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Trek to Triumph

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TREK TO TRIUMPH

*Briaunna Buckner**

INTRODUCTION

I was screaming in the stairwell of my home, holding a dead baby. The air was so thick that I could barely breathe. Tears were racing down my face as her twin sister, Zola, was screeching at the top of her lungs. “WHY LORD, don't take my baby!” Every emotion, every word, and every second after that moment felt black. All the sweet memories from just eight days of being able to hold her, kiss her, and love her fell in a black pit along with the dreams I had for my life. As I looked down at my sweet Zaina, I could not help but see at that moment that we were the same—lifeless.

I rode to the hospital in the front of the ambulance while EMS performed CPR on her in the back. I kept repeating “breathe baby, please, just choose to live,” hoping that she would hear me and fight for her life. As the double doors to the emergency room swung open, the doctor took one look at her, and I could tell it was not good. My knees gave out and I fell onto the floor. It was so cold. There was nothing left that I could do. As I struggled to gather the strength to pick myself up from the cold ground, I realized something: nothing that could happen to me for the rest of my life is worse than this. Nothing is worse than losing a child. This was my biggest fear, and I was staring face-to-face with it at age twenty-three.

That day was the first day of the rest of my life.

I resolved to be bolder. I would finish the fight that Zaina lost. I would always appreciate each second I have with the people I love. I would be in control of my life.

* Special thanks to my loving father, Robert E. Buckner. You are the light of my life and I thank you for always loving and supporting me. Thanks to Elaine Kelly, my loving mother. You have always been in my corner rooting me on. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my beautiful daughters Zola and Zaina, as well as my fiancé Fred Durhal, III. You all are the sunshine of my life. Finally, thank you to Judge Bernice B. Donald, Judge Robert L. Wilkins, and Michael Dreeben for being amazing mentors and investing tremendously in my professional growth within the legal profession.

So, I took risks. I took a lot of risks. But the biggest risk of all was deciding to attend a top-ten law school as a single mother.

THE OPENING ACT

The summer after my first year in law school, I became a single mom. Somewhere amid that major change, I also received a call from the Admissions Office at a top-ten law school. They wanted to congratulate me on my acceptance as a transfer student.

I stood there, frozen, after receiving the news. My head was full of so many questions. How would I navigate the place that I would soon call my new law school home? But one question stood out above all others (and still at times lingers in my mind): How am I going to juggle a career in law, my finances, and a family all at once?

Shortly thereafter, I packed my three-year-old daughter's bags, and we drove halfway across the country to the University of Michigan. As I drove, I watched my daughter sleep through the rearview mirror. She was sleeping so peacefully. Somehow, she was not worried that I was taking out six figures of debt for the opportunity to advance our lives. She wasn't even remotely worried that I would have to increase my cost of attendance to afford the tuition at her Montessori School. Zola did not fret that I had no finances, no family in the Ann Arbor area, and no clue how to tackle the challenges of attending an elite law school as a first-generation law student. She simply had peace. It was that moment, as I looked in the rearview mirror at her sleeping form, that I found the optimism to face what lay ahead.

SHE DOESN'T EVEN GO HERE

The first time that I stepped on campus was for Early Interview Week ("EIW"). EIW is critical for law students pursuing employment at a private law firm postgraduate. During EIW week, hundreds of the nation's premier private law firms from New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., Boston, San Francisco, and more arrive on campus to select the next class of potential associates. For many law students, this week is precisely why they chose to attend law school. EIW week is the opportunity to interview for a summer associate position at a large private law firm with a starting salary that is typically around \$190,000. A lot of these students—especially first generation and minority students—have never made or even seen this type of money. The stakes are high, students' emotions are rampant, and every moment after the door swings

open to start the interview is crucial to the student's prospects for landing an offer.

As I sat in the commons of the law school, I watched my new classmates adjust their suits, study the firms' websites, and brush up their resumes. I overheard conversations about the types of questions that the interviewers asked. Why are you interested in this market? Why our firm? What practice group are you interested in? All questions that the interviewers use to determine whether a candidate would be a good fit for their firm.

I listened to my classmates discuss how to best frame their answers; whether they should disclose that they were also looking at other markets in different cities; or whether they should tell the interviewers that they were open to any practice group.

But despite the validity and importance of those considerations, the only thing that I could think about was: do I tell the interviewers that I have a child?

Ten minutes before my first interview, I decided that I would share who I was with the interviewers completely. I figured that if the law firm did not appreciate the responsibility of caring for a child, then maybe that was not a law firm that I wanted to work for. So, I gathered my briefcase and my laptop and walked over to the building where the interviews were taking place. I knocked on the door to notify the interviewers that I had arrived. When they swung open the door, I thought to myself, "Here we go."

