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From Kosovo to criminal law

Former war correspondent finds a new front line – in the courts

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C. Justin Brown was about to go to bed in his room in the five-star Hyatt Regency in Belgrade in April 1999 when he heard a “whistling sound” just outside his window.

Looking outside, he saw a NATO Tomahawk missile slam into the upper floors of the nearby Ušæ Tower, a political party headquarters. A note from the hotel management appeared under his door the next morning.

“Dear Sir, due to bombing on your side of the building, we suggest you move to the west end of the hotel,” Brown recounted with a chuckle.

When the Serbia-Kosovo war officially ended weeks later, the steel nerves that had allowed Brown to cover the conflict for the previous year-and-a-half were finally fraying.

“At that point, I had, had enough,” he said. “Living under airstrikes for 78 days, I was a bit frazzled.”

That was eight years ago.

After being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize by his primary newspaper, The Christian Science Monitor, for his coverage of the Balkans, Brown changed career paths. He celebrated his one-year anniversary as a criminal defense attorney at Baltimore’s **Nathans & Biddle** LLP last month, in an office one floor up from his father’s law firm.

Now 37, Brown has gone from interviewing and writing about war criminals and victims to defending those accused or convicted of the most serious criminal charges here in Maryland.

He has worked on death-row inmate Jody Lee Miles’ pending appeals and is co-counsel in post-conviction proceedings for Matthew McCullough, sentenced to 100 years in prison for his role in a May 2004 shooting at Randallstown High School.

He’s also slated to sit “second-chair” in the court-appointed defense of alleged MS-13 gang member Everec Chacon, whose federal murder trial is scheduled for next year.



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

C. Justin Brown, who once covered Kosovo for the Christian Science Monitor, now practices law and testifies in Serbian asylum cases.

“It’s a different kind of excitement than being a war reporter,” Brown said. “It can be boring, but when it’s good, it’s good.”

From ‘Our Town’ to Serbia

Though it’s not uncommon for journalists to make the switch to law, Justin Brown seemed an unlikely candidate.

The son of prominent Baltimore civil rights attorney C. Christopher Brown, Justin moved to New York City after graduating from college in 1992.

That summer, he worked nights at Macy’s while volunteering at a biweekly newspaper called the Downtown Express, his first job in journalism.

There he disguised himself as a Stuyvesant High School student to report on the school’s new building in Lower Manhattan. He eluded the police cordon immediately after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing by taking the subway directly into the soot and wreckage.

Later, at a weekly called “Our Town,” he spent a night in the crime- and filth-

infested Kenmore Hotel as part of a six-month investigation before it finally was raided and seized by federal authorities in June 1994.

“I think it was a rare example of when muckraking journalism...caused a real improvement in people’s lives,” Brown said.

Brown was editing “Our Town” in 1995, when a high school classmate announced he was off to make a documentary about a group of 20-somethings in Serbia, which was then part of Yugoslavia. Brown quit his job, moved to Europe, and in the process of filming, developed an interest in the country.

After a year back in the U.S. freelancing for The New York Times and covering the New Mexico state legislature for the Associated Press, Brown moved back to Belgrade, the Serbian capital.

“It reminded me of New York... I liked the energy,” Brown said. “I also knew that it was a place that was going to generate a

lot of news.”

Brown had picked up some Serbian language skills and was soon reporting on the escalating tension in the region since the 1995 Dayton Accords settled one war but set the stage for another.

Serbia was under sanctions and desperately clinging to its nationalism; the population of Kosovo, its southernmost province, was over 90 percent ethnic Albanian and hostile to Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević's repressive regime.

Brown got press credentials through P.O.V., a now-defunct magazine; he sold freelance pieces to The Baltimore Sun, the Monitor and other publications and was a stringer for Newsweek.

He was doing a story about Sarajevo, in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, for P.O.V. in 1997 when Kosovo “blew up,” he said.

“And the Monitor called me up — somehow they got ahold of me in Sarajevo — and they're like, ‘How fast can you get down there?’” Brown recalled. “And I told them, ‘I'll get in a car right now and start driving.’”

Brown drove the hundred-odd miles over mountains, across borders and through police checkpoints, before finally crashing at a friend's house in Kosovo.

Judy Nichols, Brown's editor at the Monitor from fall 1998 until June 1999, said while certain thrill-seeking freelancers descend like vultures on whatever international crisis pops up, Brown was uniquely qualified to track what would become one of the biggest ongoing news stories over the next year-and-a-half.

“For him, I don't think it was opportunism,” Nichols said. “He had already been there and invested time.”

