

# Brooke's Story: Flipping the Script

Craig: Welcome to season four of the Robertson and Easterling podcast. This is Craig Robertson

Matt: and I'm Matt Easterling. We want to thank everyone who has listened to our podcasts so far. If you haven't already subscribed, please do so on iTunes, Spotify or your favorite podcast player, Craig and I are having lots of fun producing this show and we hope that you're enjoying it as much as we are. It's really hard to believe we're already on season four.

Craig: That's right, Matt, we've really enjoyed sharing the life stories of some great people and we have even more in store for you for season four. As you know, by now we are board certified family law specialists with one of the most successful boutique law firms in Mississippi as creative problem solvers, we take a holistic approach to the individual needs of our clients.

Matt: Joining us again. This season are licensed professional counselors, Eva. Hunter from LifeWorks counseling, we're excited to continue our partnership with event row. They provide a unique perspective as we help hurting people with the healing process.

Craig: We're also excited to introduce two new sponsors for season four, Christy Tidwell and Kelly Engleman. Christy is a certified financial planner and the founder of new path planning Christy's own wall through divorce. Coupled with 20 years of experience, make her a perfect advocate for others on a similar path. And Kelly is the founder of Enhanced Wellness Living, Mississippi's leading functional medicine. Her team's food first approach to healing along with a variety of lifestyle and regenerative treatment options sets you on a journey to take control of your health and live life with.

Matt: So now that we've told you what to expect this season, sit back, relax, take a deep breath. Everything's going to be okay. You found us and what you're about to hear is going to help.

Craig: One of the favorite things about my job is getting to meet new people and interact with their story. Everybody who comes to us has a journey that they've been on, even before they were married. And then certainly as they are contemplating change in their life, and we sit with many people who are contemplating change in their life and are able to put things back together again and we always celebrate that. But. Unfortunately, sometimes we interact with

someone who they really need to take a different direction in their relationships and the person that I have with me today did make that choice. She is just a lovely human being and Brooke, thank you for being here. Thank you for your willingness to share your story.

Brooke: Thank you for having.

Craig: So, let's just dive right in and tell our listeners a little bit about you, where you're from.

Brooke: I grew up in Huntsville, Alabama. My parents are both married to each other. They were both married prior to getting married to each other, but I was always grew up knowing that marriage is super important that divorce was quote on quote wrong.

Craig: We share that in our story because both of my parents were, were married to other people and had two children each before they married each other and had two more children. So, I'm the youngest of six and the product of two divorces. So, your parents were married to other people and then they married each other, but they stayed together.

Brooke: And they're still together.

Craig: So, what was life like growing up in Huntsville?

Brooke: I feel like I had a normal childhood. I was raised in the church, you know, went through life and all the things that you're supposed to do. That's quote on quote good. And which I struggled with just because if something didn't speak to me and to my desires in life, but that's what you're supposed to do just because of being taught up in the church, so I felt that leading up to that to say about getting married. You're supposed to go to college, you're supposed to date the person, and get married with the person who went to college with.

Craig: Right, there is this grip with regard to what life is supposed to be like as a Southern woman. I think that for me personally, I believe that my parents made a lot of mistakes in their first marriages, and I like to think that I'm the beneficiary of some of those mistakes that they made and that they tried to do a little better the second go around, even though they were flawed human beings, like we all are. Did you have that experience with your family?

Brooke: I'm not sure. I think that they're still trying to figure it out. And I think a lot of the old school mindset of the wife has to do everything. My dad will even

make jokes that my ex-husband well give him slack because he's a man and that's hard for me to necessarily because we're all humans and we're all being held to the same standards.

Craig: So, talk about your education. You said you had a relatively normal childhood, but it seems like it there were a set of rules and a set of standards and almost a script that you were expected to follow.

Brooke: Yes, absolutely. My parents were pretty strict, and dating was easy in a sense because first boyfriend I had was from church and it was my parents' best friend's son. So easy, but I realized I didn't like that relationship and I think it was harder on my parents that I broke up with him that it necessarily was for me. I went to college, and I had a very difficult college boyfriend. There was a lot of verbal abuse. Cops were called just because of stalking and so that was difficult. And then I started dating my ex-husband and he was the safe spot. It was almost a Knight in shining armor.

Craig: You told me that you had an eating disorder when you were in college, talk about that and how that impacted the decision-making process that you made.

