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Politician juggles newborn, Miami Commission post

BY CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN

I step into Michelle Spence-Jones' office in City Hall just as she finishes nursing her 6-week-old son. Sleep-deprived, Spence-Jones cradles her newborn, trying to balance sticking a pacifier in his mouth, greeting me and making arrangements with an aide to attend a meeting later in the morning.

It has been a crazy six weeks for Spence-Jones, who began labor during a press conference to announce her reelection as Miami City commissioner for another four years. A second-time mom at 41, the politician considers Noah to be her miracle baby, aptly named for the flood of controversy that now surrounds her.

In the past few weeks, Spence-Jones has taken a high-profile stance on an emotional issue. She is Miami's potential swing vote on a Little Havana baseball stadium pitched for the Florida Marlins. It has forced her to return from maternity leave two weeks early.

But Spence-Jones brings baby Noah to city hall and to meetings Sarah Palin-style, nursing him while performing work-related tasks. The commissioner says she refuses to give up time with her baby. "The last four years took me away a lot from my older son. This time I want more balance."

In Miami-Dade, it's still relatively uncharted territory to give birth while holding a seat on the dais. There is no road map for balancing a baby, a toddler, a husband, fundraising, politicking and lawmaking. Like all working parents, Spence-Jones is making it up as she goes along.

'MIRACLE BABY'

With Noah now nodding off, Spence-Jones tells me she was at the pediatrician, having further screening done on the baby to determine whether he had sickle cell disease when the calls came from City Hall. The commission was deadlocked on the Marlins vote, leaving the final decision in limbo. She was among the city commissioners who endorsed the \$634 million project, which relies on public funding, during initial votes in 2007 and 2008.

Having had an earlier miscarriage and now this health scare, she reveals her first reaction: "The hell with baseball, I got a miracle baby here."

Now, back at work, the mother of two is openly playing hardball -- demanding that her Overtown/Liberty City district receive half a billion dollars worth of projects to ensure her vote. Her new position has put her at the center of a political drama.

Spence-Jones says she lives and is raising her kids in Liberty City, where shootings are commonplace, drugs are out of control, small businesses are struggling, many schools are sub-par and the housing stock is insufficient.

"It's time for that community to get its fair share," she tells me.

In the past, women voters have been hardest on women politicians with young children. Yet, Spence-Jones says being a mother gives her perspective on the job and insight into the challenges that families face in her community. She, like other women in politics raising young children, insist the community benefits from their sensitivity to family issues when they vote.

The Marlins vote caps a rocky term for Spence-Jones. She spent much of her first four years defending herself after becoming a target in local corruption investigations. Criminal charges against the commissioner were never filed.

When she's not at city hall, she tries to overcome one of the big challenges most working moms face: finding time for

her spouse. Her husband, Nathaniel R. Jones, works in Overtown for the Head Start program.

HUSBAND, MOM HELP

Like most working couples, Spence-Jones and her husband share parental responsibilities. She wakes up three times a night with the baby. He gets the older son, Nathaniel, 4, ready for preschool, takes him and picks him up. When Spence-Jones returns home, it's her time with her older son, who is in the middle of tee-ball season. Spence-Jones says her safety net is her mother, who lives with her and pitches in with cooking dinner. "She's a blessing. She fills in all the blanks."

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said women politicians with young children are rare. Most wait until their kids are older to run for office. She feels this type of diversity is important: "They bring a different set of life experiences to this process and it's reflected in the issues they make a priority."

Now, Noah is awake and making cooing noises. I ask the commissioner about the reaction to her bringing the baby to work. "People like it . . . women like it . . . it's different."

Once the stadium vote is behind her, Spence-Jones plans to move into reelection mode, going out into the community with baby Noah in tow. She believes her constituents will react favorably to seeing her juggle. "I think they like knowing that you are an average person with the same type of issues they have."