Tricks of the trade

Criss-crossing Serbia, its powder-keg province of Kosovo, and the surrounding region, Brown tracked daily military developments while mixing in features on the Serbian Orthodox Church and a Serbian-Albanian Romeo and Juliet couple in Kosovo's capital, Priština.

Brown also traveled to nearby locales such as Bajram Curri in Northern Albania — “at the time, it was reputed to be the most dangerous place on earth” — where he paid his bodyguard, a former Kosovar

rebel, in steak and beer, and covered a coal miners' riot in Romania.

“I probably almost got killed a dozen times,” Brown said of his stint as war correspondent. “It was a wild, reckless lifestyle.”

One time, he said, Newsweek called and demanded he find and write about a “fresh massacre” to keep pace with other outlets' reporting.

On a tip from a spy, Brown drove Newsweek's armored truck around the Drenica region of Central Kosovo with the door open yelling to pedestrians he passed, “Ku erst masaker?” — Albanian for “Where is the massacre?” — until townspeople directed him to the burial site and dug up recently interred bodies.

He learned various tricks to get stories and stay safe, including dying his hair black to appear native and playing appropriate music in his car — Serb or Albanian, depending on the neighborhood he was traveling through.

Brown was in Kosovo in March 1999 when “it became apparent” that there were going to be NATO airstrikes all over Yugoslavia to quell the ground war in Kosovo. What was a reporter to do? He followed the action, back to Belgrade.

With paramilitaries after him and his Serbian girlfriend facing death threats, Brown holed up in the Hyatt, one of only two foreign journalists, he says, to stay in the city for all 78 days of bombings.

Eventually, the Serbs withdrew from Kosovo, signed a peace deal, and Brown returned to the U.S. in 1999.

After stints as national security correspondent and sports columnist for the Christian Science Monitor followed by more magazine freelancing, Brown decided to do something “completely different.”

Changing his passion

Brown said he's been asked, “Why?” numerous times and has given multiple answers, all true: he was sick of quibbling with newspapers over expenses; he didn't want to become an editor or really cover any beat besides war; a war reporter friend, the legendary Kurt Schork, was ambushed and killed in Sierra Leone in 2000.

While he misses elements of his former life, Brown said the switch was necessary.

“I had lost my passion for journalism,” Brown said. “I wasn't as hungry as I had once been and I couldn't continue like that. It was not possible. There was no doubt about it.”

So, much to the surprise of some, he enrolled at the University of Maryland School of Law in 2002.

“I felt that as a lawyer you're in a position to precipitate change,” Brown said. “And that appealed to me.... I was frustrated from being in a war zone and just being a witness to it.”

Through school and clerkships at Baltimore law firms and with U.S. District

Judge Andre M. Davis, Brown became keenly interested in criminal defense work — what he calls “the front line of our society.”

Davis noted that the press and the law share a “mandate...to keep government honest.”

“Most federal law clerks have in mind making lots of money...that was never Justin's goal or aspiration whatsoever,” Davis said last week. “How he could help the least well-off in our society: that was always his goal.”

Larry Allen Nathans, whose firm consists of only four lawyers, says he's “very particular” about who he brings into the fold and waited months until Brown's federal clerkship wrapped up to fill a long-advertised job.

“We were looking to fill the position, but we liked him so much that we decided to fill it when he was available,” Nathans said. “I thought his journalism career showed initiative, it showed guts, it showed someone who could accomplish things in difficult circumstances.”

In the action

The transition from Brown's freewheeling journalist days to the world of lawyers has not been entirely smooth.

“The legal world is very conservative in all aspects, and that's been somewhat difficult to adjust to,” said Brown. On the whole, he said, “lawyers are more conformist.”

“There's an incredible emphasis on material things,” Brown added.

In his free time, Brown is an “avid” squash and tennis player, the athletic vestiges of his star lacrosse career at Gilman School and Cornell University.

He has also maintained his interest in the Balkans, returning to Kosovo in 2002 to report on the rebuilding efforts there and regularly testifying as an expert witness in asylum cases involving Serbians. His next such appointment is next month in Chicago.

Brown said he plans to stick around Baltimore doing criminal defense work — and letting his father pick up the tab for their weekly lunches together — but refused to pin himself down forever.

“I wouldn't rule out the possibility of having a third career,” he said, “but not until after I've accomplished what I want as a lawyer.”

Baltimore's most blighted, violent neighborhoods are “as bad, if not worse, than any I've seen in Kosovo,” Brown said. “So I still feel like I'm in the action.”

