



2 of us

JASON + MARY STEVENS

When former Australian rugby league player turned TV presenter Jason Stevens, 38, was seven, his father walked out, leaving his mum, Mary, now 64, to raise four young children on her own. A year later, Jason's sister Vanessa was seriously injured when she was hit by a car.

JASON: I don't have a lot of childhood memories, but what I do remember is that Mum was the shining light in my life. My mum and dad had an unstable relationship and there was a lot of tension in the house when he was around. My mum did the best she could at providing for my siblings and me [Angie, now 35, Vanessa, 37, and Paul, 40], but with my dad always coming and going, it was never going to be easy.

Dad had already moved on by the time Vanessa was hit by a car [in 1981]. I was eight at the time. I didn't see her get hit, but my sister Angie did; she was holding her hand. Vanessa and Angie were crossing the road to call my brother and me from playing cricket. It was very traumatic; it still affects me.

Vanessa was in hospital for a long time and her life was on the line. It was a very serious injury. I recall the doctors painting the worst-case scenario for Vanessa and my mum just refusing to believe Vanessa wasn't going to pull through. You know, when you see a boxer who's received that knockout blow and they are wobbling all over the place and you think, "Give up! It's over." And then somehow they find something within themselves which enables them to stay on their feet. That sums up Mum's character. Mum stood strong – she stood on her own two feet – when her entire world was falling apart.

The doctors wanted Vanessa to go into a home, but Mum asked us as a family what we should do. The answer was a resounding, "Bring her home." I think we all had to grow up a little quicker after that. Vanessa has been left with physical and intellectual disabilities, but Mum has always insisted the best way for her to heal is to give her our love as a family.

Mum is such a giving person. She set such a wonderful example to us, which was: "We are all in this together." I like that. In fact, I *love* that about our family.

When I look back at my childhood, we didn't have much money and still, to this day, I don't know how Mum made ends meet. I remember she bought me this Australian [rugby league] jersey one Christmas and it made me feel very valued. I don't know how she ever afforded it. I wasn't playing footy at the time – I was playing soccer and cricket – but it planted a seed. Years later, when I went on to represent Australia [in 1997], I gave my first jersey to her as a gift.

Mum has always nurtured my interests. But her main goal for me – for all of us – is not just success; it's about what we do with that success. It's more important to her for me to have a life that has substance than anything else.

Mum was very happy when I publicly announced [in 1995] my decision to remain

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Mother and son: (above) Mary Stevens and her big boy Jason: "As busy as he is, he is still so considerate."

celibate until I was married. [Stevens eventually wed Rebecca Ford in January 2010.] She had lived that life herself and instilled those Christian values in me. My mum is a great believer that "all things are possible". Making the transition from rugby league into TV hasn't been easy, and while many people tried to dampen my dream of succeeding in the entertainment industry, Mum has encouraged me every step of the way. I don't think I can ever repay her for all she has done for me.

MARY: Vanessa's accident happened in the Christmas holidays. I heard the tyres screeching and then Angie came running in to get me. My husband, Ivan, and I were separated and negotiating to get back together when Vanessa had the accident, but it was all over after that; he just couldn't cope.

Of course it was difficult to raise four children on my own, but it was also very empowering for my kids because it taught them about the realities of life. Vanessa's accident made us all who we are today.

All of my kids have special gifts to offer. Jason has always been the one to lighten the mood and tell a joke. When Vanessa was first in hospital, she'd be just lying there, staring at the ceiling. Jason used to jump on her bed and tackle her until she'd smile, cry or scream. It was such good therapy.

Vanessa was in hospital for three months after her accident and so I wasn't always there for the kids; they had to grow up too fast. Jase handled things so well for his age, but I remember one day he'd had enough. He said, "I'm outta here. Pack me a sandwich. I'm leaving." He only got as far as the corner before he turned around, came back and gave me a hug. He has always had a very soft heart.

Although my dad helped me out a lot with the kids when they were young, I still had to work three jobs – I was a legal secretary, an aerobics instructor and did office work for a local real estate agent. I'll never forget the expression on Jason's face when I bought him the [Australian rugby league] jersey; he was caressing the collar and he couldn't quite believe it! He was about 14 and a well-rounded boy; those kids who picked on him at school for being chubby ate their words when he made it big in football.

I'm proud of all my kids; it's never got into my head that Jason was any more special. I was pleased when he announced he was going to remain celibate until he got married. That's how I was brought up and I was happy there wasn't going to be any more monkey business until he was married. I was confident the Lord would show him the way and I'm very happy he found Bec. She is a lovely girl and complements him.

If Jase has a weakness it is that he tries to take on too much. Sometimes when I'm talking to him I know his head is in the clouds and he's expecting 10 calls and has 10 appointments, so I cut the conversation short. I'm 64 now; I don't take anything personally. And as busy as he is, he is still so considerate. He went to the cemetery to visit my mum recently and then called me and said: "Ma, you were such a good daughter." I miss my parents, so it was nice to hear. The little things he does go beyond expectations.

I'm proud of his success in sport, and in the entertainment industry. But out of everything Jason Stevens has done in his life, the best is yet to come. **GW**