

Strong-minded litigator finds her place in big city law firm

By Brian Cox

Attorney Caitlin Brown started working in an upscale restaurant when she was 15 and she kept on working in the restaurant industry through high school, college, and law school. She says the hard work prepared her in many regards for a career in law.

"It's almost like litigation," she explains. "It's very fast paced. You have to think on your feet, and you have to interact with people who are purposely trying to make life difficult. You have to stand strong. Over the years, I built up a resistance to people being rude."

Shy and quiet when she was younger, Brown says waiting tables and – years later – participating in mock trials helped her emerge from her shell and step outside of her comfort zone.



Caitlin with her parents, David and Dianne, and her brother, Corey, tailgate before a Bills game against the Green Bay Packers in Buffalo.



Now, as senior counsel for Kozacky Weitzel McGrath, P.C., in Chicago, Brown focuses her litigation practice on commercial transactions, contract disputes, and transportation law, including admiralty law and maritime law.

Born in Cortland, N.Y., just south of Syracuse, Brown's family moved to Buffalo not long after she finished first grade. Her father was in sales for a family-run agricultural feed and grain company. He now manages a feed plant for Land O'Lakes. Her mother was an elementary school teacher. Brown was in Buffalo long enough to become a Bills fan, but in the middle of fifth grade, the family moved to a small town outside of Burlington, Vermont, where they stayed until Brown was entering high school, at which point they moved back to western New York near the Finger Lakes area. Each move brought a set of challenges for Brown, who had to make new friends and figure out how to fit in with her peers, which can be especially difficult in small towns. Her graduating class in western New York had fewer than 150 students.

"In hindsight, I think it actually paid off for me in that I was forced to move around and uproot my life and meet new people," says Brown.

After high school, where she excelled academically, Brown attended St. Bonaventure University, a small school just south of Buffalo. It was not her first choice, however. Both her parents were St. Bonaventure grads, which from Brown's perspective was a negative.

"I wanted new experiences," she says. "I didn't want to be defined by my parents' experience at Bonaventure."

But the scholarship was difficult to ignore, and the university offered a program that allowed students who scored high enough on the ACT to join the pre-med program and be automatically accepted into George Washington Medical School without having to take the MCAT. For Brown, who was interested in being a pediatric oncologist at the time, the offer was too good to pass up.

"I actually liked it when I got there," she says. "I liked the small community, the smaller classes, and how receptive the professors were."

Strong-minded litigator finds her place in big city law firm



A big Buffalo Bills fan, Caitlin drove from Chicago to Kansas City with friends for this year's AFC Championship game against the Chiefs.

Her plans to go into medicine went awry when she took chemistry and hated it, but another career path presented itself when she elected to take a mock trial class as a way to meet the requirement of a public speaking course. Through mock trial, she was able to employ a streak of defiance and doggedness that she's had since she was a young child.

At the age of 14, she became a vegetarian after being handed educational pamphlets on animal cruelty while in line to get into a concert. When she informed her parents that she was never eating meat again, they laughed and said her vegetarian phase wouldn't last long. Brown took it as a personal challenge and says it is probably a big reason why she remains a vegetarian more than 15 years later.

"I've always been strong minded and a little stubborn," says Brown. "My parents always told people I was going to be a lawyer when I grew up, which made me not want to be a lawyer, naturally."

But the mock trial class started to change her mind.

She loved it. After the class, she joined the Mock Trial Club and was a member of the team that made it to the opening round of nationals for the first time in St. Bonaventure's history. She remains in touch with her professor and recently met on Zoom with several of her mock trial teammates just to catch up.

"The people on my team were all so incredible," says Brown, who adds that the experience built up her confidence tremendously. "They're almost all lawyers today and still incredible people."

After the class, Brown decided to focus more on legal classes and ended up minoring in Law and Society. Her junior year, she decided to go to law school "because I love this stuff. I think it's fun and I have a passion for it."

Still, she wasn't convinced she wanted to be a litigator. A psychology professor who focused on food and nutrition offered to work with Brown on a study that integrated her interest in law with his work involving food policy.

The idea sparked in Brown an interest in food and nutrition labeling policy. She had become acutely aware in high school of the struggle many people face to afford healthy food.

"Being a vegetarian at the time, I was learning of the intersection of cheap food and healthy food," she says. "People who have a very low income and live close to the poverty line don't have access to fresh food and are forced to buy prepackaged, processed foods that keep them unhealthy."

