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## From family survival to family law

Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck associate recalls frightening days during Panama invasion

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Kimberly A. Cook spent Christmas 1989 surrounded by family. And the U.S. Army.

Her parents were educators and moved the family in 1988 from Atlanta to Panama's Fort Gulick, where her father taught the children of military personnel stationed in Panama.

Cook — today an associate at Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP — took the transition well, or at least as well as an 8-year-old can who, when hearing the family was moving to "Panama," assumed that meant Panama City Beach in Florida.

That misunderstanding aside, Cook loved her new home. She made friends on the first day of school. She learned Spanish by watching "The Smurfs." She played tennis and the French horn and joined the cheerleading team.

For an American girl living in Panama, her childhood was routine.

And then President George H.W. Bush decided he'd had enough of Manuel Noriega.

On Dec. 20, 1989, at 1 a.m., the United States invaded Panama and ousted Noriega, the Panamanian general and political leader. For months leading to the invasion, tension on the base was

common — young Cook knew her school's bomb threat evacuation drill by heart.

But she wasn't prepared for being woken up by her parents in the middle of the night, looking out her window and seeing a purple sky filled with red flashes, being dragged off her bed while still in her blankets and told to "stay low."

"We crawled down the hallway to my parents' bedroom," Cook said. "We laid on the floor. You could hear guns, and you could hear bombing and then the sky would light up. There were snipers on our roof because we were so close to the ammunition dump. They were concerned about it being taken over."

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From their crouched position, Cook's parents pulled the mattress off their bed and let her and her two siblings lay down. On the second floor of the home, they locked and barricaded their bedroom door and settled in — for how long, no one knew.

"I was terrified of the steps ... because I was convinced that someone was coming upstairs," Cook said.

With every sound from outside



Kimberly A. Cook

the door, Cook's 9-year-old imagination filled her with fear.

"Somebody's coming upstairs to kill my family," she kept thinking. "We are going to die."

### A true calling

The killer never came.

The family stayed in the room for a few days, playing board games and watching the news for updates once their power returned after the first night. There was a bathroom attached to their parents' room that they could crawl to and from.

Telephone lines were down. To check on their neighbors, they wrote messages on sheets of paper like "How are you?" and "Are you OK?" and held them in front of their windows during breaks in the fighting.

"When I watch TV and I see children in war-torn countries, I get it," she said. "It's one thing to see it on TV. It's another thing to feel like it's right outside your door and not know if somebody's coming for you."

Despite the chaos and uncertainty, Cook's family stayed in Panama.

Prior to Cook's senior year at Balboa High School, Cook's father took a job on Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. She remained in Panama and lived with family friends. She was accepted to Spelman College in Atlanta and was initially interested in education, even teaching seventh-grade social studies in Atlanta.

Slowly though, her interest in the law grew. She went to law school in Washington, D.C., at the Columbus School of Law of the Catholic University of America and interned for U.S. District Judge Gerald Bruce Lee.

Lee's wife was a divorce attorney — he suggested it to Cook as a practice area she might enjoy.

Cook wasn't so sure.

"I go to Catholic University of America," she told him. "My parents have been married 30 years. I don't know anything about divorce."

The judge pointed out that family law offers the chance to litigate and work with families to help them find peace during a difficult time.

She took his advice and found a summer job with the now-defunct Lewis Law Firm P.C. in Washington, D.C. After two days, she'd found her calling.

"People come because they are in a bad situation," she said. "I felt like 'I can do this. I can help somebody change the course of their life and help them through this time period.' It meant a lot to me."

### Worth every penny

In 2007, Cook and her soon-to-be husband moved to Chicago. Not long after, she joined Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP.

"Kimberly has an incredible presence both with clients and in the courtroom that is beyond her years both in age and in legal experience," said Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck partner Meighan A. Harmon. "Our practice area can be at times a little bit of a street fight. She never gets sucked into that."

At the firm, Cook, 34, has established herself as a firm leader both as a practitioner and as a role model for younger female lawyers.

"From the day I met her, I loved her," said Linda Wilson, a former client who met Cook in 2008 to talk about a potential divorce. "She doesn't tell you what you want to hear. She tells you what it's gonna be."

When Wilson came to Cook, she did not trust leaving her two young children with her husband. She met with partner

Donald C. Schiller, who assigned her to Cook.

“I’m not sure if you’re actually ready to get divorced,” Wilson remembers Cook telling her. “I want you to think about it.”

Wilson was not prepared for that. Cook made her think step-by-step about the realities of divorce. How would the children react to not having their father at home? Would she regret not going to couples therapy rather than dissolving the marriage?

What would the financial strain be on Wilson?

Wilson went home and thought about it. It was a year before she called Cook back.

“She’s not cheap — I’ll tell you that right now,” Wilson said. “But she’s worth every penny.”

Once Wilson was ready, Cook took the same care in leading Wilson through the divorce process. She told her how and when the papers would be served and made Wilson envision where

she and the children would be when it happened. She helped Wilson reimagine her life as a single mother and reminded her of the importance of taking care of herself.

“She was very concerned with the whole picture,” Wilson said. “I interviewed three other attorneys, and I did not get that feeling from them at all. I know it’s a business, but she made it feel like she actually cared.”

Today, Wilson considers Cook

a friend. Wilson’s marriage may not have been a military invasion in the dead of night, but she did require a rescue. Cook delivered.

“Family is so important to me,” said Cook, now a mother to a 2-year-old boy. “Not every marriage or not every situation is best for someone. And helping that person get control of their life back — if you can help somebody do that, that’s an amazing feeling. That’s really why I do this job.”