Anxiously, I walked into the interview room and sat down in the chair. There were two white male interviewers, and I couldn't help but notice that the room suddenly felt hot.

"Tell us about yourself?" one of the interviewers said. "I noticed that you just transferred, so it's like you don't even go here."

I answered with my typical elevator speech: "I'm Brianna Buckner; I am originally from Detroit, Michigan; I played Division I basketball down south for undergrad and decided to stay for graduate school. I then stayed down south for my first year of law school when I decided to come back to Michigan as a transfer student...."

As the interview progressed, I started to feel more confident and capable. I began to really believe that I belonged in the legal profession and that there was a place for me to make a difference in my family's lives and others. The interview was going so well, until I asked the question: "What is a typical day like for an associate at your firm?"

"Well, we get to the office around 9:30 or 10:00 a.m. We work really hard, most nights until 2 a.m. We order pizza or Chinese, which is delivered to your office—and don't worry, after a certain time dinner is

charged to the firm. Then we leave the office and hang out at a bar or go home, your choice. If you do decide to hang out with the other associates, we get home around 6:00 a.m., and then we wake up and do it again the next day.” The interviewer then went on to tell me that because of the office culture, it is critical that the firm hire people that they wouldn’t mind “grabbing a beer with” because they “work a lot.”

Initially, I was discouraged. I began to question whether big law attorneys really had to choose between work and family. I glimpsed my reflection in an invisible mirror and questioned whether I was that person—willing to sacrifice watching my little girl grow up...for work. Even for \$190,000 work. “Is every firm like this?” I wondered silently.

Two hours later, my next interview was about to begin. My palms were sweating. I thought that maybe, just maybe, a large private practice was not for me.

Then I met Dave Wagener. Dave, the interviewer, asked me to tell him about myself. I led with my elevator speech. But this time, I concluded the interview by sharing that I am a mom.

“That is awesome,” he said.

*

At the reception held alongside my callback interview with his firm, Dave walked me directly to a woman partner who had three children and said, “I want you to see a woman who is doing exactly what you can do.”

It was probably a small moment for Dave, but it was monumental to me.

Representation is important in the legal profession. As a woman, it could feel like a badge of honor or a scarlet letter to be a mother. Where the increasing demands of the workplace are ever present, it is difficult to find balance in your work and home life. To see a mother rise through the ranks of one of the nation’s top law firms and still make it home for dinner every night, where she could put her children to bed, meant the world to me.

So, thank you, Dave.

CLASSROOM CHRONICLES

My first day of class at the University of Michigan Law School was nothing short of amazing. As I walked through the beautiful wooden doors of Hutchins Hall, I overheard the chatter of those around me—

some of the most brilliant, talented, and kind law students in the nation. Students from every walk of life, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and sexual orientation, all under the same roof, tackling the most pressing issues facing our country. As I looked around the room, I thought to myself, “This place and these people are going to birth change for our country.” I felt so honored to be among them.

Walking through the crowd, I searched for an empty table so that I could prepare for my first day of classes. I sat down on a couch at the center of the common area. Halfway through reading the last assigned case, my phone began to ring. It was the Director of my daughter’s school. “Hi Ms. Buckner, I am sorry to bother you, but the school has a power outage, and we are asking all parents to pick up their children for the day.”

When I looked down at the time on my laptop, I realized there was twenty minutes left before my first class. It was too late to call a babysitter and my family lived over an hour away. I did not feel comfortable enough to ask if I could bring Zola to my class, especially on the first day; so, I had to miss the class.

I experienced a flurry of emotions that day. I even had a moment where I wanted to break down and cry. Every time I felt that I could manage my myriad responsibilities, the weight of it all would become heavier and heavier. After surviving one of the most stressful weeks of a law student’s career and one of the most difficult summers of my life, I was absent on my first day at my new law school. I felt as if I was drowning before I even got started.

After picking Zola up from school, I knew that I had to plan more thoroughly for unexpected situations. I called my mother and my father and uttered those words that I had too much pride to say in the past: “I need help.”

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I knew that engaging fully with law school would require me to get involved in student organizations that I was passionate about. One of those organizations was the mock trial team.

“NO ONE KNOWS THAT YOU MESSED UP, BUT YOU”

As a single mother in law school, you rarely have the opportunity to get involved in organizations that do not take up too much of your time. While I was involved in almost ten organizations that I felt pas-

sionate about, the mock trial team was by far my favorite. For me, the mock trial team was an outlet to make new friends, compete in an area of the law that I found interesting, and travel the world meeting some of the coolest people. It was one of the best practical opportunities that I had in law school. I could experience more of what it would be like to be a real trial attorney. So, I took it seriously.

