

I Refused to Stop Fighting: A Father's Journey From the Courtroom to Custody

By Doug Brown

There were moments during my custody battle when I wondered how much more I could take.

Not figuratively.

There were moments when I was financially drained, emotionally exhausted, spiritually tired, and sitting alone trying to understand how simply wanting to be a father to my daughter had turned into one of the hardest fights of my life.

For nearly two years, my life revolved around attorneys, court hearings, travel, paperwork, uncertainty, and the constant fear that I might lose precious time with my daughter that I could never get back.

I made trips to New York once or twice a month. I watched attorney bills pile up. Between legal representation in North Carolina and New York, I eventually spent more than \$40,000 in attorney fees alone. I cut back on my own life, dipped into savings, worked more, and kept finding ways to pay for another day in the fight.

There were times I would simply stare at those bills and wonder:

How much longer can I do this?

There were moments when giving up crossed my mind.

And admitting that is difficult.

But every time I reached what felt like my limit, I thought about my daughter, Ximena.

I thought about the promise I made when she was born—that I would protect her.

And I knew something:

I could be tired. I could be angry. I could be scared. I could even cry. But I could not quit on her.

So I kept going.

When Fatherhood Becomes a Fight

My journey into fatherhood did not begin the way I imagined it would.

Ximena was born on June 26, 2021. I remember holding her in the hospital and feeling as though everything else in the world had disappeared.

This was my daughter.

And I was her father.

But within days, circumstances separated us.

Her mother left North Carolina and went to New York, and for months I did not know when I would see my daughter again. Then, in October 2021, a 37-page envelope arrived from New York Family Court. As I read through it, I learned that Ximena's mother had been charged with child abuse and neglect and that my daughter had been removed from her custody.

That moment changed everything.

I had already filed for custody in North Carolina shortly after Ximena was born, but now the fight crossed state lines.

I needed attorneys.

I needed evidence.

I needed money.

I needed patience.

And more than anything, I needed strength.

What I wanted was incredibly simple.

I wanted to be Daddy.

I wanted mornings.

Bedtime stories.

Doctor appointments.

Birthdays.

School events.

Hugs.

Tantrums.

Laughter.

The ordinary moments.

But suddenly, many of those ordinary moments depended upon courtrooms hundreds of miles away.

The Nights Nobody Saw

People often see the outcome of a difficult journey.

They see the smiling pictures.

They see the child with her father.

They see the victory.

They rarely see what came before it.

They didn't see the nights when I cried because I missed my daughter so badly that I could physically feel it.

They didn't see me sitting on the edge of my bed trying to gather enough strength to face another day.

They didn't see the times I had to pull over because tears had blurred my vision.

They didn't see the birthdays I was missing, the bedtime stories I wasn't getting to read, or the memories I knew were happening without me.

And somehow, through all of that, I still smiled.

I went to work.

I handled responsibilities.

I showed up.

I looked okay.

But behind that smile was a father who was hurting deeply.

There were also nights when all I had left was my faith.

After one especially difficult court hearing, I sat in my car overwhelmed and quietly asked God how much more I could take.

I didn't suddenly receive all the answers.

The problems didn't magically disappear.

But I found enough peace to keep going.

And sometimes, enough strength for the next step is all you need.

My Mother Wouldn't Let Me Quit

There was another source of strength I leaned on throughout the battle:

My mother.

She was one of my greatest supporters.

One day, I called her when I was especially discouraged. I was tired of fighting and tired of feeling like the system was working against me.

I wanted to vent.

I wanted somebody to understand how exhausted I was.

Instead, my mother reminded me to keep my faith and keep fighting for my baby.

That conversation reignited something inside me.

She believed in me at a time when I was struggling to believe in myself.

Years later, I would understand just how precious that was.

My mother eventually lost her battle with breast cancer, but she lived long enough to see the outcome of mine.

She got to see me bring Ximena home.

And that is something I will always be grateful for.

The First Time I Felt Heard

For a long time, walking into court felt like walking into a room where I had to prove not only my case, but my worth as a father.

There were hearings where I walked out feeling dismissed and defeated.

But eventually, the custody proceedings moved from Monroe County to Onondaga County in Syracuse, New York.

And something changed.

For the first time, I felt like the person sitting behind the bench was actually looking beyond the paperwork and seeing me:

A father fighting for his daughter.

Judge Christina F. DeJoseph listened.

During one hearing, when I was repeatedly interrupted while trying to speak, she stopped it and made it clear that everyone in her courtroom deserved an opportunity to be heard.

That may sound like a small thing.

To me, it wasn't.

After spending so much time feeling unheard, being allowed to simply tell my story felt enormous.

For the first time in a long time, I walked out of a courtroom with something I desperately needed.

Hope.

March 27, 2023

Then came the night that changed everything.

On March 27, 2023, I flew to Syracuse with my then-fiancée, Erica, because court was scheduled for the following morning.

After arriving at the hotel, we spent nearly two hours on the phone with my attorney preparing for the hearing.

When that conversation finally ended, my phone rang again.

This time, it was the couple who had temporary custody of Ximena.

They asked if I wanted to come see my daughter.

I had not held her since the day she was born.

I remember the ride to their house.

My heart was pounding.

I was excited.

Terrified.

Nervous.

I didn't know how Ximena would react to me.

Then we walked inside.

And I saw her.

She was standing there holding a small stuffed bunny.

Our eyes met.

For a moment, she just stared at me.

She tilted her head as though she was trying to understand who she was looking at.

I barely moved.

I barely breathed.

Then something changed.

She dropped the bunny.

She reached both of her arms toward me.

And she began walking in my direction.

I opened my arms and let her come to me.

When she reached me, she wrapped her arms around me.

I picked her up.

She laid her head on my shoulder.

She rubbed my arm.

And I cried.

Because the last time I had held my daughter like that...

was the day she was born.

I quietly told her:

“Daddy's here, baby. I missed you so much.”

And somehow, despite all that lost time, it felt as though she knew exactly where she belonged.

With Daddy.

One Ordinary Night

We spent several hours with Ximena that evening.

Eventually, it was getting late, and Erica and I knew we needed to return to our hotel because court was early the next morning.

Then the man caring for Ximena pulled me aside.

He told me he loved the way I interacted with her.

And then he offered something I never expected:

I could take my daughter back to the hotel with me for the night.

I didn't have to think about it.

Yes.

That night, we gave Ximena a bath.

We washed her hair.

We played.

We laughed.

There was nothing extravagant about it.

There were no cameras.

No courtroom.

No judge.

No attorneys.

Just a father taking care of his little girl.

And after fighting for so long, those ordinary moments felt extraordinary.

I don't think I really slept that night.

I watched her.

I took it all in.

My daughter was beside me.

She was safe.

And for the first time in a very long time, I felt whole.

The next morning, it was time to return to court.

Ximena had to go back with her temporary caregivers before we left.

But I walked into that courthouse differently.

I had spent the night being the father I had been fighting so hard to become.

And as I walked into court that morning,

I carried her hug with me.

March 28, 2023

Then came the words I had prayed for.

The judge announced that I was being granted full and sole custody of Ximena.

For a moment, everything around me seemed to disappear.

My heart pounded.

My eyes filled with tears.

I thought about every court appearance.

Every attorney bill.

Every trip to New York.

Every sleepless night.

Every prayer.

Every moment when I questioned whether I could continue.

And then I thought about the promise I had made to my daughter when she was born.

That I would protect her.

I had kept my promise.

Right there in the courtroom, I quietly thanked God.

March 28, 2023 became one of the happiest and most surreal days of my life.

And when I was finally able to hold Ximena knowing that I didn't have to give her back that evening, something inside of me changed.

I kissed her forehead.

I told her Daddy was there.

And for the first time in what felt like years,

I could breathe.

Custody Wasn't the Finish Line

Winning custody didn't make me a father.

Being her father every day does.

A court can issue a custody order.

But a court order cannot wake up with your child when she's sick.

It cannot make breakfast.

It cannot attend school events.

It cannot teach right from wrong.

It cannot comfort a frightened little girl.

It cannot read bedtime stories.

It cannot provide stability.

It cannot say, "Daddy's here."

That's my job.

I had spent nearly two years fighting for the opportunity to raise my daughter.

Now I had to live up to everything I fought for.

That's when I realized something:

Custody had never been the finish line.

Fatherhood was.

Turning Pain Into Purpose

Eventually, I started looking at everything Ximena and I had survived and wondered whether our story could help somebody else.

There is a father somewhere right now sitting at the edge of his bed staring at attorney bills.

There is a father sitting in his car after a court hearing trying not to cry.

There is a father buying another plane ticket.

There is a father reading legal paperwork he doesn't understand.

There is a father who loves his child deeply but is so emotionally exhausted that walking away is beginning to feel easier than continuing.

I understand that father.

I was him.

That is one of the reasons I eventually turned my journey into a book.

I didn't write my story because I believe I am a perfect father.

I'm not.

I wrote because there were moments during my battle when I desperately needed to know that somebody else had survived something like this.

I wanted another father to be able to look at my journey and think:

"If he kept going, maybe I can too."

My story eventually became *Fathering Against The Odds, Behind the Smile: Blood, Courtrooms, and Tears* - a story about what people couldn't see behind the smile I wore while fighting to remain present in my daughter's life.

And strangely enough, when I later compiled resources for fathers at the end of that book, one of the organizations I included was The Fatherhood Project because of its work promoting father involvement and strengthening families.

I never imagined that one day I would have an opportunity to share my own story with that same community.

Life has a remarkable way of bringing things full circle.

To the Father Who Is Tired

If you are reading this while going through your own battle, I won't promise you that everything will happen the way you want.

I won't tell you that every decision will feel fair.

And I won't tell you that strength means never becoming discouraged.

I became discouraged.

I cried.

I questioned myself.

I questioned the process.

There were even moments when I questioned God.

But I kept going.

So when you are tired, remember:

Your lowest moment does not have to become the final chapter of your story.

Learn.

Prepare.

Document.

Ask for help.

Find people who will remind you who you are when you're too exhausted to remember.

If faith is part of your life, hold onto it.

Control what you can control.

Keep your child's best interests at the center of everything.

And above all:

Keep showing up.

Not because every father is guaranteed the same outcome I received.

Not because every custody case is the same.

But because your child deserves the best version of you that you can give them.

One day, Ximena will be old enough to fully understand everything that happened before she came home.

She may learn about the courtrooms.

The flights.

The bills.

The tears.

The prayers.

The nights I wanted to quit.

But there is one question she will never have to ask me:

“Daddy, did you fight for me?”

She will already know.

She'll know because I was there.

She'll know because I stayed.

She'll know because when quitting would have been easier,

I kept going.

March 28, 2023 will always be one of the most important dates of my life.

But when I think about my greatest victory today, it isn't simply a judge granting me custody.

It's waking up and getting to be her father.

It's watching her grow.

Hearing her laugh.

Being there for the ordinary moments I once dreamed about from hundreds of miles away.

That is the victory.

I didn't fight because I wanted to defeat somebody.

I didn't fight because I wanted to say that I won.

I fought because I was her father.

I fought because I loved her.

And I refused to stop being one.

About the Author

Doug Brown is a father, author, advocate, and social services professional whose nearly two-year interstate custody battle resulted in him being granted full and sole custody of his daughter, Ximena, on March 28, 2023. His book, *Fathering Against The Odds Behind the Smile: Blood, Courtrooms, and Tears*, chronicles the emotional, financial, spiritual, and personal toll of that journey and the perseverance that carried him through it. Through his writing and advocacy, Doug hopes to encourage fathers facing difficult circumstances to remain present, responsible, engaged, and focused on the well-being of their children.