

# Driven to Serve

*Life-threatening moment shaped Nuby's career, passion for service.*

*By Leah Sewell, BA '11*

Life has its twists and turns, and when a career path opens, it's usually only in retrospect that we're able to see the significance of our choices. One Washburn Law alumna discovered a way to travel that journey with confidence behind every step.

**Cecilia (Brown) Nuby, '15**, seizes every opportunity to its fullest. It's an approach she learned through a life replete with twists and turns, a chance meeting with a young student, and an uncomfortably close brush with death.

Brown grew up in Flint, Mich., but her family was Kansas-bound when economic depression hit the area and work opportunities grew scarce. Brown attended Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, Kan., and later graduated from the historically black college, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Brown admits she wasn't the model student in those days.

"I would never go to class," said Brown. "But, thank God, I was able to catch on easily and ace a test even if I hadn't studied."

Brown's poor attendance record frustrated speech instructor Faye Hawks, who threatened to fail her from her class unless she held up her end of a bargain. With a keen eye to Brown's talent for oration, Hawks forced her reluctant student to join the debate team. The moment was deeply significant for Brown.

"I just fell in love with debate," said Brown. "It intrigued me competitively, but more than that, I recognized I had a skill for persuasive speech. One day, I called my debate coach and asked, 'What can I do so that I can be in debate for the rest of my life?' She told me, 'You can be a lawyer.'"

And with that, Brown's path forward was inevitable. She crammed for the LSAT and soon found herself on a waiting list for Washburn University School of Law and accepted into New England Law School in Boston, Mass. But before she could make the choice about where to attend law school, Brown found herself at an abrupt roadblock.

In April 2012, doctors discovered she had a life-threatening blood clot that would require surgical removal of half a lung. Alone for a moment in her hospital bed, she gathered her will to survive the ordeal and made a solemn promise.

"I prayed and said, 'God, if you let me live, I will give myself to every opportunity that presents itself,'" said Brown. "And here I am today, living that promise."

For Brown, survival meant persisting in her dream to attend law school and to ultimately practice law emphasizing compassionate service. Brown made the choice to stay closer to home and family. When Washburn Law called with an acceptance, she threw herself into life as a law student.

"I couldn't have asked to be at a better school," said Brown. "It's like a family there. I wouldn't have been able to get that same closeness if I had gone to Boston."

Brown remembers her self-confidence growing through participation in Moot Court and the Trial Advocacy Program at Washburn Law.

"What I learned through Trial Advocacy and Moot Court was invaluable. When I have to cross-examine a witness, I feel like I'm ahead of the game. As an attorney today, I have no insecurities walking into a courtroom," said Brown.

Brown is a busy Kansas City attorney specializing in employment litigation, criminal defense, and family and traffic law. She established her own firm, Cecilia Nuby & Associates L.L.C., in May 2016, just one year after her graduation from Washburn Law.

Brown had help along her journey from her debate coach, her mother, and through her faith. She also received financial help through the generous scholarship funds made available at the law school.

"I needed all the help I could get," said Brown. "I was grateful for that scholarship."

During her first year of practice with Stacy Shaw & Associates in Kansas City, Brown mentored an intern from Washburn Law. That intern was **Stephen Grafelman, '16**.

"Stephen was smart, talented, and super professional," remembered Brown.



Photo by Youko Kerr

Brown recognized Grafelman's last name as synonymous with a family she sent correspondence to in appreciation of a gift they made to the school, but thought it was only a coincidence.

"One day, Stephen came in with a picture of me and I said, 'Where did you get this?' And he said, 'You sent this to my father,'" said Brown. "We both knew in that moment that it was an awesome thing. Stephen's internship felt like a divine placement," said Brown.

By mentoring Grafelman, Brown said, "I could thank the family in a way where I didn't even realize I was thanking them."

Grafelman, in turn, is grateful for Brown's guidance.

"She is a wonderful person, and I owe her a lot," said Grafelman. "It was a great experience for me, and it was really my first baby step into the real world of legal practice."

The guiding principle of Brown's practice is "service is joy." Because of the help she received from people like the

Grafelman family, she feels compelled to give in service of others, and not just in the sense of typical client-attorney relationships.

"I've helped the homeless in Kansas City with pro-bono work. Homeless people can't afford attorneys, and they're often exposed to conditions that can get them ticketed for things like panhandling and loitering," said Brown. "I know these people can never pay me, but I know I make a difference in their lives."

She also frequently volunteers at her alma mater when help is needed in Trial Advocacy or Moot Court, those places where, as a student, she found her own sure footing on the path to her career.

"The key to life is to serve others," said Brown. "Service is what brings joy, not money, accomplishment, or titles. The key is helping others accomplish who they need to be."