I dedicated every week in the fall semester to practicing with the team. Sometimes, I wouldn't make it home until 8:00 at night. My team and I would spend long hours developing trial strategies, rehearsing responses to objections, and practicing oral arguments. My daughter even sat in on a practice when she decided that she wanted to be a trial attorney like mommy. I loved it.

In my third year, I competed in my final mock trial competition. At these competitions, law students from across the country gather to compete. We put on our best opening and closing statements and directly examine and cross-examine witnesses in a mini trial.

During the second trial of the tournament, I was set to give the closing argument. My palms were once again sweating. I had just turned in a brief for class 20 minutes before the trial; I didn't sleep much because my daughter was sick; and I did not feel optimistic about how the trial was going. Every objection that I made during the cross examination was overruled and every objection that opposing counsel made on my direct examination of the witness was sustained. This was my last shot to convince the jury to side with our client.

"I just wanted to sit on it and hear the engine roar," I said as the first line of my closing argument. My voice was noticeably shaking as I struggled to get the words out of my mouth.

Halfway through my argument I didn't feel like myself. This was not going the way that I practiced it so many times before. I didn't know why I felt this way, but I knew that something was missing.

After the trial, the team hopped on a Zoom call to discuss how the trial went and if we should make changes for the next day. "I messed up a line in my closing," I said.

Our coach, Caitlin Hatakeyama responded, "Bri, no one knows if you messed up but you. Tomorrow, we want the old Bri back. We want the Bri that gives us chills after every word. You did great today, but this is your last mock trial competition ever. Don't leave anything on the floor."

It felt like permission to deviate from the script. It gave me the confidence to level up. I felt empowered.

I woke up the next morning and practiced my closing argument in front of my dad, my grandma, and my daughter. Each of them acted as jurors sitting in the family room.

“I was just sitting on it—” I said before my dad cut me off.

“I’m not convinced,” he said. “Modulate your tone or say it in a way that puts us in the plaintiff’s head.”

I practiced my closing argument at least ten times that morning. Before I knew it, it was game time.

“Let’s do this, Bri. Show them who you are. Bring the heat,” my partner, Bryan Borodkin, said right before my closing argument. This was the last closing argument I would give in my law school career.

“I was just sitting on it, imagining what it would be like to take it for a spin,” I said.

When our team hopped on another Zoom call afterwards, I was the last to log on. I was greeted with claps and screams. “The old Bri was back,” they said.

I looked over at the door to my family. My father had tears in his eyes and my daughter simply gave me a thumbs up.

I felt excited, satisfied, fulfilled, and loved

Although we did not win the competition, it was my best trial performance in law school. I had won a tournament before and even received the award for best oralist. But this felt different. I was just winging it and having fun. As someone who plans out three options for every second of my life, the words “nobody knows that you messed up but you” kept lingering in my thoughts.

So many times we aim for perfection—whether that be in motherhood, in our careers, or in our relationships. We plan precisely the dates and times that our lives should unravel and become frustrated when it doesn’t happen according to plan.

But there is no script for our lives other than the one we write for ourselves. There are no critics. There is no audience in the stands waiting to boo you. There are no tomatoes to dodge while on stage. We are each our own ultimate critic: No one but us decides when or if we messed up.

THE CITY WHERE IT HAPPENED

The freedom to deviate from the script is what led me to apply for an untraditional externship my 3L year. One of the best ways to get hands-on learning experience in law school are through clinics, internships, and externships. Yet, in some circumstances, wonderful and once-

in-a-lifetime opportunities to gain practical experience are too costly for law students who are parents—particularly single moms. But I refused to surrender to self-doubt.

I interviewed for an internship position as a Law Clerk for the Senate Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate. A Senate Judiciary clerkship is one of the most prestigious internships that a law student who is interested in public policy can land. Law clerks for the Senate Judiciary Committee work on the most pressing public policy and legal issues facing the country. Clerks also get first-hand insight into how the judicial nomination process works.

Weeks of anxious waiting later, I received a call from an unknown number. “We want to offer you a position as a Law Clerk with the Committee. Congratulations!”

After hanging up, I stood there in disbelief. “It happened, oh my goodness, Zola,” I said. “We are going to D.C.”

