

UNFLAPPABLE

by Carolyn E. Mosby-Williams
with Lisa D. DeNeal

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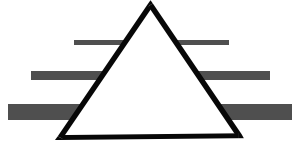
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my ancestors who are at rest, that helped mold me into who I am today - my mother, the late Indiana State Senator Carolyn Brown Mosby; my father, the late John Oliver Mosby, Sr.; my grandmother, the late Mary Snelling Brown; my grandfather, the late Alvin Thomas Brown; and my great grandmother, the late Lillie Cole Snelling.

This book is also dedicated to my mentor and friend, the late Rev. Charles R. Williams.

Special acknowledgements to Brian; my son, Lance; my brother, Bill; nieces Dawn, Monique, Kortney, Kandice and Kylah; nephews William IV and Justin; my Aunt Marilyn; and cousin, Tarik A. Preston.

Special thanks to journalist Lisa D. DeNeal, who helped make this book a reality.

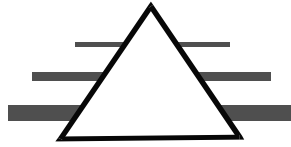
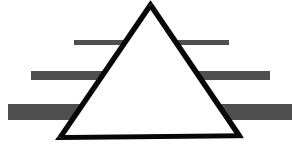


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Introduction

“I am ‘unflappable.’”

Could you imagine standing at a microphone, in front of a room full of people, introducing yourself as such? Especially if the people in the room held jobs as members of the media, people who record and document every word, facial expression and gesture you make?

Would they have any idea what the word meant, let alone why I would label myself with it? Of course, they would be likely to look it up before making the final edits for the nightly news broadcast or early newspaper editions. But at that moment, would they even care to know why I would assign myself an identity based on one word?

“Unflappable,” according to Webster’s dictionary, is an adjective, meaning “not easily excited or disconcerted. Imperturbable. Calm.” And while the above scenario never occurred, I did experience a moment where this adjective was used to describe me. Thankfully, it was not before an audience of media hounds. It occurred during a one-on-one conversation with my now former boss. Unflappable was the adjective he used to describe me in a newspaper interview. At least one publication had a theoretic way to describe me.

As a public relations professional, I was the calm before any mass media storm threatening to position the company or

my client in a negative manner. Amidst the hail of microphones, cameras and voices of those searching for the perfect headline or sound bite, I was the sturdy structure that refused to give in. Surely the aftermath was harmless. I felt it was a complimentary send-off to my leaving the company so I could concentrate on my new family. I was newly married and the mother of a beautiful son and stepmother to two more wonderful boys. I was the quintessential career woman.

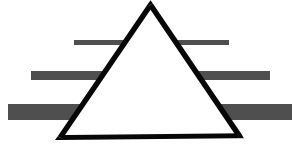
However, I thought about what unflappable meant in the context of a discussion with my boss in regards to my career. While he was right about my skills to weather the storm professionally, had that affected my ability to react personally? I remember the conversation quite well. Tim was president of the company where I was the vice-president of marketing and communications. It was a few months after my maternity leave – in fact, I'd returned earlier than planned – and I immediately resumed my duties.

One day, he called me into his office for a chat. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he asked if I was okay. I told him yes. I reflect on that conversation now, understanding that he did this in the interest of my wellbeing. He then said it had come to his attention, as well as others, that I did not appear to be on top of my game. He said I was not as focused as I was before I went on maternity leave. With my experience in dealing with spontaneous incidents and conversations, I faced my boss with familiar confidence. Underneath my exterior armor, however, I was taken aback by his comments.

I did not necessarily take offense at his words. Months after he became president of the company, he saw my potential to the point of promoting me from director to vice-president. And if he saw that deeply into my character and abilities, why should I doubt him when he saw trouble? I was slightly shaken, but there was no denying it; I had to acknowledge what he'd already seen

and analyzed. Months of soul searching and counseling confirmed my boss' early comments; I was not at the top of my game. While the word unflappable described my exterior, internally it was a different story. Over the years I'd been able to always put the "PR face" on for any situation, but now, after 36 years, I risked ending up like a loser in a high stakes card game. People at work were beginning to call my bluff, evidence that my best poker face was beginning to fade. I had to fold my hand and see what I had to do to be on top again.

