A Whole New Man

Bobby Brown's mental and physical challenges transformed him into someone with a healthier, happier outlook on life.

March 4, 2019 By Kate Ferguson

"You only live once." So goes the saying, but entertainer Bobby Brown, age 50, was able to relive his past during the filming and airing of a two-part miniseries he executive produced with his current wife and manager, Alicia Etheredge-Brown, through their company, Brown Ribbon Entertainment.

The Bobby Brown Story aired on Black Entertainment Television (BET) last year and drew more than 6.6 million viewers who traveled back in time with the iconic star to watch him experience the personal tragedies and triumphs that affected him both physically and mentally and helped mold him into the man he is today.

"It was an experience to have to relive a lot of the things that, probably, weren't so good, and it was kind of surreal to see all of the things that I've been through, and I'm able to still be here, standing strong and moving on with my life," Brown says. "It's just a great thing, and watching the movie was like therapy."

A few events that occurred in Brown's life—such as the stroke he suffered in August 2001—surprised many of the singer's fans. During the BET recap program Rewind That!, actress Gabrielle Dennis, who plays Whitney Houston in the miniseries, recalls the dramatic reenactment. "That was a very difficult scene," she says. "It was difficult to watch and to be a part of, in the sense that I had to take myself out of it as a spectator because I'm in it and not supposedly knowing what's going on. Bobby would come to the set, and some days were easier than others. This was definitely a scene that was hard for him to get through."

Dennis says Brown told her that her portrayal of his deceased wife during this crisis was amazing to him. He offered only one suggestion during the filming of the intense scene. "He said, 'You gotta bend down and put your finger in front of my nose to see if I'm breathing. I remember her doing that,'" Dennis recalls.

By this point in his life, Brown had slipped deeper into drug addiction. But this horrific incident wasn't enough to motivate him to put an end to his substance use. "Jail got me to stop taking drugs," Brown said during an interview on The Dr. Oz Show. "I never wanted to go back to jail. I didn't want to be incarcerated ever, ever again."

Thoughts of his children also acted as a sort of intervention.

“I didn’t want my kids to grow up and see me in that type of light,” he told the talk show’s host, Mehmet Oz, MD. “I’ve always been one to want to grow, to want to be better and better on the next day. If I’m bad yesterday, I want to be better the next day, especially for my children. I mean, my children mean everything to me, everything. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for them, so I try to be as strong as possible for them every day. And it takes every day for me to do that.”

During another segment of the interview, Oz handed the entertainer a healthy brain to look at and feel. Then he had Brown compare the soft, folded sections of the organ’s tissue to cross sections of a brain damaged by stroke. Oz instructed Brown to press visibly blackened areas embedded in sliced sections of the organ and explained that this blackening, or scarring, occurs when a rise in blood pressure brought on by drug use causes blood to seep into the brain. Shuddering, Brown prodded the slices of brain and declared that these parts felt “rock hard.”

In general, substance use can trigger strokes, heart attacks and respiratory failure as well as increases in blood pressure, heart and breathing rates, and body temperature.

Oz explained to Brown that this brain scarring might have caused Brown’s mouth to droop on one side after his stroke. “The brain’s remarkable ability to recover will let it make new paths to make up for that problem,” Oz said. “You just can’t keep doing it over and over again; that’s the beauty of stopping the bad habit.”

Bobby BrownCourtesy of Derek Blank Photography

After his stroke, Brown vowed to live differently from how he had been. Today, he remains committed to personal growth in all areas of his life and leads a healthier lifestyle. He also has a line of products that includes healthy sauces made from tomatoes, herbs and peppers; blended seasonings; and a coating mix for frying and roasting poultry, meats, fish and veggies.

“All of the Bobby Brown Foods products use all-natural ingredients with a focus on reducing sugar, sodium and preservatives from our diet,” Brown says.

His efforts to cope with the death of his and Houston’s daughter, Bobbi Kristina, at age 22 prompted another development in Brown’s life.

In memory of his daughter, Brown founded the Bobbi Kristina Serenity House, a nonprofit organization that currently offers help and support via its website, BobbiKristina.org, to individuals who experience or are affected by domestic violence. “I know my daughter is always with me, and I know she’s very proud of what we are doing in her name,” Brown says.

The official cause of Bobbi Kristina’s death was reported as pneumonia caused by the immersion of her face in water in a bathtub and drug intoxication from a mix of meds. Her estate filed a lawsuit that alleged Bobbi Kristina was physically abused by her boyfriend, Nick Gordon, and Brown later joined the suit. (Gordon lost by default.)

“On the days that they were shooting those scenes [focusing on Bobbi Kristina], I really couldn’t be on the set, so my wife was always there and I would stay home with the kids,” he says. “She made sure that everything was accurate. But it was kind of difficult; it’s always difficult when you’re dealing with something like that.”

