Phenomenal Woman: Cupcake Brown

Oprah Magazine September 2001

At 37, Cupcake Brown has only to pass the bar and she'll be a lawyer, with a $125,000-a-year job waiting for her at McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen, a white-collar criminal defense firm in San Francisco. Doggedly focused, she is busy these days and full of hope.  
  
It wasn't always so. There was a time when she got up—or "came to," as she puts it—in the morning with nothing to look forward to but the pursuit of the next trick and the next high.  
  
Brown—whose first name is the result of a nurse's misunderstanding of her mother's post-delivery request for a cupcake—remembers a happy childhood. "We lived in the ghetto, but it was home," she says. One morning she woke up to the sound of the alarm clock in the other room blaring on and on. Her mother had choked to death during a seizure. Brown was 11.  
  
Placed in a series of foster homes where she was repeatedly abused physically and sexually, Brown started running away and selling her body in order to survive. At 12 she joined a gang and started "doing what gangs do: rob, steal, fight."  
  
Two days before she turned 15, Brown nearly got her wish. She was shot in a drive-by and doctors told her she might not walk again. When she did, three weeks later, she knew it was time to leave gang life. That same year she left the foster care system for good, having herself declared legally emancipated. "I was 'grown,'" she says wryly, "so I did what I wanted, when I wanted, how I wanted." What she wanted most was oblivion, and she found it in heroin, crystal meth, marijuana, powder and crack cocaine, angel dust, alcohol, acid.  
  
For many of its alumni, foster care proves to be a one-way ticket to failure. One study indicates that less than 8 percent manage to graduate from a four-year college. The few who do succeed have one thing in common: someone in their life who stands by them. Brown found that person at the age of 23, in Kenneth J. Rose, a San Diego attorney who gave her a job as a legal secretary.  
  
Rose saw in Brown something she did not yet recognize in herself: her intelligence. "He acted like I was smart, and it just blew me away," she says. Nevertheless, as her responsibilities at work increased, so did her drug use. At one point, she lost her apartment and went on a four-day crack binge, winding up without her shoes, wearing nothing but a green dress, now brown with filth. "I happened to pass a window," Brown recalls, "and saw my reflection. My eyes were sunk in my head. My lips were burned and scabbed from the crack pipe. You could see my ribs. I had seen death before on other people. But I'd never seen it on me."

She walked nearly 60 blocks to Rose's law firm, where she told him for the first time that she was addicted to drugs. Rose got on the phone and found a bed in a rehab program, then assured Brown that her job would still be there

when she got out. "Ken's white," Brown observes. "I'm black. He's Jewish. I'm Christian. Society says we're supposed to hate each other, but he has shown me unconditional love. If it hadn't been for Ken, I'd be dead or in jail."  
  
Once she got clean, despite never having finished high school, Brown enrolled in community college. It took her five and a half years to get through a two-year program while working full-time, and another two years to finish her BA. Brown then applied to five law schools and anxiously waited for the responses. The first four were rejections. "I thought all my dreams would go up in smoke," she recalls. "But I opened that last letter from the University of San Francisco, and girl, not only did they accept me, they gave me money."  
  
Defying all expectations, Brown graduated from law school this past spring. What she didn't know until she heard her name read out is that the faculty had voted to give her the school's highest honor for outstanding scholarship, activities, and character.  
  
"It was a wonderful feeling," Brown says. "Most of my life, people hated to see me coming, 'cause I'm gonna beg for some money, I'm gonna steal something, I've got some angle. So for people to actually vote on me and say, 'We like her. We like what she stands for'—that was a complete turnaround for me."

Update…

Excerpt from Brown’s website started 2005 currently updated 2014… see About Cupcake

Cupcake's story is about system failure, societal ignorance, and a little girl who, as a result, resigned to degradation, depression, deprivation, and defeat.  Her story is also about choices -- good ones and bad ones -- and about the possibilities that are there if only we "Pray, trust, work hard, and grab hold!"  Most people would have been daunted by the hurdles she faced.  Yet, despite enormous fear and grave self-doubt, Cupcake grabbed a hold, prayed, and held on for dear life as she learned that there was another way -- a better way.  She sensed a Guiding Hand and discovered that, over time, a network of people were being formed to encourage and guide her along the way.   Leaning on this network, Cupcake climbed the long, difficult, and steep ladder to transformation, sobriety, positive change, self-improvement, and triumph.   
  
As an author, attorney, and advocate, Cupcake speaks all over the country, using all of the years of negative experiences, coupled with the positives, to share with others how -- even though it seems impossible -- the hopes and dreams of anyone really can come true.   
  
After law school, Cupcake was an attorney for one of the 25th largest law firms in the nation.   
  
Besides graduating college *magna cum laude* without a high school diploma or G.E.D., Cupcake has received many scholastic awards including, the University of San Francisco School of Law's Judge Harold J. Haley Award for Exceptional Distinction in Scholarship, Character and Activities; the McAuliffe Honor Society; the National Law School Dean's List; and San Diego State University's Donald Leiffer Outstanding Alumni Award for Distinguished Service.   
  
In addition to her numerous accomplishments, Cupcake has served as a judicial extern to the Honorable Joyce Kennard, California Supreme Court, and to the Honorable Martin J. Jenkins, U.S. District Court, Northern District of California.