Years of training and experience in handling everything from the serious or traumatic in professional settings, spilled into how I live personally. My own foundation, like the bricks, mortar and steel used to create the tallest, strongest structure, risked collapse. Years of carrying the weight of pain, hurt, rejection and anger on my shoulders were taking their toll. My foundation threatened to implode and release some 30 years of vulnerability. I will admit though, maintaining calm and control was always innate to my persona, even in childhood.



Preparing for Death

Parents are the first to say they never want to bury their child. And preparing for death is the last thing a child is expected to do. However, for me, Carolyn Elizabeth Mosby, or “Beth” to family and close friends, it seemed destined for me to be acquainted with death at an early age. My parents were Carolyn A. Brown Jordan Mosby and John Oliver Mosby, Sr. There was a 20-year age difference between them, yet it would not interfere with their love. To this day I cannot figure out how it worked, but as the saying goes, “age is nothing but a number.” Even so, as a child it was still a mystery in my eyes. Apparently for our family, age was not a major issue in the household. What made our family part of such a unique percentage of the U.S. population was that the age theme expanded beyond my parents’ gap. It was an even bigger mystery in that the age brackets within my family were just as intriguing. My mother was around the same age as my half-brother and half-sister. My father, grandfather and maternal grandmother were also the same age. And some of my nieces and nephews were 15 to 20 years older than I was! The age gap was an amusing and lively topic amongst family and friends.

I was disturbed however, by the age factor shared by my father and grandparents. When your father was the same age as your grandparents, one message was common to the outside

world -“OLD DADDY!” Another example of people’s view of age was my grandfather mentioning that most people assumed he and my father were brothers. The misconception about my father happened often.

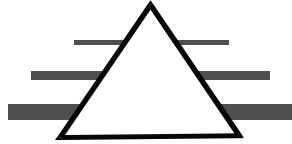
One vivid memory was of my father taking me shopping for a new pair of shoes. The saleslady looked at us and said, “Aw, isn’t that nice, your grandfather is buying you some new shoes!”

I barked, “He is NOT my grandfather, he is my father!” I did not comprehend the fact that this saleslady, as well as people outside of my world, would not understand the difference in my father and what society depicted. At my age, Daddy should be at least in his twenties or thirties and in what society holds as the prime of his life. Our constant visibility would raise some eyebrows from strangers, something I am sure others who came from a late generation of parenting can relate to. Decades later, children are being raised by second-hand parents or retirees who should be enjoying life.

Despite the oddity, my Daddy never let age define him; in fact, he was quite active for a 63 year-old – he was the father of an eight-year-old! A retiree, he golfed almost daily, bowled, played cards, went ice-skating and loved to dance. He was the life of the party and could tell a funnier and nastier joke than anyone in the room. My mother, however, was the exact opposite; she was more laid back and extremely professional. It still worked between them.

Regardless of his energy, somehow I knew that eventually I would have to prepare myself for the worst. Mortality was an obvious figure in our household. My father was a heart patient who made frequent visits to the hospital. Years later he would be diagnosed with colon cancer, intensifying my fears. Instead of worrying about what dolls to play with, mortality quietly stole my innocence. Television shows, particularly hospital dramas, fed my fears. You know those scenes when the

character is taking his last breath while lying in a hospital bed? The camera zooms in on the heart monitor and that line goes flat, undoubtedly meaning death. It was a confirmation that the heart has stopped beating. So you know by now that every time Daddy was in the hospital, I was watching that heart monitor. It did not matter that he was sitting up in the bed, laughing and joking; I was focused on that heart line. For me, that monitor and that line meant life or death. And I always needed to be ready for that moment to come.