Brooke: So, it actually started in high school and it was the way that I could deal with stress. It was the only thing I could control and so I'm sure there was a lot of weight issues with it, but it was more something I can control so I could control my weight and so I did that.

Craig: It sounds to me, like you're saying that there was this life scripted out for you and this life expected for you that you felt out of control of, but when it came to food, you had complete control over what you put in your body or what you didn't put in your body.

Brooke: Yes.

Craig: So, talk about how it impacted your life.

Brooke: I think it just let me put live in an alternate reality, in a sense, it was something that I didn't have to worry about the pressures outside the world, because I'm controlling this one tiny piece of my life. And it obviously was super unhealthy, and it was something I hid from everybody. I mean, there's not a confidant I had about it and my sister did figure it out. My sister's always been very intuitive of things with me. And so ,I stopped for a few years and then college, the same thing kind of happened, especially after the college boyfriend

and the craziness with that, it was another thing that I can control. I think honestly at that point I've realized that this wasn't healthy for me. And so it wasn't, I never had to go to a rehab type thing to figure it out. It was just more like being more mindful and as I got older, I realized other healthy aspects and things, and those thought processes would pop in every once in a while, but I realized that there was better ways and outlets to handle myself.

Craig: Was it a response to stress? What would you say as a survivor of an eating disorder to a parent who might be listening, who suspects, or has confirmed that their daughter has an eating disorder?

Brooke: Definitely go into it with love and understanding that there's a lot more going on than just the food aspect of it. We as humans have so many pressures and a lot of times child or person feels those pressures necessarily, and I can control.

Craig: And it seems like that's so heightened these days with social media and at all times, you know what you're missing out on all the pictures are filtered. I mean, I've young clients who are at age 24 or 25, getting Botox. I have no problem with Botox, but there's this filtered reality that I think that we live in and this constant pressure of comparison, and it can be scary for parents.

Brooke: I can't imagine growing up with social media at that age, like how much more pressure that would have added on to me.

Craig: So you said that you met your Knight in shining armor, that you had struggled with this idea of control, and you had found yourself in a bad relationship, a chaotic relationship in college, and you had slipped back into some of those old negative coping mechanisms, but here was this guy who was, he was a good guy and your parents liked him. He wasn't abusive. He was good to you. What happened then?

Brooke: I felt that I had my person: He, like you said, he was good. He was kind good country, boy. And I thought, okay, this is who I'm going to do life with, but I still hadn't figured out who I wanted to be as a person, I'm just following those next steps. So, I graduated from college, and I felt okay, well now the next step is to get married.

Craig: And he was the person who you were standing next to when the music stops. So, to speak a really, really smart client told me that one time, and it was really, it was one of the saddest things I had heard is, he was who I was with. So, you were doing the cakewalk of life and just walking around the chair and

the music stopped and he said, who you sat next to, and that seems, but it seems so sad. It doesn't sound like there was this spark, that you weren't struck by lightning. I love Ted Lasso. I don't know if our listeners have been listening to that show, but it's awesome. If you haven't.

Worth getting apple TV to listen to it. Roy Kent is one of my favorite characters and they had a double date, and he was interacting with Rebecca, the boss and she was talking about this guy that she was dating post-divorce and Roy said, you know, you need to be with someone amazing. And he was poignant from this really foul mouth British dude. But you know, it sounds like your guy was great, but maybe he wasn't amazing for you.

Brooke: Exactly and looking back on it, it literally was that it was this great guy, but he wasn't, he didn't challenge me. He didn't push me out of who I wanted to be and almost in a sense, accept me for who I was when I started to develop and grow, because I was so young when we decided to get me.

Craig: Well, you married him anyway.

Brooke: Yes, I did. The first few years were great and we had even said we wanted to push off, having kids for a while, be married and just be us. We're still both figuring out our careers. And at that point I really started to hone in on what I wanted to do and that we had babies and I was then working in a very stressful job and there was even a comment that was said that he said, I don't know if our marriage can survive this job. And I agree.

Craig: Talk about that a little bit more. The, um, I'm sure many working moms are listening to us right now. What was it about the job that was so difficult?

Brooke: I had a very large staff, um, and very toxic members of the staff that would call me all hours of the night handling very different aspects of it. And I felt like I was at work all the time and I was stressed. My ex and I started to, there were more layers of our differences started to appear, and we had a lot of arguments and disagreements about life and I realized I was like, maybe, maybe the stress of the job is bringing out, not the best in me and so I decided to get a different job.