As my initial excitement wore off though, anxiety set in. I am a Black woman, a first-generation law student, and a single mom. I know too well the many barriers to exploring legal opportunities. The foremost among them being financial. I thought, “How will I pay for rent in D.C.?” “I need to find a school for Zola.” “I only have a month and a half to prepare!” I did not know at that moment how I would tackle it all, but I knew that I could not let this opportunity pass by.

I looked at Zola, my sweet four-year-old. “Do you want to go with mommy to D.C. for a couple of months?”

“Oh, yes!” she said.

*

We arrived in Washington, D.C. in the middle of the night the weekend before my clerkship began. My now fiancé, Fred Durhal, III, woke me up to see the city’s skyline as we drove into the District.

“My goodness,” I thought to myself. “We are actually here.”

It was surreal. Zola and I were together in the nation’s capital for the first time, and I was about to begin a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as a Senate Judiciary clerk.

Later, on an unassuming Friday night, Zola and I sat on the rooftop of our apartment building. As I worked on an assignment, Zola finished up her homework. Fred was in town, helping me learn to navigate the city. I felt at peace.

And then my phone started to buzz uncontrollably. News notifications beeped. Texts arrived one after another. And a call came in. It was my mom.

“Justice Ginsburg passed away,” she blurted out.

My heart dropped in the pit of my stomach. The air suddenly felt colder. One of the most prominent civil rights icons ever to sit on the bench was no longer with us.

That night, I packed up and ordered an Uber for Zola, Fred, and me. We were going to the Supreme Court. I don’t know why, but I felt like paying my respects in person would help lessen the pain.

After we got as close as the driver could take us, we got out of the car and began to walk.

“Where are we going, Mommy?” asked Zola. Hundreds of people were gathered outside of the Courthouse. Flower arrangements and candles were lined up and down the sidewalk. Different flags were being waved in support of her legacy. Hundreds of visitors held hands to sing and console one another.

I looked down at my daughter. “We are here to say goodbye to a phenomenal woman. All of these people are here to say goodbye.”

But it wasn’t until Zola said “Did you know her?” that I understood why I was there—why I *had* to be there.

“No, not personally,” I said. “But we have the opportunity to be here because of fearless women like her.”

There I was, a single Black mom, living out a dream that few experience, standing beside my young daughter, bearing witness to the fruits of the sacrifices made by those who defied norms and took risks. Some of those trailblazers literally set aside their lives to give someone like me—a girl from inner city of Detroit—an opportunity to succeed, to have a seat at the table, to help shape the future.

Growing up, I confronted so many harsh realities that threatened to overshadow my dreams. I remember being a student at Detroit Martin Luther King Jr. High School and picking up my textbook...only for three chapters to fall out of the cover. I remember walking through metal detectors every day where guards emptied my backpack to check for weapons. I remember raising my hand in class for permission to use the bathroom—only to ask if I could also stop by my locker on the way because the school was not stocked with toilet paper.

As I stood at the steps of the Supreme Court, I looked at my daughter, my partner, and the thousands of people that gathered for change. I knew that for all Justice Ginsberg helped accomplish, there was more to do. And in that moment, I resolved to be as relentless as she was at pursuing a better world.

“IF IT WAS EASY, EVERYONE WOULD DO IT”

My support system throughout law school consisted of Zola, my mother, father, grandmother, brother, fiancé, friends, babysitters, professors, administrators, Zola’s teachers, and other members of the community who took a special interest in seeing me graduate from law school. My mother always made sure that my daughter’s hair was done. My partner would take Zola for walks or birthday parties if a pressing deadline arose. My grandma would take Zola shopping at the Dollar Tree to get toys—after I spent hundreds of dollars on expensive ones (and Zola loved the dollar store toys). And even law school friends and classmates that I served with on the Law School Senate would allow her to hang out in the suite if I had class and her school was canceled. (Thank you, Hattie McKinney.)

But while there was a village of supporters who invested in me, there was no one more invested in me as an individual or in my legal career than my father, Robert Buckner. My father practically lived with me during my 2L and 3L years of law school—filling the role of a nanny, friend, comedian, and whatever other job the situation required. His investment in me and my success was invaluable. Without it, my graduating would have been nearly impossible.

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“Oorah, Oorah!” He said jokingly as he woke Zola and I up after a long night of studying. “Early bird...”

“...gets the worm,” Zola finished his sentence.

“Why do you always have to wake me up ten minutes before my alarm clock goes off?” I asked.

“Because no one in this world ever got anything for free, especially not sleep. When you’re snoozing, you’re losing,” he said. My dad tended to use proverbial language to make a point for as long as I can remember. For every question I asked, he would pause silently for five or more seconds then answer with a riddle. I once asked him why he took so long to answer my questions. He answered, “...duh, because I’m thinking.”

