days later, when the e-mail arrived saying Marcus would be hiring someone else, Beckett seemed to expect it. “I kinda knew that would be it,” she said. “Yes comes right away.”

In a later interview, Marcus said he hired an attorney with broader litigation experience that was more relevant to his business disputes practice. He’d received 140 résumés in response to three online job postings, out of which only six (including Beckett) received in-person interviews.

**T**he next two months were a dry spell — no responses to her résumés, no networking leads. Last May Beckett walked into AU’s law school alongside students wearing flip-flops, sweats and jeans. Dressed in a black pantsuit, blue blouse and a scarf decorated with dragonflies and butterflies, Beckett carried a copy of “Bad Mother” by Ayelet Waldman into the hush of the rare book library,

where Linda Mercurio was waiting to begin a job coaching session. But inside, Beckett wasn’t feeling very put together. The words tumbled out of her mouth.

“One of the reasons I’m here is that I’m stuck. I’m going to cry,” Beckett said, as tears began to fall. “I can’t be the kind of mom I want to be and have a professional identity. I’ve failed at everything I tried. I failed at my first job here. I got fired and was told I was incompetent. I’m hanging onto the shreds of my professional identity with this contract work, which is unsatisfying.”

Mercurio pulled Beckett aside for a moment of quiet counseling. Later, a more composed Beckett talked positively about a new project she was spearheading for Docs in Progress, a Silver Spring nonprofit helping independent documentary filmmakers. She would assess whether the organization had enough community support to turn its front lawn into a community garden.

“For years, I had resisted signing up and volunteering somewhere because lack of salary means lack of prestige,” Beckett said. “In this case, I feel it’s an investment, and it’s a project that I identify with. I love to pull weeds and be in the dirt and be in gardens. This may point me in a good direction.”

Mercurio said later that she had always believed Beckett would achieve what she wanted. “She’s incredibly gifted,” Mercurio said. “Whatever way she went, she was going to find success.”

At a Starbucks, Beckett explained that her earlier despair was exacerbated by a tussle with Rory over homework and Molly’s recent run-in with a bully at school.

Her distress wasn’t all family-related. “I have a very hard time feeling like I’m walking away from the law.” But looking back, she wouldn’t change the path that led to her current career limbo. “Raising children is honorable and worthy,” Beckett said. “I felt ashamed of my choice, like I was ... failing the feminist movement.” Above all, she wants her daughters to be more confident about the lives they choose and the role of motherhood.

**J**ust as Beckett began to accept having no active leads for a paid job, Passman & Kaplan, a local employment law firm, called to invite her to interview in mid-June. Her client Steve Silverberg sublet his office

from the firm, so she had asked him to recommend her. Most of her contract work was in the same field, giving her immediate, relevant experience.

“I don’t feel desperate,” Beckett said. “They want to find somebody good as much as I want to find the right place. ... It’s not just them sizing me up.”

When she walked into the interview with Joe Kaplan, Beckett’s confidence made a strong impression, Kaplan said in a later interview. The firm needed someone with litigation and employment law experience who could command the respect of both clients and opposing counsel. Kaplan and partner Sandra Mazliah interviewed Beckett together. Then they opened the floor and were pleased that Beckett had her own questions.

“Someone who doesn’t have insightful questions for me about our firm and what working here will be like doesn’t show the depth of interest we’re looking for,” Kaplan said later.

Kaplan had to leave the interview, and Mazliah remained to describe the culture of the firm, including monthly lunches to encourage personal as well as professional discussion. She stressed the family-friendly culture, with paid leave for new dads as well as for moms. Beckett took the discussion as a positive sign that they were interested in her enough to sell the benefits of the firm, and that they valued the family work she’d done in the past 17 years.


On her way home, Beckett reviewed

the changes she might need to make in her life if she went back to work — choosing between reading her newspaper on the Metro or biking to work to keep up her daily exercise routine. The girls would need to take on more chores.

Her optimism was on target: About 36 hours later, Beckett got a call from Kaplan offering her the job.

The soul-searching, résumé-copying and pavement-pounding were over. Grinning widely while on the phone, Beckett asked if she could think about the compensation package overnight. As she jumped up to call Tarbox, she felt a rush of elation. *I can do this!* she thought to herself. *This is my entree to the working world.*

Beckett accepted the offer the next morning and made plans to celebrate over champagne when Tarbox got home from New York. As word spread that she was going back to work, Beckett got a call for one last contract project. She also had to finish up some work for Silverberg and get the family ready for a road trip to see both sets of grandparents.

But first she would dig out her framed diplomas and bar admissions from the basement and choose a few plants for her new office. After 17 years, Amy Beckett was going back to work. 

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**At the end of a long day of networking and interviewing, Beckett is happy to kick off her heels.**