Craig: Did that help?

Brooke: The most amazing job. I love my job and the stress was a lot less and I was really feeling like I was becoming the person, the business person that I've always wanted to be. And our marriage still was not getting better.

Craig: Well, speak to yourself 10 years ago. What was it about the relationship that was missing for you? Because I think some people are listening to this thinking and maybe rightfully so, but look, I made a commitment and this is my life and even though it's not amazing, this is my path. What would you say to that person?

Brooke: We only have one life to live, and you need to have the best life. Through all of the struggles, I went through with my marriage, I did start going to therapy, and that was the best aspect for me to realize I was not putting myself first and my desires and my happiness, because I was so worried about checking the box for my ex-husband in the mirror and so you want somebody that challenges you to be the best person he can be to continue to succeed on every avenue that you want to be and that can just be, Hey, I want to be a great mom. Um, I, you know, or I want to have all these business ventures. And it can be both of them and I think that he struggled with me being both aspects. He wanted me to do business, but make sure I wasn't more successful than him. And then also be the perfect mom and I struggled to be both and then also being true to myself and I loved having my own hobbies or anything like that. And it felt like I was filling so many other cups, but myself and so I want everyone to realize that you need to care about yourself. Not saying to be selfish, but to care about your own happiness and not just everybody else's happiness.

Craig: How does a person who is always optimistic, always sees the glass half full come to the point in their life where they think, I kind of need to get some help. I need to get some input from another person in a therapeutic relation.

Brooke: Yes. It took a while for me to agree to therapy. I have a great friend, that's a therapist and, you know, she always would give tips, but obviously doesn't want to be my therapist and I decided, you know, maybe let me just go talk to somebody. And I went into that first therapy session saying. I'm really happy with who I've been coming as a businessperson, but I can't stay in my marriage. And I don't know.

Craig: How long had you been married when those words came out of your mouth to another person?

Brooke: About seven years.

Craig: Seven years in you had gone to college and gotten a degree and you had survived some adversity and you were doing the cake walk of life and the music stopped and you sat down next to the person who became your husband and you felt limited is what I heard you say. You felt like you weren't able to stretch

your wings and that you were uncomfortable in the box that society was placing you in.

Brooke: Yes, very much so.

Craig: So when did you start to think that maybe there was something different?

Brooke: I had a couple conversations with my ex prior to therapy to say, hey, these are things that I'm not happy about and I need to see changes.

Craig: And what are those things? Maybe there's a guy who's listening, who. Who loves his wife, but is thinking, gosh, why is she so unhappy? Why does she seem so miserable? And what did you, what did you communicate in that moment?

Brooke: I didn't want to just hear the words I needed to see actions also. And so, me stating, hey, this is what I need, and you say, yes, absolutely. I'm going to, I'm going to do that. I'm going to support you. I'm going to be, but they're not actually following through.

Craig: So, Brooke, what I heard you say is that you were gaining the voice to be able to communicate what you needed, and you were hearing the right words, but as time went on, you were not seeing any affirmative action?

Brooke: Correct.

Craig: And how did that change your mindset?

Brooke: It was tough for my marriage because I felt that I was stuck that because you're a good Southern Christian girl, you're not supposed to get divorced. This is the choice I made, and he was not hearing me, so I didn't know what to do and I just felt that I was trapped in this.

Craig: Did you start confiding those feelings and someone else? I did. I had spoken with my ex-husband about how much I was ready to be done. And I was not seeing changes and continue to not see changes and I got very close with a friend, a male. We ended up having an emotional affair and it was my confidant and then it crossed the line to be a physical affair.

Craig: Also, now, Brooke, how does that happen? The you're a person of integrity, a person who had a good example of what family should be and great intentions with regard to the marriage you were going to share, but you found

yourself unfulfilled and incomplete, and you started to speak that out loud in therapy, but eventually you shared that to another person. How did it cross the line?

Brooke: It's obviously something I never would've thought would have happened. You know, I've always had the mindset once a cheater, always a cheater. How can anyone ever cheat? And I understand how it happens because it's tiny bits of that you give yourself as person emotionally, and you feel like they become your person and then you're together and there's more flirting and because this is your person that you've confided so much into, and you feel that they understand you and as the flirting happens and then the lines are crossed.

