

‘AMERICA’S MOM’

For Tabitha Brown, a deli sandwich opened door to her success

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She’s been called “America’s mom” and her roots run long and deep in Rockingham County.

Actress and social media star Tabitha Brown said she still considers Stoneville and Eden home, despite living in Los Angeles and commuting to Chicago these days.

Brown’s videos featuring vegan recipes, humor and positive affirmation have garnered her millions of followers across several social media platforms — and gained her the moniker America’s mom.

“Family was a big thing for me, still is,” said Brown, who plays interior designer Octavia on the Showtime show “The Chi.”

“My dad was one of 12, so it was a big family. I had a lot of cousins growing up,” the 42-year-old said during a Zoom interview.

Brown’s social media following exploded during the pandemic and TikTok ranked her No. 2 on its list of top 10 creators for 2020.

In March, she received the inaugural NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Social Media Personality.

“Although her innovative recipes encourage others to make delicious meals, audiences finish her videos with a new recipe for the soul, too,” the NAACP said in announcing her award.

“There’s, to me, no greater acknowledgement,” Brown said. “I didn’t have to do a fancy movie. I didn’t have to write a song. I simply showed up as me.

“My hope is that it helps other people to walk in their free self, as well,” she said. “Your authentic self works.”



TABITHA BROWN, PROVIDED

Actress and social media star Tabitha Brown now lives in Los Angeles, but she grew up in Rockingham County. Her charm, humor and vegan cooking earn fans and money on social media.

Viral video

Her Facebook video raving about a Whole Foods sandwich in late 2017 boosted her online presence,

shifting her closer to the stardom she’s sought since a child.

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Brown

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“My life is changing right before my eyes,” Brown exclaims in the video, after taking a bite of the TTLA (tempeh bacon, tomato, lettuce, avocado) sandwich.

It really was, though Brown, who was auditioning for parts and driving for Uber, didn’t know it at the time.

The video went viral and demand for the sandwich shot up. Whole Foods tapped Brown to become its “plant-based brand ambassador.”

She went on to promote other products and recently launched her “Sunshine All Purpose Seasoning” blend in a partnership with McCormick.

She has a show called “All Love” on Ellen Digital Network, a media platform collaboration between Warner Brothers and Ellen DeGeneres.

Biography Daily estimates her annual income at around \$4 million.

Devoted fans

Her fans — who refer to her as Auntie Tab — are loyal, as evidenced by the recent backlash against talk show host Wendy Williams.

Williams chastised Brown for “retiring” her husband, Chance, encouraging him to leave his job as an LA police officer to pursue his own dreams. He runs Team Chance Basketball, a program that aims to teach kids life skills through basketball. Williams recounted her own experience with her ex, saying that he lost the money and then blamed her for the failure and for him quitting his job.

“I predict that this marriage is going to be on real rocky ground in a moment,” Williams said on her show.

Brown’s swift video response on social media was classically Southern.

“Wendy Williams, God bless you, God bless you,” Brown said, “... the pain you must be in and I’m so sorry.”

Brown goes on to recount the struggles and “broke times” she and Chance experienced over their 23 years together. She notes they had an agreement 15 years ago that he could pursue his dreams in five years — when she projected her career would pay off. (She admits that she was off by a few years.)

She offered prayers, and asks her followers to do likewise, that true love will find Williams. Brown ended the video, as she usually does, by encouraging her viewers to have the most amazing day. And her signature closing words: “But even if you can’t have a good one, dontcha dare go messing up nobody else’s, hear?”

The response was lauded by many in the media, including Shanelle Genai, who wrote about Brown’s response in the digital magazine *The Root*: “She’s a national treasure who must be protected at all costs. She’s been one of the brightest lights to have shone throughout this entire pandemic and I honestly don’t know where I’d be if I never heard her say ‘hello there’ again.”

Brown’s path to success resembles that of the stop-and-go traffic for which LA freeways are famous.

