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The Stories Behind Two Houston-Area Law Graduates Whose Social Posts Went Viral and Inspired a Country

Two Houston-area mothers defied tough odds to succeed in law school—and inspire the country.

By **Angela Morris** | July 31, 2018



Shartory Brown and Leshia Champ

Two Houston law graduates who defied tough odds to succeed in law school have inspired people across the country.

Other law students can learn about resilience and the power of priorities through the stories of May graduates Leshia Champs of Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law and Shartory Brown of South Texas College of Law Houston.

Both Brown and Champs were homeless at times during their childhoods and became teenage mothers. Tragedies and heartache could have derailed their lives—yet they persevered through college and law school, all while raising multiple children. The two women share so much in common that they became good friends while interning together at the Harris County Attorney's Office in the spring of 2018.

“Going through certain things in life gives you a strength you don't even know you have and forces you to deal with situations. Going through them, you don't think you will survive,” explained Brown, noting that her prayers and faith in God miraculously pulled her through many tough situations. “Your struggles build strength in you.”

Champs also credits God for her strength and resilience.

“There are times I sit back and think about where I am now and where I came from, and I wonder how? How did I make it to law school after being a high school dropout? How did I manage to get through law school and still parent five children? I thought I was just lucky, however, I've come to the realization that I'm just blessed and it's all God's doing,” Champs wrote in an email.

Her story has inspired people nationwide. When Champs' pastor posted graduation photos to social media of her with her five children, holding signs with messages like, “I did it,” “I helped,” and “Me too,” the photos went viral. Mainstream publications around the nation picked up the story. Champs said she's overjoyed to inspire others, and the experience brought her a lot of confidence.

Texas Southern law professor April Walker, who taught two of Champs' courses, said the story inspired so many people because Champs demolished society's expectations for someone like her.

“The odds were against her—she was not supposed to succeed,” explained Walker, adding that Champs is now “on a pedestal” at Texas Southern, inspiring her peers and law students across the country.

“They can say to themselves, ‘She did this with all these obstacles. I have none,’” Walker said. “If she can do it, I can do it.”

Life threw many obstacles at both Champs and Brown. Their stories start with bouts of homelessness as teenagers.

Brown’s mom died when she was an infant and her father was not around, so her grandmother raised her. At 13, Brown ran away because of assault in the community, and began staying with friends, sleeping on porches or living with other family members. Both Champs’ mom and dad suffered from drug addiction, and her dad died when she was 10. Champs spent time in foster care when she was seven, and by the end of eighth grade, she was homeless—staying with friends and whoever would take her in. She had dropped out of high school by 10th grade.

Amid this uncertainty, both women became pregnant as teenagers.

Brown’s first pregnancy at 17 forced her to drop out of school and move into a foster home for teenage mothers. At 19, she became pregnant again, was removed from an independent living program and lost her apartment, becoming homeless with her 2-year-old and infant sons. When Champs became pregnant at 19, she started working at McDonald’s and when her baby was born she found a job at a call center to support her family.

Brown’s life looked like it would get back on track after she stayed at a women’s shelter, returned to school and secured a home. But then her first husband physically abused her and she fled. Meanwhile, for Champs, 2009 was a year of heartache. Pregnant with her fourth child, her apartment burned down, she lost her job, her partner and the father of two of her kids died of cancer, and Champs nearly committed suicide. Later that year her mom had a stroke.

Divine intervention lead Champs to law school.

Early in 2009, Louise Holman, pastor of Ministers for Christ Christian Center where Champs goes to church, told her that God had said she needed to go back to school because one day, she would become the lawyer she always had wanted to be. At the time, with three kids and a fourth on the way, Champs thought the idea was a little crazy—but she listened. She earned her GED, took courses at Houston Community College, and eventually earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Houston in 2015. By the time she went through Texas Southern for her law degree, Champs had five children who motivated her because she wanted them to have a better life. Her kids now range in age from 14 down to 5.

Brown also found motivation in her three sons—who now range in age from 21 down to 8. In addition, she leaned on South Texas law professor Shelby Moore, sometimes calling her to cry when overwhelmed, and taking comfort from the professor's pep talks. Moore also met with Brown and five fellow students each weekend to tutor them in legal writing.

Moore said that other law students should learn from Brown's skill in seeking support when she needed it: Brown was never afraid to ask questions, request mentoring or speak up if something went wrong.

"She had this toughness about her. She was really smart—laser-sharp. I would teach something, and she'd hone in on the thing that was important. I saw she was juggling a lot, but in the midst of that, she kept pushing," Moore said. "She was just somebody who was willing to work, no matter what was going on."

Angela Morris is a freelance journalist. Follow her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports