



'Being a father is a strong part of my identity'

daddy dearest

Four fathers share their thoughts about fatherhood.

Full circle Stephen Mills, 50, with Justin, eight days old.

My son and daughter from my previous marriage are 17 and nine. They live with their mother and I see a lot of them, but when Nicole and I got married in 2004 we knew we wanted to have a child together to complete our family. Parenting presents areas of growth and challenge for me; on the face of it, children are hard work, but the joy they bring is overwhelming. Being a father is a strong part of my identity.

It was distressing that Nicole struggled to conceive. She had an ectopic pregnancy that damaged a Fallopian tube and, because she was in her late 30s, we decided to go the IVF route to speed things up. We had three unsuccessful attempts. We even tried implanting a frozen embryo but that didn't work either. On our last attempt, Nicole produced only one healthy egg and this was fertilised and implanted.

We weren't very hopeful, but 10 days later, a blood test showed that she was pregnant. Elation turned to despair when we learned that her level of the hormone hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin), which should have been around 100, was a staggering 40 000. Such a high reading is consistent with an unusual condition called a molar pregnancy, in which a mass of cancerous tissue grows in the uterus, mimicking pregnancy.

Our doctor was puzzled and called for more tests. They revealed that Nicole had actually conceived naturally before the last IVF procedure. In the early weeks of pregnancy hCG levels rise rapidly, which accounted for the reading. It's extraordinary that the baby survived the harvesting of eggs and the implantation of the embryo, but he did. Justin, our very special little boy, was born on 18 May 2007.

Nicole had hoped to have a home birth. My other children were born by elective Caesarean so I took a while to accept this idea. Once I realised that it was the right choice for her, I came around and learnt the relaxation techniques with her. In the end, Justin was in

a breech position and so Nicole had to have a Caesarean.

I find the birth experience very emotional. I fainted when my first child was born but this time I watched Justin's birth with great excitement. We didn't know what gender to expect and had two names ready. His feet came out first and then the rest of him. "It's Justin," I told Nicole and we both burst into tears.

When I held him, about half an hour later, he felt like a precious, fragile china doll. He was just eight days old when this picture was taken, and although we were tired and irritable, I am so glad that the moment was captured.

Nicole has come into her own with motherhood and my older children have been loving and supportive. They helped choose Justin's name and have been quite involved, so all round it's been a really positive experience.

Nicole turns 40 in August and although we wouldn't rule out having another baby, we definitely won't do IVF again. If it happens, it happens. We are fortunate to have a strong infrastructure at home, thanks to the support of our wonderful housekeeper, Marie.

We live in a security village between Paarl and Groot Drakenstein in the Cape – it's a beautiful, healthy place for a child to grow up. My family will always come first and my role is to do the best I can to keep them safe.

I'm a keen sportsman: I run and swim and have done 15 consecutive Argus Cycle Tours. I'd like my children to be physically active. Nicole and I have agreed that there will be no TV for Justin for two years and that after that it will be strictly controlled.

I believe in teaching by example. I'm not a strict disciplinarian, I'm a bit soft! Nicole is a little firmer – we balance each other. We discuss everything and I hope that we will instil feelings of security and trust in our children.' – As told to Catherine Eden

❖ Stephen Mills works as a portfolio manager for an asset management company.

First time around

Chris du Plessis, 50, with Lara, 1.



I'm fifty. This is my first child. Saying it has changed my life is like calling the Atlantic a "rather large body of water". But being unceremoniously – though gleefully – ripped from my firmly set course in life was not the primary upheaval.

As a South African, child-spawning carries a broader responsibility than merely looking after the new arrival. We have to consider factors that new fathers elsewhere on the globe might scoff at. Like how we get the child to relative safety (i.e. away from the abject mayhem of Johannesburg).

My partner, Anina, suggested Knysna, where her parents live – and even though I hate the sea (too damn wet, too bloody noisy, etc.), the specs looked rather good. For one, it had a severely attractive murder count: only 48 were reported in the entire Eden district, which stretches from Mossel Bay to Plett, in the nine months preceding our arrival. And, apart from a relatively sane sister who lives on a Greek island and believes in little forest people, I have no living relatives – so an extended family also made sense.

Besides the chaos, I had been quite content where I was. A freelance journalist doing the preprandial amble down to the bar I own just around the corner from my house in Melville – a snug little Mozambican pub where everyone knows your name. But I didn't do what Lot's wife did. I never looked back.

Less physical changes also occurred. My first sobering insight was at the hospital when I saw Lara being held aloft by the surgeon. As I cut her umbilical chord, I did not feel even vaguely the way I thought I would. Not for a single second did it occur to me that this child was mine to be moulded in my image. As I towelled off her tiny body, it was clear that she was already a perfect little individual who had to cultivate enough resilience to survive on her own.

Granted, I had made a contribution (a small spurt of semen at the right place and time – really no big deal). And I was happy to be a vehicle for this little person's path through the impending turmoil. So I would act as shield. But I was completely taken aback by how desperately I wanted to do that. Certainly a knight's move for someone who never really wanted to do anything with much enthusiasm, except maybe to fret. Or sleep to stop fretting.

Time will tell how well I manage. I am chuffed that I had an adequate dose of debauchery before we had our little daughter, and happier still that I waited until I was semi-retired. For it is the most pleasing thing in the world to watch her astounding development on a daily basis – to see her make one more muscle work, slurp up yet another overwhelming image, experiment with a new sound as her teeth relentlessly push themselves outwards...

I haven't changed too much. I still cry. Only, whereas before anger and frustration (at, say, waiting too long for my beer) alone could moisten my eyes, I now find myself holding back a tear when the BBC's "Supernanny" bids farewell to another less-troubled household.

Instead of the cacophony of breaking bottles, sirens and the screams of another hapless crime victim, I now wake up to a vista of the lagoon (thankfully, we avoided the sea view) and bushbuck grazing on the lawn.

All said, it's a helluva thing, this. In fact, I might just pull my weary bones together and get my girl to come help me make another one.

❖ Chris du Plessis is a freelance journalist, television producer and bar-owner.

PHOTOGRAPH: BERENCK VAN STEENBERGEN

Second chances

Zakes Mda, 59, is a father of five and stepfather of three.



Zakes Mda in 2002 with, clockwise from top left, Neo, then 30, Zukile, 10 and Zukiswa, 6.



It occurred to me last night, as I drove my wife and five children around in our minivan, that I have been in the fatherhood business for 36 years, a journey that has transformed me from a scoundrel to a human being in three stages. I had taken the children, ranging in age from seven to 15, to a water park two hours' drive from home where they spent the rest of the day. For me this is the third stage of fatherhood after three stepchildren joined my family a year ago, adding to the two biological children that the court placed in my custody after an acrimonious divorce. It is a stage of patience and selfless love. It is also a stage where my greatest joy comes from giving others joy. It has not always been like that.

My first stage happened when, at 23, I met beautiful identical twins in a Lesotho village, fell in love with both of them and ended up marrying one when she fell pregnant. I was ill-prepared for marriage, let alone fatherhood. I spent the days working as a bank clerk and the nights partying. I viewed parenting as my wife's responsibility. The arrival of two more children did not reform me. I continued to be a distant father.

The fact that those children, who are now adults in their thirties, turned out well is no credit to me but is definitely a credit to my ex-wife, who was a good mother and is a good person. It is also a credit to my own parents who helped look after the children while I roamed the world in search of theatre.

Thankfully, as the years went by I grew closer to these children. Today we are best buddies.

Very few fathers get a second chance to redeem themselves. I got mine in my second marriage. This second stage of fatherhood – with a son and a daughter – saw me giving up alcohol, nicotine

and all my previous debauchery. I became more of a hands-on parent than my wife. I was a de facto single father. My wife was either living abroad or working in a distant city while I looked after the children in Johannesburg. Not only did I take them to their piano and swimming lessons but I had to nurse them back to health when they got sick. I attended parent-teacher meetings where I was usually the only man.