She took acting classes, did stand-up comedy and landed small acting parts. But she also worked a variety of non-entertainment jobs: a five-year stint at Macy’s, a year caring for dementia patients during the night shift at an assisted living facility, and working 9-to-5 at a cosmetics manufacturing facility.

Country girl

Growing up in Stoneville, she fondly recalls spending time at



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TASHA THOMAS

Tabitha Brown’s family says she was always posing for photographs while growing up in Rockingham County.

her maternal grandparent’s house in Draper.

“My great-grandfather, John, he spent a lot of time with me when I was very little,” Brown said. “He would take me on the farms and he had ... a bunch of quail and we would get the quail eggs and he would take me to strawberry patches and to go feed goats and cows,” she said.

“I was a tomboy — climbed a lot of trees, played with the boys, (played) football, got lost in the woods, fishing and all that stuff,” Brown said. “It was a great childhood.”

Her older sister, Tasha Thomas, recalls a typical sibling relationship.

“She was annoying,” Thomas said, chuckling. “She used to bother me all the time. She’ll be acting or she’ll be dancing or she’ll say, ‘sister watch this and watch that.’”

“And I’m like, ‘will you just get out of my room!’”

But if Thomas was feeling bad, Brown would always try to comfort her.

“She was always trying to make people laugh.”

Brown’s family said she loved “The Cosby Show.”

“She wanted to be like Rudy,” said Brown’s father, Eddie Thomas, referring to a character on the hit television show.

He recalled Brown taking his clothes to wear when she was in high school. “She didn’t want to look like everyone else, so she wore my clothes,” he said.

Brown sang in the youth choir at Mount Hermon Baptist Church in Ruffin and was active in sports and drama at Morehead High School, according to her stepmom, Diane Thomas. Brown returned to the school in 2016 as the commencement speaker for graduation.

“She was popular (in high school),” said Diane Thomas, who taught at the school. “A nice, good role model for other students.”

Plan B

After graduation in 1997, Brown attended Miami International University of Art & Design.

“That was the original Plan B, as my mom told me, but I was determined my plan A was going to work,” Brown said.

Her father agrees. “She called me one night, on a Thursday night, and said ‘Daddy, I’m out here in Miami, and all I’m



Tabitha Brown’s family says she was a big fan of the character Rudy on “The Cosby Show.”

doing is wasting your money. This is not what I want to do,” Eddie Thomas said.

“She wanted me to come and get her and I went out and got her,” he said.

Focused on Plan A, Brown decided to move to California.

“I’m young, I’m 19, have no idea what I’m doing, I just had this dream, and moved to California,” she said.

She moved to Laguna Niguel, where her mom knew someone who would rent Brown a room. She worked two jobs.

Brown’s childhood sweetheart and future husband, Chance, boiled down her situation.

“He came out and he was like, ‘This is insane. This doesn’t make sense. You’re not doing any acting, you’re nowhere near Hollywood,’” Brown said.

New responsibilities

Chance convinced her to move back to North Carolina for one year — where it was cheaper to live — and save money and then move to Los Angeles to pursue her acting career.

“So we moved back to Greensboro in ‘99, and that one year plan turned into five years of baby, marriage, house and cars and jobs ... and a forgotten dream,” Brown said.

These new responsibilities, by now she was married to Chance and raising their daughter, Choyce, convinced her that she had missed out on her opportunity to live in LA and pursue her acting career.

“And a couple years into it, something shook my bed one morning and woke me up,” Brown said. “It felt like I had had an earthquake in Greensboro, and I heard



Tabitha Brown grew up in Rockingham County and attended Burton Grove Elementary, Holmes Middle School and Morehead High School.



Tabitha Brown poses with a doll.

a voice — it sounded like thunder. And the voice said to me, ‘this is not the life I planned for you.’”

“And it scared me, ... nothing like that ever happened to me,” said Brown, who thought she might be losing her mind.

“So I got on my knees and I started praying. ... ‘Now God, if this is you speaking to me, I need you to show me the sign today.’”