Carrying a Relatively Light Load

I was born in Gary, Indiana on November 27, 1967, at a time when the city, built over 50 years before from blood, sweat and steel mills, was making history with the election of the first Black mayor, Richard Gordon Hatcher. The Civil Rights Movement was strong in Gary, with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League giving notice to any type of racial injustice perpetrated in plain sight. Hatcher's political landmark (he ended up serving five mayoral terms in a 20-year period) would also bring an influx of militancy among Blacks in the community, molding and shaping my hometown in years to come. As a matter of fact, my mother became the first Black clerical employee at the local utility company after the Urban League intervened because the company was not hiring Blacks.

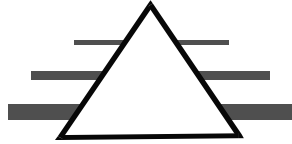
I was born nearly a year after my parents married. While their age differences spanned two decades – she was 34 and Dad was 54 - both shared similarities of already having a family. My father, John Oliver Mosby, Sr. was divorced with two adult children, while my mother, Carolyn Alan Brown Jordan was a divorcee with a son, William, III, affectionately known as “Billy” during his younger years. There is a 15-year age gap between us, with Billy being the oldest. While I have a close relationship with Billy – or one that is as close as

siblings could be despite the age gap – my relationship with my father’s two children was practically non-existent. I always felt as if his children resented the fact that I even existed, resulting in us not having a closer relationship. Unfortunately, ours is an example of some extended families throughout the United States.

My parents met on the greens of the South Gleason Golf Course in Gary. It is a funny irony, as my mother was not a golfer, and yet she was there. She never admitted to being at the golf course looking for a man but I always wondered. They were introduced by an up and coming politician and good friend of both of my parents, who later became the city’s deputy mayor. According to their stories, which were probably embellished, my mother had minimal interest in Mr. Mosby at the time, while he was intrigued with the slim, attractive and unfazed woman in his presence. The courtship dance to win my mother’s heart began not in the typical fashion of wooing her with flowers and candy. He discovered the way to her heart was through her son’s stomach. My father knew how to cook and my mother was in the early stages of her career, working at the University of Chicago. She rarely had time to cook, but she didn’t like to cook, either – a trait I would inherit. An evening meal for her and Billy, who was maybe 13 at the time – involved a waiter and a set table with menus featuring the daily special. My father worked his way into her life with pots and pans and a hearty, home cooked meal. However, before he could show off his cooking skills, my father had to get inside his future wife’s home. Billy was often home alone and given instructions to not let anyone in the house while she was out. Billy made an exception to Mr. Mosby, who promised to cook dinner if allowed to come inside. After what can be described as a whirlwind romance, John O. Mosby, Sr. and the former Carolyn A. Brown Jordan were married February 5, 1966.

I was not exactly planned. The announcement of my pending arrival was not one of gathering loved ones together with great news. My mother was lying on her back in bed and my father touched her stomach and she jumped. He looked at her and said, “you’re pregnant!” To which she responded by bursting into tears.

My father, being the supportive man he was, cried right along with her or at least that’s the story he told. My father was quite the comedian so you had to take what he said with a grain of salt. My brother Billy, on the other hand, was thrilled that he was going to have a baby sister or brother.



My Developing Blueprint

You cannot choose your parents. You are born not knowing what is in store for you or how your parents will prepare you for a life of independence. And your parents can only hope that they've done their best. In between, you pick up various traits of character and personality from the gene pools, and pray you don't drown.

My father and I shared the same birthday. He was born on November 27, 1911 in Morgantown, West Virginia, the oldest of eight children. He received a high school education, attending Monongahela High School. He came to Gary in the early sixties. At one time he owned a janitorial company and among his contracts was the Holiday Inn in Merrillville (now the Radisson Star Plaza), a major entertainment venue. He also worked for the city of Gary in code enforcement and had a part-time job with the Parks Department. He was retired for most of my life and the majority of my childhood was spent with him. I spent time with my mother, but let's just say our house was a total 360 degree opposite of the typical American household. I thought this was the norm in most households. Dad was "Mr. Mom" and Mom was the primary breadwinner of the family, but Dad hardly complained. I came into this world with eyes that changed color often to match Dad's light green irises and a head full of nappy hair. I mean nappy to the

point that my then sister-in-law gave me a relaxer when I was two years old!

