

Her Way

How Mika Brzezinski became a journalist, had a family, opted out, came back and found her place on 'Morning Joe.'

BY LIESL SCHILLINGER

WHEN did you first become aware of Mika Brzezinski, the co-host of MSNBC's daily news discussion program "Morning Joe"? For the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, it was in the 1970s, when she spilled a plate of caviar on his lap. For me, it was a Decem-

ALL THINGS AT ONCE

By Mika Brzezinski with Daniel Paisner.
Illustrated. 232 pp.
Weinstein Books. \$24.95.

ber morning in 2007, as I listened to the Carter-era statesman Zbigniew Brzezinski discussing Benazir Bhutto's assassination. The anchorwoman addressed him as "Daddy." Daddy? I looked up from my pancakes.

But for four million YouTube viewers and countless others, the Mika moment came half a year earlier, in June 2007 — early in the "Morning Joe" run — when Brzezinski refused to lead the news roundup with a report on Paris Hilton. She tried to light the script on fire, then to tear it up; finally she put it through a shredder.

Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to *the Book Review*.

It was, a fan e-mailed, "the shred heard around the world." Who was this rebel on the news desk? How had she ended up on Joe Scarborough's program? And why hadn't this newswoman — possessed of clear charisma and ability — had a more visible public profile before?

Brzezinski's memoir, "All Things at Once," written with Daniel Paisner, explains both the unusual circumstances of her childhood and her struggle to build a career in television media while raising a family.

Brzezinski married the investi-

Brzezinski's questioning will be familiar to all women who shoulder the triple load of career, motherhood and guilt.

gative reporter Jim Hoffer when the two were fledgling reporters in Connecticut. About five years later, "zipping around like a wild windup toy" as she juggled a job on the overnight shift at CBS with the needs of their toddler and their 4-month-old, she fell down a staircase while hold-



ing the newborn. The baby broke a femur in the fall and went into shock. With devastating candor,

Brzezinski describes her terror as she awaited the doctors' prognosis. (The child made a complete recovery.) "How could I have let myself get so run-down, so exhausted at work that I would fumble over my own feet and fall down a steep flight of stairs with my newborn in my arms?" she writes. It's a question that has no answer, but which is asked, in infinite permutations, by all women who shoulder the triple load of motherhood, career and guilt.

"All Things at Once" follows Brzezinski through her professional chutes and ladders — the freelance gigs, the graveyard shifts, the drama (covering 9/11), the dreariness (puff segments on shoes) — the only constant being the precariousness of her em-

ployment. In 2006, on her 39th birthday, she was abruptly and "arbitrarily" fired from CBS. Her stunned reaction was to quit the work force and become a full-time mother. But soon after opting out, she found her younger daughter, then 8, sitting on the floor in a "knees-up fetal position," distressed over her mother's lost career. She decided, she writes, that "it was important for them to see me fail and then come out the other side."

TURNING down an offer for a grueling full-time-plus position at ABC, she took a part-time job at MSNBC that gave her flexibility. It was there that Joe Scarborough bumped into her in 2007 and drafted her to be his sidekick on "Morning Joe." Scarborough is a conservative Republican, of course, while Brzezinski's politics are more liberal; but he liked her professionalism and her "snarkiness." Now the two bicker like an old — and very well-informed — married couple over the headlines every day, their lively pushback waking their breakfast audience before the coffee's even brewed.

Brzezinski writes that having joined "Morning Joe," she felt at age 40 as if "I was back at the Brzezinski family dinner table, fighting to make myself heard. . . . It was exactly where I belonged." She became, she says, "Mother, wife, journalist. All things at once." □