The professor suggested they conduct a study involving nutrition labels that used simple emoticons to designate whether a product was healthy or unhealthy for people who may not have the health literacy skills needed to comprehend a standard nutrition label.



Caitlin and her boyfriend, Conor Whitmer, on his family's annual vacation on Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Strong-minded litigator finds her place in big city law firm

Brown polled people at a grocery store to learn if the emoticons helped them differentiate between healthy, healthier, and unhealthier foods. The graphic labeling worked, and the peer-reviewed study was published in the *Global Journal of Health Science* in 2015, the year she graduated.

Brown carried on her interest in food and nutrition policy when she attended Michigan State University College of Law. She started the school's first Food Law Society and served on the executive board of the National Food Law Student Network. She envisioned possibly working at a nonprofit after graduation to help draft policies and regulations that would address food labeling, food scarcity, and general food nutrition education.

Today, she remains active in the food policy field and currently sits on the Young Professional's Board of the Illinois Environmental Council.

During law school, Brown clerked with a firm that was immersed in litigation involving survivors of Larry Nassar, an assistant professor at the university and the team doctor of the U.S. Women's National Gymnastics team before he was accused and convicted of sexually assaulting hundreds of young athletes.

Brown was tasked with conducting almost 60 interviews with clients who had to complete an extensive questionnaire as part of the mediation process.

The work was tolling and painful.

"I'm still thankful for the experience because there were some moments that still hit me with how strong and resilient women are," says Brown.

During her time at MSU College of Law, Brown traveled to Chicago several times and fell in love with the Windy City. In January of her 3L year, she applied for the bar in Illinois and moved to Chicago four days after taking the bar exam.

After years of living in small towns, Brown was ready for big city life.

She secured a position with a small firm that did mostly civil litigation and insurance defense. Because of the firm's size, Brown hit the ground running and gained hands-on experience quickly. In short order, she was drafting substantive motions, conducting extensive legal research, and drafting coverage analyses for insurance companies.

After a few years, however, Brown felt she needed to find a larger firm where she could benefit from greater support.

Several firms expressed interest in her experience in insurance defense, but Brown enjoyed representing smaller businesses and wanted to find a position in commercial litigation.

In July 2021, she interviewed with Kozacky Weitzel McGrath, P.C. Founded in 1997, the firm started as a boutique commercial litigation firm and has grown to become a full-service law firm that advises businesses, professionals, and insurance companies from around the globe in nearly every area of the law.



Caitlin with her brother, Corey, and sister, Sarah, in Hawaii where Sarah is a helicopter pilot for the Army National Guard.



Strong-minded litigator finds her place in big city law firm

Brown clicked immediately with partners Paul Kozacky and Jerry Weitzel during the interview and felt drawn to the firm's culture.

"We are a very team-based firm, which is one of the reasons I really love it," says Brown. "It's very interactive and collaborative. I got the sense that I would be given a good amount of leeway to grow and learn."

She values working with both Kozacky and Weitzel, who have decades of experience as litigators.

"I have loved working with them," she says. "They've both really taken me under their wing and given me any opportunity I want at this point to grow and experience different subject areas."

Kozacky has introduced Brown to maritime law, which she finds fascinating. The firm represents owners of vessels as well as cargo owners and works a lot with resolving claims involving the Carriage of Goods by Sea Act.

"It's an interesting area of law that I did not expect to ever practice in or even think about until I was immersed in it," says Brown. "I've met some incredible people in the maritime field, which has been awesome."

She has attended maritime law conferences in Montreal and New Orleans at Tulane and has found the community supportive, encouraging, and welcoming.

As the oldest of three children, Brown is eager to boast of her siblings' accomplishments. Her younger sister is a helicopter pilot for the Army National Guard in Hawaii and is aiming to be a commercial pilot. Brown's brother suffers from Stargardt's Disease, a rare inherited eye disorder that has left him legally blind at the age of 30. He recently graduated from the University of Buffalo with a degree in computer science.

Brown and her boyfriend, Conor, enjoy spending time at Lake Michigan and exploring the different neighborhoods in Chicago.

"I think part of the reason I love Chicago so much is because it is so different from anywhere else I ever lived," says the once shy and reserved Brown. "I love being able to meet new people. I have friends all over the place now."



Caitlin and her siblings, Corey and Sarah, board a plane in Hawaii, where Sarah is a helicopter pilot for the Army National Guard and plans to become a commercial pilot. Corey has a degree in computer programming.