

Christy L. Brown: Building Women's Leadership

While working on her master's thesis at Duke University, Christy Brown interviewed Black women law students, learning that their lived experiences were shaped by being a woman, being a person of color, or the intersection of both. What she learned from her thesis has informed her career ever since.

BY SHANNON GREEN

A near miss when she was 5 years old convinced Christy Brown to become a lawyer.

Brown, now president of Alverno College, grew up in the 53206 area of Milwaukee. She vividly recalls an incident she describes as an "unfortunate encounter" in which she was the victim of an attempted abduction.

While walking home from half-day kindergarten one day, "a man asked me to get in his car to help find his daughter," Brown recalls. She was getting into the car when "I heard tires screeching and a car slam on its brakes." It was her mother. "Unbeknownst to me, she was following me home to make sure I knew the way," and, thankfully, was there to rescue her daughter from an unknown fate.

Brown got out of the man's car and went with her mother, who called the police when they got home. "Ultimately, we ended up in the D.A.'s office, where whomever was handling the case told the man that he did not have anything on which to hold him, but that if he was in front of the court again, he would prosecute him to the full extent of the law," she said.

That attorney's statement made a strong impact on the little girl. "That sounded to me like 'the law' was a powerful force for good and for justice," Brown recalls.

Brown recently looked into what happened to that man, using the Wisconsin Circuit Court Access program. "He had gone to prison for 30 years."

"During that kindergarten year is when I started saying I wanted to be a lawyer," Brown said. Her goal was reinforced by many other things as she grew up: her mother's work as a legal secretary; the show *Perry Mason*; Martin Luther King Jr.'s work and words that

represented the quest for justice and civil rights; and lawyer and congresswoman Barbara Jordan, "whose oratory skills were impressive to me and who embodied strength and confidence in oneself."

Another inspiration was Vel Phillips, a lawyer and judge who was a trailblazer for civil rights in



Christy Brown, president of Alverno College, has focused her career on building women's leadership and helping women and girls find their voices.

city and state government. “She was an amazing role model for me, as I found her to be sure of her voice. This is likely one of the reasons she attained so many firsts. I believe she was outspoken all her life and was a great influence for lawyers in Milwaukee and Wisconsin,” Brown said.

‘Bigger Than Me’

Brown went to Duke University Law School, receiving her J.D. in 1994, and became a Wisconsin lawyer that year. She also earned a master’s degree in humanities at Duke University, taking courses in African American history, women’s studies, and cultural anthropology. “My thesis was on the intersection of race, gender, and class,” she said.

Brown made a strong impression on her classmates at Duke. “I still am in awe that I was selected by my

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classmates to give the commencement address at our Duke law school graduation,” she said.

In 1992, as a law student, she worked as a summer associate in the Milwaukee office of Michael Best & Friedrich. After earning her law degree, she returned to the office as a full-time associate in labor and employment law. “I chose the Michael Best firm because they were very active in professional and civic organizations, and I knew that was something I wanted to do – wanting to give back and also seeking community.”

At the time, she was the only African American woman lawyer in the firm’s Milwaukee office, which felt, she said, “somewhat lonely.” Brown remembers a visit one day by the only other Black woman employee, who worked in the mail room. “She told me how proud she was of me. I was surprised and humbled.”

The visit made her feel “like being there was bigger than me. Being there felt like a responsibility, one that I was honored to undertake given the struggles that women and people of

color had undergone so I could have more opportunities.”

‘I Love Challenges’

Brown worked at Michael Best from 1994 to 1997 and then was vice president and corporate counsel at Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan Inc. (1997-2002); executive vice president and general counsel at Milwaukee Area Technical College (2002-07); vice chancellor of finance and administrative affairs at U.W.-Milwaukee (2007-12); and CEO of the Girls Scouts of Wisconsin Southeast (2012-23). Brown became the ninth president of Alverno College in July 2023.

While working on her master’s thesis at Duke University, she interviewed Black women law students, learning that their lived experiences were shaped

by being a woman, being a person of color, or the intersection of both. What she learned from her thesis has informed her career ever since. Her career, she says, has always been focused on building women’s leadership and helping women and girls find their voices. She especially focuses on “helping those who are underrepresented and marginalized in our community – especially women and girls and people of color – access opportunity and be empowered to lead change, helping to transform our world,” she said. “Each new role I had gave me something that I could learn that was different or expanded my skills. I like change and have frequently been called a ‘change agent.’”

She pursued a new position when “I had achieved whatever initial goals had been set for me at the former position. A new position meant a new challenge,” Brown said. “I do love challenges!”

Advice for the Next Generations

Brown has advice for all new lawyers: In a new position, negotiate for the highest

compensation you can. “Where you start influences where you finish and how well you are able to negotiate for the next role.” It is especially important for women. “Men are often paid more – the gender pay disparity is real,” she said.

She also advises women who are new lawyers to especially take good care of their own physical and mental health. “Lawyering can be exhausting; to persevere, you must pace yourself and sometimes even laugh at yourself,” she says. “And you must have a support network.”

A big challenge for women is that stereotypes still strongly affect their lives and careers. “Women are judged more severely compared to the same or similar behavior from a man,” Brown has found. And personal and family responsibilities still fall more heavily on women than men. “This needs to change – more flexibility is needed for all. There is still a glass ceiling, with fewer women than men being promoted to equity partner or other senior leadership roles in law firms.”

‘Truly Blessed’

“I love being a lawyer – lawyers represent the highest ideals of our community.” It is a privilege, Brown said, “to be able to enjoy a career that has allowed me to follow my calling, my passion, and my purpose.

“If it is the case that my presence, particularly as a lawyer, has an impact on the industry, the company, or the organization, and helps identify a path for others to follow, I feel that I have been really and truly blessed.” **WL**



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