In the months leading up to the grand opening of Barclays Center, work for Dan Lefton, ’00, was about as 24/7 as it can get, even for someone who has always been regarded as a work-is-life kind of guy.

Then at 3 a.m. Sept. 28, 2012—the morning of the grand opening—his pregnant wife, Laura (director of club business and corporate development at the NFL), shook him awake to say that her water had just broken.

“It was the ultimate life lesson for me,” said Lefton, who welcomed his first child, Jake, that day. “It helped put everything into perspective.”

Lefton, with the Nets since 2007, is vice president of suite sales and premium seating. Prior to joining the franchise, he served as director of corporate hospitality for the Washington Redskins, was a member of the premium sales department for the Detroit Pistons and worked as director of ticket operations for Temple University.

Lefton has endured challenging situations during his career, from Temple being booted from the Big East in 2004 to the Nets’ 12-70 season in 2009–10. For most of his time with the Nets, he sold the dream of a new start in Brooklyn. Meanwhile, new sports and entertainment venues popped up across New York (the homes of the Jets, Giants, Yankees and Mets among them), saturating the market with premium hospitality destinations. An advantage for the Nets: Learning from all of them and adjusting accordingly to market demands and conditions.

Gone are the days of being understaffed and begging for appointments. Lefton now finds himself in a position with a record number—just shy of 12,000—of full season-ticket holders and with premium seating nearly sold out. Fans no longer come just to see superstars such as LeBron James or Kobe Bryant play against the home team.

“It’s a legitimate fan base,” he said. “It’s exceeded my expectations, as well as how well-received Barclays Center has been.”

In line with his colleagues, Lefton stresses the importance of continually creating value for Nets fans, building personal relationships and providing unparalleled access and experiences.

“These last five years have been extremely fulfilling and worth all the hard work and sacrifice, because this is the dream,” he said. “This is part of the reason I took a leap of faith. I wanted to be a part of something really, truly special.”

Christine Bowns, ’03, joined the New Jersey Nets full-time on July 1, 2004, when fan favorites Jason Kidd and Kenyon Martin led the team. Fifteen days later, the franchise traded Martin—the Nets’ No. 1 overall pick in the 2000 draft—to Denver.

As an account manager of VIP access and experience at the time, Bowns fielded fan complaints, with some ticket holders screaming in protest over the deal.

“A lot of my great relationships I have with ticket holders now is because of that summer,” Bowns said. “They were angry—which they had every right to be—and they wanted someone to vent to. I was happy to be that person. That year was a great learning experience for me, and I grew a lot professionally.”

In the years since, Bowns has advanced to director of VIP Services, where she oversees eight account managers and two coordinators. Bowns’ other responsibilities include creating and implementing programs and events to increase fan loyalty and to ensure overall service to Nets season-ticket holders.

Bowns emphasizes the importance of going the extra inch for ticket holders and creating wow moments, which can be as big as helping someone get a picture with a player or as small as returning a phone call quickly. “It’s all about creating lasting memories,” she said.

Her interest in the service and hospitality side of sports started while pursuing her graduate degree at STHM. During her first year, Bowns served as a graduate assistant for Dan Lefton, now a Nets colleague, at Temple’s ticket office, and she also worked with Nelligan Sports Marketing in New Jersey. During her second year, she interned at Louisiana State University’s ticket office.

The summer of 2012 was much different than 2004. Instead of losing a marquee player, the Nets were gaining a new arena and identity. Bowns hardly had time to stop and reflect on the uniqueness of the situation. Then Jay-Z opened the Barclays Center with a series of eight concerts. For a moment, Bowns could relax. Chills shot through her body.

“Not too many people in sports can say they’re part of a franchise move like this,” Bowns said. “It’s pretty special.”