



Brenda with her son, Mycole, who was born five years after she kicked her drug habit.

class act

Brenda Combs was a homeless crack addict. How did she wind up a **respected schoolteacher?**

BY KENNETH MILLER

JUST NORTH of the airport in Phoenix, in one of America's most violent neighborhoods, the crackle of gunfire often ricochets between shabby stucco houses. Jacked-up cars blaring hip-hop cruise past the dirt yards, and the clatter of police helicopters echoes through the desert air. But if you listen closely, you can hear a chorus of small voices wafting from a classroom in a white brick school building. Brenda Combs is leading her students in song. "When we wake up in the morning," she belts out in a soulful contralto, "we can brush our teeth ... comb our hair ... eat some food ... and get ready for a brand-new day."

The kids in this summer class range in age from 5 to 12 and, like most pupils at StarShine Academy—a charter school serving kindergarten through 12th grade—come from Phoenix's poorest families. Some of their parents are drug addicts; others are homeless. The woman by the chalkboard, for her part, has achieved a kind of success that once would have seemed well beyond her grasp. Combs, who runs the summer program and teaches third and

fourth grades the rest of the year, was recently listed in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*. When she received her master's in education from Grand Canyon University last spring, First Lady Laura Bush sent congratulations. As Combs was being interviewed on CNN, the university's CEO showed up with a surprise graduation present: a full scholarship toward a PhD.

"Brenda is incredibly gifted," says StarShine Academy's founder, Patricia McCarty. "I often think of how many people used to walk by her and say, 'She's a throwaway.'"

What makes Combs such an extraordinary educator of at-risk children—the kind whose students drop by later to thank her—may be the years she spent living on the streets as a desperate crack addict. She slept under bridges and rummaged through dumpsters for breakfast. And she seldom used a comb or a toothbrush.

Combs, 45, likes to show teenage students her "before" photos, which portray a gaunt, disheveled derelict with zombie eyes. "I know what it's like to want to get high," she says, "to be hungry and abused. They trust me because I've been there."

WHEN COMBS WAS A GIRL in Flagstaff, 135 miles to the north, few would have expected her to follow such a torturous path. Her father was a baker by day and a janitor by night; her mother, a part-time restaurant cook. Both believed in education and hard work. Brenda, the eldest of three, had an ear for music; when she taught herself to

play "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" on the piano as a kindergartner, her mother wept with pride. For her family, church came before all else.

"My parents were very religious," she recalls, "and they had a firm grip on their kids." Drinking, smoking and cursing were prohibited; so were dating and slang. Brenda felt like a misfit among her more worldly peers, especially after the family moved from the inner city to a mostly white suburb. By the time she got to college, she was determined to live by her own rules. She lasted a year at Northern Arizona University, then quit and found work as a bank teller.

SHE ALSO STARTED partying. First came margaritas and daiquiris, then pot and acid. A boyfriend introduced her to cocaine. Combs now believes she has an addictive personality. At the time, she knew only that getting high banished her insecurities and inhibitions. She began drifting from job to job, committing petty crimes. Arrested for forgery and shoplifting, she got off with probation. But Combs's real undoing proved to be crack—smokable cocaine—which hit Flagstaff in the mid-1980s. Suddenly nothing else mattered. Home became a cheap motel or an acquaintance's sofa.

When Combs failed a drug test, violating probation, an attorney helped her avoid prison. She went through rehab, and the two wound up falling in love. Combs took a job as a hairdresser and began pursuing her dream of becoming a singer, playing nightclubs



COURTESY BRENDA COMBS



Combs received a master's degree from Grand Canyon University last spring (above, with her son). She had come a long way from her days on the street (left, 1993).

on weekends. But her relapses doomed the relationship, and she plummeted back into addiction.

In 1992 she drifted to Phoenix. One night, she was walking past a house where a raucous card game was in progress. A car screeched to a halt. "I remember hearing a clicking sound," Combs says. "Then I saw guns come out of the window." The target was a man she'd just asked for a cigarette. He threw himself on top of her, but both were wounded in the fusillade.

Combs's left ankle was so thoroughly shattered that surgeons considered amputation. After months in hospitals, she returned to the streets, still on crutches.

"For me," she says, "cocaine was the best medication."

AT STARSHINE ACADEMY, one of Brenda Combs's favorite motivational

tools is a snow cone machine. She bought it a few years ago for her son, Mycole, now seven, but decided to share its bounty. Every Friday afternoon, she makes cones for each of the school's 130 students. "They work hard all week," she says. "They need a little reward."

