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Beating the odds

On 'borrowed time,' Campbell opens new business to advise on risk management

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When Tracy A. Campbell was 21, she was diagnosed with a rare terminal brain cancer. A few days before Christmas that year, her doctor ordered immediate surgery.

"I asked if I could go home for a week and come back, then we could do the surgery," she said. "But the doctor looked me in the face — I'll never forget this — and said, 'You don't even have two days to waste.' It was the first time in my young life that I felt vulnerable."

Given a 2 percent chance of surviving the year, Campbell — then a senior at Yale University in 1995 — underwent the surgery and decided to finish her last semester of college.

She attended classes during the morning, worked an on-campus job in the afternoon and received 12-hour chemotherapy treatments, spending some nights at a New Haven, Conn., hospital.

Three years later, she was in remission.

"I slowly recovered, and I think that was through sheer will that I wasn't ready to go yet," she said. "I had worked too hard to get to this point, and that was my driving force."

Now 38, Campbell said she has tried to make the most of her "borrowed time."

Last month, she opened Cynosure Risk Advisors LLC to counsel companies and provide comprehensive audits for them on risk management and insurance coverage.

Her own life-threatening experience, she said, demonstrates that no one is immune to risk.

"I was told all my life that I wouldn't be able to open my own business or go to Yale or become a lawyer — but I disagreed," she said. "These are odds people never expected me to overcome. I beat the odds, but wouldn't have been able to do so without knowing how to manage those choices."

Her drive stems largely from her upbringing.

Campbell was raised in the Chatham neighborhood on the South Side by her single mother, who had a sixth-grade education and pushed her daughter to excel academically.

"Her real passion in life was ensuring that I was well-educated and financially independent," Campbell said. "When I was growing up, she worked low-end jobs to make ends meet. It was very important to her that we made enough to be just above the poverty line and didn't qualify for any public assistance."

The only days off her mother would typically take were to attend parent-teacher conferences. She also enrolled Campbell in after-school programs.

"It always seemed a little over the top to me but looking back on it now, I don't think I would have achieved any of the objective markers of success that I have without her," Campbell said. "She believed in me more than I believed in myself."

Campbell received a political science degree in 1996 from Yale and



Tracy A. Campbell

graduated three years later from the University of Illinois College of Law. She always wanted to become a lawyer but didn't know what she wanted to do with the degree.

To pay off her tuition debt and help take care of her mother, Campbell entered private practice, joining Williams, Montgomery & John Ltd. as an associate in 2000. She defended companies in product-liability and commercial-litigation matters.

A year later, she joined Schiff, Hardin LLP, then became a partner in 2007. She spent 12 years there, first handling product-liability cases and then insurance-coverage matters.

Robert I. Berger — a partner at Schiff, Hardin — said Campbell is very thorough when examining a case.

"She's good at getting all the background information when researching all of the laws and then applying the law and coming up with a strategy of how to proceed that will be in the best interest of the client, whether it is to settle the case or assert defense," he said.

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"She was also a good writer, too. Her style ended up being the paradigm for what we would follow."

In March, she left Schiff, Hardin and became the vice president of strategic growth and finance at The Legal Balance, a website that helps women practice law and accomplish life goals.

She helped with the site's relaunch in April and then opened her own counseling firm on Aug. 1.

At Cynosure Risk Advisors, she is targeting senior-level executives as clients due to their responsibilities handling risk management and insurance coverage. She wants them to be able to explain and justify policy changes and positions to the companies' stakeholders.

The stakeholders, depending on whether a company is private or public, can be its shareholders; its board of directors; other companies that have invested in it or that have lent it money; or owners of the business itself.

"We want them to be able to articulate, 'Here's why we're insured for this liability and why we're not insured at all for this particular liability,'" she said.

"We want them to have a greater command of their insurance and risk management so that they can in turn give the reasoning behind their plan to their stakeholders."

Her experience in private practice helps her understand the importance of being proactive about risk management and insurance coverage decisions. Though avoiding all risk is impossible, Campbell said she wants to prepare her clients for "whatever storm may come their way."

"It's about helping people make thoughtful and educated decisions about the futures of their companies," she said.

"Whether as a lawyer or a legal counselor, that's all you can ask for — for your clients to have the information that they need to make decisions that positively affect their goals and objectives."

Patricia Brown Holmes — a partner at Schiff, Hardin — said she admires her former colleague's drive and creativity.

"She told me for forever she wanted to start her own company," Holmes said. "And you have to respect someone who knows what she wants to do and then goes out and does it."

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