After my second divorce, I became a full-time Mr Mom. My priorities changed. Writing came second to cooking meals and doing laundry (a few years ago we moved to the US, where we don't have servants). I discovered that fatherhood, particularly hands-on parenting, humanised me and imbued my writing with greater insight. My children provide me with material for my fiction. Some of their utterances find their way into my novels verbatim. Indeed, the first page of my very first novel was written on Christmas Day 15 years ago, when I was at home looking after my four-month-old son while his mother was at church. It was written between changing nappies and feeding the baby.

Fatherhood has taught me the values of generosity, tolerance and compassion. In my late fifties, when my friends are brooding grandfathers, I am enjoying a new lease of life taking five kids to bowling alleys and music lessons. An evening spent watching my 15-year-old son playing basketball is not wasted.

It is midday. I must stop writing now and prepare the Sunday lunch. On today's menu is rice noodles cooked with tofu shirataki in a glazed sauce and served with wasabi vegetables.

❖ Zakes Mda, 59, is a South African writer working as a professor of creative writing at Ohio University.

PHOTOGRAPHS: IMAGES 24, IMAGES24/IRONNE KWESI

The empty nest

Andrew Buckland, 54, has three sons.



Andrew Buckland with his wife Janet and youngest son, Daniel, now 27. Andrew and Daniel are currently performing together in the Cirque du Soleil show 'Love in Las Vegas'.

I was 20 years old when Matthew was born. He is now 33. His mother Janet and I met as students at the Rhodes Drama department. Let's just say that she was impossible to ignore. Five months later, we were married.

I was typical of the worst kind of Rhodesian ruggie-bugger in those days – loud and full of beer. But the day I discovered drama and cut my first-team rugby socks into legwarmers – and started my romantic journey with Janet – my life changed. I left that other world behind.

When Matthew was born, Janet and I would walk to drama rehearsals with him on my back and put him to sleep in a corner of the theatre. We had no clue about how difficult it should have been, so it was all quite easy. And we became better at it every day. So much so that, looking back, it's hard to remember any really difficult times. We ran a strict household. The only way we could survive as students was to make sure that every day was regulated. We consulted about everything. We established boundaries. We insisted that the boys understood that the difference between them and the world began with us. They really had to fit into our way of life. They were part of a system.

Luke was born two years after Matthew, and four years after that, in 1980, Daniel came into the world. In 1982 we moved to Johannesburg from Grahamstown. We had absolutely no money, yet the more the children grew and the more we could communicate, the more the rewards increased. It was sheer joy just to know they were there.

I felt I could relate to them. My father had a very Edwardian upbringing and he was a relatively older father. He married at 39 and seemed remote and severe. As a young boy, I was sometimes scared of him. It was only when he started ageing that I began to see how gentle he really was, and to understand his sense of humour.

I always swore I would never be severe, but I think I was a bit. In hindsight, it's clear that I was sometimes distant or hard on the boys. Janet and I were both strict, but consistent, even when the children were very small. But that meant there was no need for heavy discipline when they grew older. We had mutual respect.

And now they're all out of the house. Matthew and Bridget, his partner, have their own child, Isabel, who is nearly two. Their visits are treats that we plan our lives around. I can't help feeling the loss now that they're gone! Daniel's singing ... Matthew's irrepressible laugh ... Luke's interminable questions ... I'm not used to missing them.

The memories come flooding back: when Matthew, aged four, lost his slippers and wrote us a note saying he was running away to get out of trouble. Or when Daniel, at 12, got sloshed playing a drinking game. He was so apologetic – 'I'm sorry, Dad' – that my heart broke for him. And the pride when Luke, whose teachers complained that he didn't concentrate and was below average, got a first-class honours degree in philosophy, then a master's and then a fellowship for a doctorate.

Before our offspring arrive, fathers have no idea what it'll mean. But the planet shifts when they are born. We are flabbergasted with love for them. You are in a different place now and nothing will ever be the same as it was before. – As told to Nia Magoulianiti-McGregor

♣ Andrew Buckland, 54, is associate professor of drama at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. xxxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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