Combs labors tirelessly to help kids beat the odds. "Miss Brenda made me see that wherever you come from, you can do something great," says Ricky Gomez, 14, who recently won a scholarship for gifted students to a Catholic high school. Combs, he says, steered him away from drugs and toward his dream of becoming an architect.

She makes regular home visits, even when the domicile is a dilapidated trailer. When a parent is in jail, Combs has been known to put up an extra child or two in her own small house. "She doesn't expect any credit for it,"



Brenda Combs, who has long had a talent for music, often uses songs to teach concepts.

says Beth Brantley, who gave Combs her first teaching job seven years ago.

Because the school operates on a slim budget, Combs scours yard sales, spending part of her \$35,000 salary on art supplies, educational games and AV equipment. She spends her evenings devising lesson plans—a math game involving pizza slices, an English unit in which students publish their own books. To make ends meet as a single mother, she holds down part-time jobs: choir director, online college instructor. And on Sundays, after church, she brings food, water and a bit of hope to those who live on the streets. “I want to go back and let them know, Hey, I made it,” she says. “If I can do it, you can too.”

IT WASN'T THE BULLETS that got Combs to change her ways. Over the years,

she was beaten, stabbed, burned with cigarettes and raped. She survived multiple overdoses and a pipeful of crack laced with rat poison. Then, one morning in 1995, she awoke beneath a highway overpass to find that her shoes had been stolen.

The ground that day was hot enough to raise blisters. Combs was literally stuck. But the thief had stolen more than her shoes—he took the last scrap of her dignity. “It all just hit me,” she recalls. “I thought, This cannot be the life that God intended for me.”

After a friend rustled up a pair of sneakers, Combs walked to the police station and turned herself in. Her probation officer handed her a catalog of rehab programs and ordered her to find one she could stick with. Combs chose a halfway house and set about healing herself. The year she spent there, she says, was the hardest she had ever known. The slightest emotional upset, the flare of a cigarette lighter, even certain songs on the

radio, would set off ferocious cravings. Most of the other residents eventually relapsed. But for Combs, this time, there was no turning back.

After getting clean, Combs surrounded herself with supportive mentors but didn't always heed their counsel. Her most serious misstep was marrying an addict who was trying to stay sober, with far less success. While Combs worked to pay the rent, José would disappear on binges; he sometimes beat her when he returned. The abuse continued even after she discovered she was pregnant. She was 37 and hadn't used illegal drugs for five years. No one could explain why, hours after Mycole's birth in January 2000, the infant suffered a near-fatal stroke. He was left with brain damage, and doctors warned that he might never learn to walk, talk or feed himself.

COMBS FILED FOR DIVORCE when her son was three months old, after José, in a rage, trashed their house and took a swipe at Mycole. At the time, she was working days at a collection agency and nights at a restaurant. That fall, her day boss told her to decide between keeping her job or rushing to the hospital every time her son had a seizure. Combs quit on the spot.

Beth Brantley, who ran the day care center where Mycole spent much of his time, saw an opportunity. Having just started a charter school for older kids, she made an offer: If Combs would come work for her, Mycole could stay for free.

“I'd never thought about teaching

before,” Combs says. But after a week, she knew she'd found her calling. To enhance her skills and credentials, she began taking education courses at a community college. By 2005 she had earned her bachelor's degree at the online University of Phoenix and enrolled in the master's program at Grand Canyon University. After Brantley closed her school, Combs applied for a position at StarShine.

During the job interview, Patricia McCarty asked her why she wanted to work in a hardscrabble neighborhood when she could earn far more in a comfortable suburb. “She said, ‘These kids are me,’” McCarty recalls. “‘And we're here to change the world.’”

TODAY COMBS and her son live in a two-bedroom bungalow she helped build with a small army of Habitat for Humanity volunteers. She has reconciled with her parents, who love to take Mycole on fishing trips. He is in second grade now, and after years of intensive therapy, he's an avid basketball player, an eager student and a voracious reader.

Combs's own horizons continue to expand. McCarty is grooming her to become principal of a new StarShine school. Organizations are asking her to give speeches. Publishers want her to write an autobiography, and producers want to turn it into a movie.

All the attention is a little dizzying, but she has weathered tougher challenges. “Many doors are opening to me,” she marvels. Then she laughs. “I guess I'm ready.” ■