My dad was a retired Veteran of the United States Marine Corps and Correctional Officer for the State of Michigan; so, brevity was definitely his forte. He often discussed the importance of implementing a combination of discipline and respect to reach unknown heights of any given profession. While he taught me many things, the number one thing that he taught me was to never quit.

There were so many moments throughout law school where his motivation and advice sustained me. I vividly remember one night, after walking up three flights of stairs to my apartment, both arms filled with bags of groceries, and my boots filled with snow as I opened the door.

My dad was sitting on the couch when we made eye contact. Immediately, I dropped all of the bags right there on the floor and burst into tears. “I can’t do this, dad,” I said. “Why did I think that I could do this? My head is filled with so many dreams for myself and for Zola, and I never thought that I would have to do it alone.”

As I was sitting there on the floor, he got up and walked down the hallway. When he came back, he was holding an old picture of myself, Zola, and Zaina that he always kept in his wallet.

“This is who you do it for,” he said. “And it’s hard; in fact, it’s damn hard... but if it was easy, everyone would do it.”

*

My dad died two weeks after my law school graduation. For two years, he had dropped my daughter off at school in the mornings and picked her up in the afternoons. He stayed up late with me until two or three o’clock in the morning to quiz me on flashcards. He discussed case law with me and challenged my policy proposals. He even listened to Supreme Court oral arguments with me for fun. As we reminisced the day before he passed, he told me that he had done it all so I never had to feel alone during my journey.

Thank you, Dad. Job well done, soldier.

THE FINALE

During law school, I was blessed to work for some of the nation’s top government organizations, private law firms, and nonprofit organizations. I received over fifteen awards for my academic achievements and civic contributions, including being named the First Black Young Alum of the Year at Jacksonville State University, 1L of the Year at my law school, and served as one of the nine justices on the University of Michigan’s Supreme Court. I even had an opportunity to live in four different states throughout my time in law school. However, while I am so proud of myself and all the great work that I get to do, hearing my now five-year-old daughter say that she wants to be a lawyer like mom-my steals the cake.

Law school was hard. Many nights my head never hit a pillow but instead a laptop or a casebook. Law school was not my only responsibility, as the responsibilities of being a parent almost always take precedent. I juggled my extra-curricular activities as well as my daughter's school, ballet, and soccer practices – all during a global pandemic. I sounded out vowels for my daughter's homework, fed her, gave her a bath, and put her to sleep before I could touch a case book to read for my classes the next day. I went to sleep around 3 a.m., woke up the next morning around 7 a.m., and we did it all again.

I did not have an unlimited amount of resources or money. In fact, I didn't have much of anything. I made decisions and planned out how I could make those opportunities a reality. I asked women and parents in the field hundreds of questions and learned from their advice. I failed a lot, and I succeeded a lot. But I didn't sulk in my failures – as a law student or a mom.

On graduation day, many of my classmates asked me, “how did you do it?” “You are a single mom at a top-ten law school and you didn't just do law school, you did it right,” one of my classmates and best friends, Chuck Mahone, stated. My response to them all was, “I didn't.” “I didn't do law school for myself or by myself. And I don't think anyone can do law school ‘right,’” I said. “My village helped me so much along the way. My parents and grandmother helped me to raise a sweet and sassy little girl, my professors encouraged me to rise to the challenge, my classmates inspired me that my greatest asset is to own who I am and what I have to offer, and the legal community insisted that I go toe-to-toe with the status quo of what constitutes a ‘traditional law student.’”

When I returned home from the hospital after the death of my first child, I wasn't the same. As broken as I was on the inside, I knew that the pieces that I had left to give to my family and the world meant something. When my father died two weeks after watching me walk across the stage, I knew that the sacrifices of those people who believed in me had to mean something. And when my daughter looks into my eyes and tells me that she is so proud of me, I know that I have the strength to carry on with God's help and grace.

As the curtains close to the final act of my law school career, unlike most lawyers, I am okay with not having all the answers. In fact, the only thing that I am certain of is that although I have the paper, I do not have the pen. I marvel at the path that God has allowed me to travel to get here, and I do not regret a single thing.

But in the last seconds of our time together before we part ways, I cannot withhold this final quote: “bring wipes.” Yes, you guessed it,

mom. Baby wipes. Bring wipes to dry the white board after your long nights of studying, bring wipes to clean off the table after your child spills juice in the library, bring wipes to dry your tears when things get a little tough, and bring wipes to clean your suit (just in case) before that big interview. For the next couple of years, life could get quite messy. But if you are anything like me, and you are, you'll trek your way to triumph. ✿

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