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mom interviews



kate kelly, author and historian

Bringing history to life at AmericaComesAlive.com

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Kate Kelly's career path has taken her from college life as a theater major to a life as an author and historian. "My senior thesis was about a 19th-century actress, so there is a connection," she points out. "Though I never would have guessed then that I would find myself writing about history." On her website, [America Comes Alive](#), she introduces readers to incredible Americans and shows how stories about America's past continue to inform our future.

Kelly lives with her husband in the suburbs of New York City. "I have three daughters, 29, 26, and 21, so I am no longer in the parenting trenches," she says. "I can testify that it's very rewarding to have grown children out doing interesting things that they share with you."

She took the time to share with Work It, Mom! some of the interesting things she's working on right now -- including ways to use history to bring families closer, now that school has been added back in to our work-life juggle -- and offers some advice for work-at-home moms.

Tell us a bit about your career path.

It became clear early in my working life that I absorbed the written word better than the spoken word, so I moved from a job at CBS Radio to a job in public relations so that I could polish my writing skills. I eventually began freelancing for magazines and collaborating on books.

History is really a form of storytelling -- it needs to be both interesting and factual, and while I have never wanted to write a novel, I love finding and telling people's stories. I grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, where my parents were very active in the community, so I learned at that time that America is worth working for, and that we have a history and culture that is important to honor and preserve.

After I finished my last collaborative book (a book on back pain written with a doctor), I decided it was time to use my skills to share what I can learn about our country's past by creating my website, www.americacomesalive.com. I hope that if people have a better understanding of where we have come from, they will work to preserve it.

You've written about so many different things, from getting organized to politics to science to American history. How do you settle on a topic?

Most of the subjects I have written about were brought to me by editors. Even my first history book, "Election Day: An American Holiday, An American History," was suggested by an editor. The collaborations have always been brought to me by an agent or editor who needs a writer to work with an expert. I am always curious about almost everything, so if someone suggests a topic, it is easy for me to become enthusiastic about it.

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Your site, American Comes Alive, mentions the idea of "making sense of today by looking at yesterday." What historical facts do you feel are being overlooked in this day and age, and how is that affecting us?

I think people just need to be reminded of our past. For example, the shock we felt after 9-11 bore a certain resemblance to how people felt after Pearl Harbor. In that case, reminding people we have lived through something horrific makes them feel more prepared for some of what we face today.

You also write and speak frequently about US elections. In other countries, people fight for the right to vote; here, people seem to take it for granted, even groups that have struggled for recognition in the past. Why do you think that is?

Americans do sometimes become complacent, or they slip into a feeling of "What I do doesn't matter so I won't bother to vote." But of course, it does matter. Right now I happen to live in a very small town where the election for mayor can hinge on just a few votes. It's a good reminder, because every vote really does count all across the country.

This fall I've written a lot about how women won the right to vote, and I hope it reminds voters to appreciate that voting is both a right and a privilege.

How can parents use history to pique their children's interests or bring their families closer?

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Kids may roll their eyes when you start with the words, "Well when I was young..." but don't let that stop you! Whether it's a story about how you didn't have a cell phone when you were young or about how their grandfather walked two miles to school every day, they hear you, and the stories will come back to them later on. Also, I love the school assignments where the kids are to interview a grandparent or a neighbor about something that person lived through. Those conversations help a child understand the past. My kids had a great-grandfather who owned a general store, and we have wonderful stories of his life, as written by the kids, on our bookshelves now.

Parents also love taking their kids to historic sites and museums. The experiences can be interesting to the whole family, but remember: even an adult is hard-pressed to remember more than three things from a museum experience.

Before you start, challenge the kids to find three interesting facts or select three favorite things, and if they accomplish their goal in 30 minutes or so, don't worry. Let them amuse themselves until the rest of the family is ready to leave, but they'll come more readily on the next visit if they feel they had some control.

I also have some tips for sharing history and family history with kids on the Resources page of my website: americacomesalive.com/resources/

There are no set hours when it comes to research and writing. How do you juggle work and the rest of your life?

As a parent, I found that I had two work modes: the "mother setting" and the "work setting." I do like to work and always kept a heavy load and, in order to meet deadlines, if I wasn't involved with the family, I was working. That actually isn't ideal! Advice to current work-at-home moms: Try to do something for yourself at least a few times each week, whether it's a walk or an exercise class, or ten minutes of reading, it's worth it.

Now I still find myself at my desk every day, but I am better about getting out to yoga, walking the dogs, meeting a friend or reading.

One secret: When your children go off to college, your concentration strengthens because there are fewer interruptions. I love my daughters, and loved raising them but I concentrate much better now. (If you feel totally “fried” most days, there is hope!)

What's next on your life to-do list?

Because this site is addressing mothers, I would first mention that after many, many years working really hard as a parent (and enjoying it), it is also wonderful to be without the day-to-day responsibility of parenting. As a mother of daughters, after-school discussions were huge in our household, and while I sometimes miss the camaraderie of being with them, it's okay to just have my own feelings to deal with. Those of you with daughters know how it feels when they come home and are upset from a social slight of some type -- minor or major, it's hard not to feel what they are feeling.

As for what else is next, right now I just want to keep doing more of what I'm doing. I'm traveling more to research stories for the website, and I love getting out and meeting new people.

I believe strongly in the wonder of this country, and I'd like to reach more people to share that sentiment with them.

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