Later, when Brown and her husband were driving to Four Seasons Town Centre, she heard an announcement on the radio about a contest to become a co-host on “The Busta Brown Show,” a variety show on WTWB-Channel 20.

“And at that moment, I knew that was a sign I had prayed for,” Brown said. “I went crazy in the car. I told my husband, ‘That’s my sign, that’s it!’”

She entered and won the contest.

“That’s what got me dreaming again,” Brown said. “I learned to produce television and do my own segments of hosting and interviewing celebrities.

“We even did sketches, ... funny stuff kind of like ‘In Living Color’ or ‘Saturday Night Live,’” Brown said.

She started acting in local and regional plays and independent films.

LA move

A year later, she told her husband that they needed to move to LA. “I had heard the voice of the Lord, I got to go,” she said.

In 2004, with \$8,000 in savings, the couple moved to LA.

But a couple of months later, Brown’s mom, Patricia Johnson, was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease more commonly known as ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord.

“So my world stopped,” Brown said. “You only get one momma.”

For three years she traveled back and forth between LA and North Carolina, helping take care of her mom.

After her mom’s death in 2007 at age 51, Brown again refocused on her career, picking up roles in TV shows and movies, such as “Thug Life” and “Laughing to the Bank.” She and Chance also had a son,

Queston, or Quest for short.

“I always tell people — because my husband’s name is Chance — (that I) took a Chance, made a Choyce and now I’m on a Quest,” she said.

Brown also includes in her immediate family TyLeah Hampton, whom she calls her bonus daughter. Hampton is Chance’s daughter from a previous relationship.

Getting sick

Brown was sidelined again by an unexplained sickness in 2016. She suffered headaches for more than a year and a half.

“I had begun to fall when I would walk and get these bad dizzy spells and I had chronic fatigue and chronic pain throughout my body,” Brown said.

Doctors couldn’t pinpoint what was going on, other than to say it seemed to be an autoimmune disease.

With the sickness, “I was in a really dark place for about a year,” Brown said. “Depression had set in, the anxiety was through the roof, panic attacks were happening. I was on medication to try to balance all that out.

“I honestly had thought God forgot about me,” said Brown, whose mother was a pastor.

That changed, she said, when Choyce came home from school and told her about watching the Netflix documentary “What the Health” — which promotes veganism to avoid or cure illness.

“It’s not every day that your teenager comes home and tells you to watch a documentary,” Brown said. “I was like, ‘Girl, let’s pop some popcorn and watch it!’”

Seeing the documentary four years ago “was like a lightbulb moment for me,” she said.

She took the suggested 30-day challenge to go vegan.

“I was starting to feel so much better,” Brown said. “I just told my husband, ‘You know what, this could be my life.’”

“I went completely vegan and haven’t looked back,” she said.

A new freedom

It was during this period that a “new Tabitha” emerged, she said.

“Old Tab was not free,” Brown said. “I was very much so programmed into thinking I had to conform.

“For years I was told to cover up my accent because — you know, it sounds ignorant. ... I always wore my hair one way, I would wear it straight. I was always on a diet, honey, trying to be a size two or four and look the part,” Brown said.

“When I got sick, I realized that I didn’t want to live my life for anybody else no more. ... To be alive is such a gift, and to be alive and be who you were created to be every day, there’s freedom.”

Brown said she also made a promise to God that she would quit trying to live her life her way, but live it God’s way.

“I’m going to be free,” she said. “And if people love me, they’re going to have to love me for me. And if they don’t love me, ... well God bless them — it ain’t my problem and it ain’t my business!”

Seeing her mother’s fortitude during her illness also inspired Brown.

“To see her never complain, to go ... through this whole transition, with a smile on her face — knowing she was going to die — and being at peace with that.

“It changed me,” Brown said. “It opened my heart and it softened it for other people.

“If I go through something, it is selfish of me to keep it to myself,” she said. “Because I can share my experience that may help somebody else.”

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