

A PIECE OF CAKE — CUPCAKE BROWN'S TRANSCENDENCE

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Not many lawyers are best-selling authors. And even fewer, if any, are former homeless crack addicts, prostitutes, or gang members. Yet Cupcake Brown is all those things and more.

The triumphant story of Brown has been featured by everyone from Oprah Winfrey, who profiled her as a “phenomenal woman,” to CNN and National Public Radio. The story began when Brown’s mother died when Cupcake (her real name, though she calls herself “Cup”) was eleven, and custody of Brown and her brother was awarded to her birth father, who knew the children only for their value in Social Security money. She was passed off to an abusive foster mother who encouraged her nephew to rape Brown. Several years of street crime, prostitution, and drug addiction in San Diego followed, culminating with her living behind a dumpster.

An unlikely series of events, chronicled in her memoir, *A Piece of Cake*, led Brown to San Diego State University, from which she graduated in 1998 magna cum laude despite her lack of a high school diploma or GED. That would have been triumph enough for most former crack-addict prostitutes. But Brown went on to graduate from the University of San Francisco School of Law in 2001, winning the school’s Judge Harold J. Haley Award for Exceptional Distinction in Scholarship, Character, and Activities. She was also admitted to the McAuliffe Honor Society and served as an extern to Justice Joyce Kennard of the California Supreme Court.

Brown then became a litigator at San Francisco’s Bingham McCutchen, specializing in antitrust, securities, corporate governance, and white-collar crime. Her favorite task, she says, was research and writing. “I love it. I’m in my element. And I enjoyed the partners I worked with,” she adds. “They didn’t judge me. They knew I was intelligent and capable. It was a great learning experience that I will take with me forever.”

While launching a legal career that leaves most junior associates spent each day, Brown at the same time wrote her

memoir, which became a best seller (reaching number one in the United Kingdom and number seventeen on the *New York Times* best-seller list) and a critical success. Reviews heralded Brown as a frank, resilient, gifted storyteller. According to the *Washington Post*, Brown’s book “dazzles [the reader] with the amazing change that is possible in one lifetime,” and the reviewer described it as “poetic in its simplicity.”

David Balabanian, chair of Bingham’s litigation department, was a primary influence in encouraging Brown to write the book, giving her days off periodically when an especially emotional chapter took its toll on Brown’s psyche. For that reason, the book took Brown two years to write and two years to edit. “After I wrote about rapes and beatings, I couldn’t go to work the next day,” she recalls. “So I had to put it down and come back to it.”

Balabanian says what’s most affecting about Brown’s memoir is its positive tone. “She’s objective about the injustices, not self-pitying,” he says. “In some respects, she’s hard on herself. It wasn’t an unbroken trajectory from degradation to law school. There were fits and starts. It reads, in many ways, like a book by Dickens.”

The firm as a whole was “completely supportive of the book,” Brown adds. She is especially grateful for how everyone at the firm treated her with respect, despite her unorthodox past. “Law firms can be very hierarchical,” she explains. “But even when I was a first year, David [Balabanian] would refer to me as his ‘colleague.’” She suspects her history may have actually made her more approachable. “I can deal with any community, any professional setting,” she says. “There are all kinds of people in law firms, and a lot put on airs. But a lot of people feel comfortable with me.”

Spurred on by Balabanian’s encouragement, Brown decided to write the book because of errors in stories about her by the media, which have followed her since her San Diego State days. It began when one of her professors there, who studied gangs, was interviewed by the local NBC news and mentioned Brown. “So the news team



wanted to meet me. I was petrified. I wondered if I'd ever robbed anyone at NBC," Brown quips. "When the story ran, the speaking requests started pouring in. Audience members had all these unanswered questions. The media started to follow me, and every news story had mistakes."

As her law firm career took off, so did her motivational speaking career, which became even more demanding as *A Piece of Cake* gained attention. She was doing as many as three or four speeches a month, "always praying nothing would come up at work," says Brown, who decided to leave law firm life this fall. "I want to help people," she explains, "but litigation is not the kind of help I want to give. Bingham was a wonderful place, but firm life requires a lot. I'm not going back to a big firm. If I did, it would be Bingham."

The audiences at her speaking gigs are, Brown says, "as varied as my story." Schools, churches, and even corporations looking to motivate employees hire her. She never uses a canned speech but instead tailors every presentation to the specific audience.

"What's endearing about her is her extraordinary good cheer," Balabanian says. "Talking with her, you'd never think she'd had a down day in her life, let alone the hardships she experienced. For her to bounce back and not exhibit any bitterness or confront the world in a suspicious, guarded way is as remarkable as her other achievements. How is it possible for someone by sheer act of will to turn around her life? I have a hard time following my diet."

In addition to her speaking work, Brown is contemplating writing a sequel to the memoir focused specifically on her recovery, a how-to book of sorts. "I get a lot of e-mails that begin, 'How did you . . . ?'" she explains.

She's also adapting *A Piece of Cake* into a script. It hasn't yet been optioned by a studio, and she may actually try to

make the film herself so she has more control. "I'm a realist," Brown says about her foray into script-writing. "We all have different talents and we all have to try. If the script sucks, I've already won because I tried. It might be crap. I've never written one before. But in my motivational speaking, I encourage people to try [new things], and I want to practice what I preach."

Brown lives in San Leandro with her cat Squirt and spends "all [her] free time" with her

boyfriend John, whom she met at church. They are big movie buffs, heading to Blockbuster every Tuesday for new releases. Her favorite movies, she says, include *While You Were Sleeping*, *Lady Sings the Blues*, and anything with Doris Day.

John Pernick, a Bingham litigation partner who worked with Brown, says he cannot remember being in a room with Brown and not smiling. "I would describe Cup as joyful," he says. "Not only was she a joy to work with because of her intelligence and skills but she also just brought joy with her. Like everyone else who has worked with Cup, I have seen her attain success at everything she has worked on, from finding the right argument or case to helping a client to writing a best-selling book. So I am just interested in seeing what the next success is going to be."



From left: David Balabanian, Bingham McCutchen; Cupcake Brown; and Judge Martin Jenkins, U.S. District Court, Northern District of California