Dad tried to do the best he could when it came to tending to the needs of a little girl. He even made attempts in areas that led to me starting my independent streak pretty early. For example, trying to comb my hair. My father attempted to do my hair, which quickly resulted in my learning how to do it. Other basic needs, like transportation, became a better job for my father. He took me wherever I needed to go – school, piano lessons, ballet, shopping – I was pretty much his shadow. One of our early staple routines as father and daughter occurred on a daily basis. Before taking me to school, he would take me to breakfast at Round The Clock, a 24-hour restaurant popular with locals who enjoy a meal while getting the latest news off the streets. We would sit with a group of his friends. I was the only girl, but just as a child picks up on adult actions, I too would develop characteristics similar to my parents' that would be noticed later in life.

One visible trait I got from him was providing space between me and the person sitting nearby. As an adult, whenever I arrived at a meeting, I would choose to sit next to an empty chair, allowing space between the next person and myself. By no means was I being unapproachable but I have never been comfortable sitting extremely close to someone. That came from noticing my father and his male friends doing the same thing whenever they were hanging out. I especially noticed that during my breakfast trips to the restaurant. Men, African American men, do not like sitting close to each other; it is uncomfortable to them and is perceived as an invasion of space, or so I have been told. My relationship with my father was, at its best, a positive reflection of a father and daughter. Without a doubt, I was a “daddy’s girl” and you did not see him without me tagging along. We shared some great bonding time

through the years, but there were moments when my time with Daddy would result in a test of my parents' marriage.

During one time in my childhood, my father had an affair with a woman I unknowingly revealed to my mother. Since my father looked after me, I had to go wherever he went, including this other woman's house. One day while playing with my new toy telephone, my mother noticed I was carrying on a "conversation" with someone. Asking whom I was talking to, I replied, "the lady with the new furniture." My mother asked whom I was talking about and after I insisted such a woman existed, my mother unveiled a trait I would later inherit and use in adulthood. She turned into a private investigator, getting as much information as possible on this woman friend of my father's. My mother found the woman's number and called her, not revealing her true identity. Instead, she pretended to be another woman my father was trying to hook up with! The other woman expressed surprise about the information my mother was serving. I must say she truly missed her calling as a detective. After numerous phone conversations with this woman – and my revealing the street where the woman stayed during a drive with my mother - she shared her discovery with my father and kicked him out of the house for six months. I was told my father stayed with a relative or a friend in California, but begged to come home. My mother eventually allowed him back into our lives. While she was intolerant of any type of disarming behavior, her heart remained opened to him.

On a lighter note, I inherited a whimsical approach to life from my father. He had a devil-may-care attitude about things; if I wanted to sit around and watch television all day, he was fine with it, most of the time. My bedroom was a pigsty all of the time. He was fine with it. He did the cooking and the chores and I spent my time juggling television, outdoor playtime, extra-curricular activities and homework. Dad was

extremely animated and carefree. If the sun came up, he was fine with that. And if the sun did not shine, he was fine with that, too. He'd just figure out how to get through the day without a worry in his heart. He was not lazy; he just had a contented aura of peace and leisure about him. I adopted that same demeanor like a sponge. However, growing up in the Mosby household meant you had to find a balance between carefree and discipline.

This is where Carolyn Brown Mosby stepped in.

My mother's motto was "my way or the highway" and while the road was bumpy, she was the master craftsman that constructed my foundation. She worked hard to smooth out my rough edges and gave me enough direction to overcome any obstacles or roadblocks headed my way. My job was to steer myself in the right direction and stay away from the road less traveled that could lead to destruction. My mother's authority was not to be taken lightly, although at times I did test her. In the end, she would win and give me a fair warning. She had no problem informing me that while she could not jump my father, she could easily beat my behind. I did some chores, but eventually my father would wave it off and I would go about my business. I was always the owner of an unkempt bedroom, which is where my mother allowed me to wallow in my own filth. Billy, who was easily a more obedient child, was horrified at the fact that I got away with it. Even now I cringe at how messy I was. There is no way I could go back into that type of behavior. But I allowed the behavior to manifest itself in other ways. Unknowingly, I was piling a form of psychological mess inside my system and, like a child pushing her mess in an overstuffed closet, I dealt with segments of my life the same way.