Craig: Were you able to then re-engage with your family at home when there was this other shadow in the corner?

Brooke: It's something that my therapist and I talked a lot about it's I did not admit to anybody that this had happened. I didn't even tell my therapist this had happened. And it was almost like I wanted, I pretended like it was a separate life that it wasn't who I was. I felt like I was living two lives and I wouldn't let them cross. So, I'd come home, and I'd be super engaged with my children. I was trying to engage with my ex-husband at the time, but obviously slowly feeling the closeness of this other person, and I'm not seeing changes in my husband at the time, and we were just falling further and further apart. My ex-husband also told me he would never let me divorce him and so it was almost like me saying, okay, I can live this secret life because this is my only way to have happy. Because my husband at the time would not let me divorce him.

Craig: You're sharing so vulnerably and bravely and thank you for that. And I know there's someone listening right now. Who's really connecting to your story. When did the two worlds collide?

Brooke: I had told my ex-husband that I wanted to divorce about a year before he kind of got on board. I think he got on board mainly because COVID happened, and we were together 24/7 and realizing that our differences coming to light even more. I think he realized that for us to separate was going to be the answer. He was agreeing on to do it amicably and that worked out great and then he found out about the affair.

Craig: How did he find out?

Brooke: I'm not a hundred percent sure and he decided to then serve me papers.



Craig: Well, what did it feel like to have papers served?

Brooke: Of course, I still wanted to pretend that all of this was not true. I was like how dare you say that I had an affair, there was no adultery and I. I was mortified. I was hurt that we are going through this together. Obviously, he was way more hurt by me having the affair, but it was so tough. It was the roughest time of my life.

Craig: Brooke, you talked about being served papers. Time sort of stopped. When did you come up for air and how did you determine what legal help you were going to seek?

Brooke: So, I'd have already reached out to you when I'd first decided I wanted to get divorced and the moment I got served papers, I reached back out to you. It was a tough first meeting to tell you that yes, the papers are correct. That I did have an affair. You told me to be 100% honest with you, and that was the scariest moment because I had admitted the affair to anybody.

Craig: Well, I'm glad that you did and for those out there listening, you know, you want your lawyer to see the cards they're playing. And I feel like, and maybe in retrospect, you would agree that once you say the words out loud and start telling your story, a little bit of healing starts.

Brooke: Most definitely. You told me once I left your office to go and tell my best friends and that it would continue to get easier. And I did, I had told my two closest friends, it was the hardest conversation to have. They opened me with open arms to say that they love me no matter what, like this is not changed their feelings towards me. I then opened it up to my therapist and later to my sister and my parents. And it became easier to say because having the affair does not define who I am as a person. It was something that did happen, and I wish that I didn't go about it that way, but it's just a part of my story and who I am now.

Craig: Well, then you're really brave to tell the dozens of listeners who tune in to our podcast when it drops every few weeks and so thank you for doing that. Okay. So, divorce is going to happen now, even though there had been a season of time that you were unhappy, this double life that you were leading is what finally inspired your husband to take action and force the conversation. How would you describe walking through the divorce process?

Brooke: He was rightfully so, very angry and he wanted to do things to hurt me. And so, the beginning part of the divorce process was tough, but it got easier

because I learned to communicate more with him to say, Hey, I know you're angry with me right now, but those are decisions we make long-term and these are about our kids because obviously we wanted to make sure that our kids are the biggest priority to everything and there were moments that he would be on the same page with me and the moments that it was pure anger, but we got to the part where we realized like finalizing and starting our lives as two separate beings was the best decisions just to do that.

Craig: You were able to, we ended up having a trial. Every divorce is difficult, but with relative ease, you guys were able to figure it out and come to arrange an agreement. To move past the marriage and into the next chapter of your life. So, tell our listeners a little bit about starting again.

Brooke: I felt that my healing on the marriage itself started before the divorce process because I was working through my therapist. I already knew that I was done with the marriage. The divorce part obviously took some healing also, but a few months after the divorce was finalized, I was like, I want to get back out start dating and I went on dating apps and I realized very quickly, I wasn't ready.

Craig: You know, it's interesting that you recognize that you weren't ready to, to date and to get back out there. How did you realize that?