Last summer, Brown and his wife received a proclamation from Bill Edwards, the mayor of South Fulton, Georgia, and other local officials, for the couple’s plans to launch a 24-hour crisis intervention hotline and emergency transitional center for male and female domestic abuse survivors.

Brown says his family lives every day with the pain of losing Bobbi Kristina under these circumstances. “She was just this funny little girl who could sing, dance; she was just a beauty to be around—my baby. I loved her smile because she smiled just like her father. But she’s in my heart. She follows me everywhere I go, and my two little daughters are just like her. I see Bobbi Kris in both of my daughters, and that’s the beautiful part. It’s like she was reincarnated into my daughters, and they look just alike.”

Brown’s two little girls—Bodhi Jameson Rein and Hendrix Estelle Sheba—and son Cassius are the singer’s children with Etheredge-Brown. Brown also has two older sons, Landon and Bobby Brown Jr., and an older daughter, LaPrincia.

“They are the most beautiful kids that I ever could ask for,” Brown says. “My older children were

there for each other and their younger siblings, and they grieve too. We all grieve, but we have to get through it because life must go on, and they realized that. They're always together, so it's funny to just sit down at the table with six kids and two granddaughters and know that this is my family."

Brown says the most difficult thing for him was having to let go of Bobbi Kristina. "I know that she is safe now. She's not in harm's way and I'm glad for that," he says. "She doesn't have to suffer any more. She's not suffering, and, like I said, she's always with me, so just knowing that I have her here in my heart is everything for me."

Bobby Brown with his wife, Alicia Etheredge-Brown, and their three children.Courtesy of Derek Blank Photography

Brown and Etheredge-Brown with officials from the City of South Fulton.Courtesy of Derek Blank Photography

A message from Brown on the organization's site states its mission. "We seek a world without Domestic Abuse, Bobbi Kristina's Serenity House is that forum…our collective voices will be heard. We may not know what the future holds, but we do know that it lies in the hands of our children. Thus, the decision is not whether we should invest in the future of our children, but how soon we can make the commitment."

Brown says he's still waiting to build a home for abused women, men and children. "Domestic violence is a disease; it's something that we need to get the cure for and the Bobbi Kristina Serenity House is a safe haven for those who are in that situation," he says.

He asks that people visit the Serenity House website and donate to support the organization and help fund construction of a shelter in Atlanta and others elsewhere. "We're trying to build homes in different cities for domestic abuse survivors," he says. "We've got a lot of people who are helping out."

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To those who know individuals who are enduring domestic violence in one form or another, Brown says, "Just lend them your ear and be kind because they are going through something that is hard for them," he says. "Domestic abuse affects the whole community; it affects the whole family, so just be there for them."

Today, Brown is proud of his resilience. He believes the bad times that tested him strengthened his character. The loss of his daughter also changed him in another positive way. “I think it helped me grow to want to be a better man,” he says. “Life throws you curveballs sometimes, but you have to know that some things are meant to be. Sometimes you have to take the bad with the good and be able to move on.”

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Ultimately, with his new family, perhaps it can be said that Brown received a second chance, an opportunity to create a new life that allows him to apply all the lessons he’s been taught.

“I learned that I’m a lot stronger than I look and my heart is a lot heavier,” he says. “But with the help of my wife and my family, I’m able to get over some of the bad days,” he says. “Sometimes I wake up and don’t want to get out of bed. But I know there’s so much to do and so little time. Life’s not promised to you tomorrow. But if you live healthy and you love strong, there’s no telling how long you can be here.”

Once known as the “Bad Boy of R&B,” Brown now subscribes to a totally different outlook on life.

“Bobby today is definitely a family man who’s content with being that,” he says. “I’m content with staying for real with my kids and with my wife. I used to be out partying and all types of things. I don’t do that anymore. Now it’s about respecting the life I live with my wife and my kids and respecting myself as a man, a husband and a parent.”

Actor Woody McClain, center, plays Bobby Brown in the BET miniseries.Courtesy of Derek Blank Photography

Good Grief

Take baby steps to help you heal.

When individuals lose loved ones, or weather some other life-altering experience, they need time to mourn the loss, recover and move forward with their lives. But everyone processes these events very differently, as the healing process for each person is unique.

Nevertheless, folks can effectively negotiate such trying times in a number of ways. Below are a few suggestions from experts:

Allow yourself to grieve. Be patient, and take things one day at a time; it takes time to mourn your loss. Remember the happy times you spent with your loved one and celebrate those moments, which will keep that person alive in your heart.

Seek support. Don’t be afraid to turn to family and friends. Make them aware of your loss and ask them to lend a sympathetic ear if you need to talk.

Keep living your life. Stay active and take care of yourself. Don’t withdraw from the world. Continue to make plans for the future; focus on goals you want to achieve and new skills you want to learn.

Appreciate the little things. Learn to stop, look and listen so you can find the beauty in your surroundings. See the humor in life and don’t forget to laugh.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/whole-new-man-bobby-brown