Brooke: I had realized that I had done the healing with my therapist on who I wanted to be as a person and I don't necessarily know if I want to be married again, but I enjoy doing life with somebody and so I thought, okay, well maybe seeing if there's another partner out there for me. I decided to try out dating apps, but I realized that it was still too fresh of a wound, and I needed to be single and just being me for a while.

Craig: What happened to the other guy?

Brooke: We both decided that having a relationship was not going to be the best situation. He was a great friend for the time and understanding like some of the things that I wanted out of myself, but us being a team was not the best decision.

Craig: Brooke, it sounds to me like your life was somewhat mapped out for you and you were bailed from that. Just scripted. I'm going to go to college. I'm going to get a job. I'm going to get married. I'm going to have kids and we're going to live this nice American picket fence lifestyle and you did that by going outside of your marriage seeking this other relational dynamic. When the two

worlds collided, you found yourself in a divorce situation and starting over and you started dating very shortly after the divorce was over and you realize that you weren't ready, but you've told our listener that you started to kind of dip your toe back into the relational waters, again, as a person who is more confident in who they are. So, who is that person who is Brooke today and what does she want in a new relationship?

Brooke: I want somebody that challenges me, that supports me, that's not just that they intertwined into my life, but they also make me a better person. I don't need a person to be happy. I'm very happy with the person I am, and I think that's what everybody should be, but I want somebody that can do life together with me in a way that we both become even more of our best versions of ourselves.

Craig: That's well-put. What's it like being out there as a single mom dating, trying to navigate co-parenting with an ex-husband?

Brooke: It's difficult. There's a lot of interesting people out there. People that don't necessarily want a relationship. There are people that get freaked out that I have kids.

Craig: You're a little bit of a risk taker though and you're willing to take some chances. What would you say to that single mom who might not be as adventurous as you are?

Brooke: I get that I really do, but you, like I said earlier, you have one life to live. Put yourself out there. It's not going to hurt to go to lunch with somebody. It's not going to hurt to have drinks with someone.

Craig: How's dating different now as a single mom with a career than maybe in college or you got married young, but what's changed about the dating world as you see it changed?

Brooke: Everything has changed.

Craig: Talk to our listener about that.

Brooke: It's harder to meet people organically now. My friends are all married. And so, I am the first one out of my group that is divorced. Meeting people organically is difficult. I mean, if I see somebody at a restaurant and they're not wearing a wedding ring, it doesn't mean that they're not married.

Craig: I heard you say it's more difficult to meet people organically, help us understand what you mean by that.

Brooke: When you're 18, 19, 20, college, everyone is single or for the most part are single. You're out at restaurants, out with groups, bars, and it's easier to know that this person is single and to strike up conversations. When you're middle-aged and you want to meet somebody, you don't know if they're married or not.

Craig: Well, as we live longer, life gets more complicated and there more people involved and it's more complex. Dating as an older person is more complicated. Well, what's it like?

Brooke: I have not found somebody that I want to continue doing life with.

Craig: But you're positive about it. You're smiling about it. It sounds like you're having fun offer some encouragement to that single mom who maybe is not quite ready to date but is thinking about dipping your toe into the dating.

Brooke: Go for it. I've met some great people that I've become friends with. It doesn't mean that I want to do partnership with them, but I still like them in my life. It puts yourself out there just to have conversations. I think about it in the business world. If you go on an interview, it's just a practice for the real interview that you want to do in life to go on as many interviews when you're trying to find a job, same thing with dating. Go out there, put yourself out there, see the interaction you have with people.

Craig: and what's co-parenting like? As a divorced mom who shares custody with her former husband, what's working, what's not working. What would you like to see? What do you think you're doing well?

Brooke: So, I tell people when they hear that I'm divorced and if they say that, oh, I'm so sorry. I'm not sorry that I'm divorced because I do think that we're better people separated, and I tell everyone that we do co-parent well. We do put the kids first and of course; we're going to see. We're going to have differences, even if we were in the same house on ways to raise them and each child is different and our parenting styles are going to be different no matter what, but we try to communicate and communication is key in this, the only person that's going to suffer the kids if are mad at each other so there's no reason to be. We work through it, and we put the kids first.

Craig: Well, Brooke, you're awesome. Thanks for being here for spending time with us, for being so brave and for encouraging our listeners to take chances and to put one foot in front of the other and be resilient. I just want to tell you on behalf of everybody, who's hearing your voice, that we really appreciate you.

Brooke: Thanks so much.