



Single dads

We take our hats off to single dads who are raising incredible women – with a little help from their friends.

SHANE BILSTON (48)

'I kind of like it when they side against me!'

in May 2007 my wife, Debbie, died after falling from a viewpoint high up in the mountains. She was just 50. We have two daughters, Zoe and Tara, and we had the rest of our lives mapped out as a deeply connected family. Before she died, we had made plans to live in Spain for a year. She died six weeks before we were due to leave. The three of us left anyway and we are still here in Barcelona.

Apart from the mourning process and the huge devastation the three of us felt, I still had to be the parent. I think the hardest thing for me has been that there is no sounding board any more. I hate having to make decisions by myself. I can, but I don't like it. I think for the girls, there is no variety: it's just me!

I also really dislike having to do all the chores and deciding what to cook for dinner. Not that I never chipped in when Deb was alive, but it gets really mundane (most women will be nodding their head when they read this!). We don't have home help, so we try to share the load, but I end up doing most of it.

There is conflict when you have two teenage daughters in the home, but we diffuse it with laughter and reason. They are normal, chipper, adventurous girls who have opinions and needs. I treat them like adults. I kind of like it when they side against me!

I want them to make their own mistakes, and that means having to let go of some of my preconceived ideas. I believe that if conflict sits on the shoulders of respect then the process is usually healthy. When Debs was alive we had a voting system in the house and it was usually kind of equal, but now I only have one vote to their two – I think I am going to up my stakes!

Neither of them has brought home a boyfriend yet, but we will take that as it comes.

Friends have been fantastic and so have the rest of my family, but I turn to Zoe for lots of support. She is very level-headed and seems to have a maturity about her that reminds me of Debbie. It's not unhealthy or anything. We just chat a lot and I get strength from that.

I am a bit shy to talk about all the girl stuff: they are more open than me. If I don't know the answers, then we get hold of special women friends who can chat to them about it. I guess the most I can ask from life is that when they get older, I can be in the background standing by and watching over them.

TARA (13)

I think my dad is peculiar! He thinks differently to most dads and we certainly do different things. He has done so many things in his life. Did you know he is a paramedic and has saved so many lives? My dad is a great debater and we discuss all sorts of world issues. I want to be a writer when I am older so I'm interested in all sorts of things and my dad knows a lot of things. He's a cool dad.

ZOE (15)

My mum used to be the strict one, so by comparison my dad is very chilled. He does have a limit and puts his foot down on the odd occasion but he generally leaves things up to us. When we misbehave, he takes away the computer or the television, but that's about it. We are all good mates. It was very, very difficult and sad after mum died but we have now settled into a way of life that is fine. I am looking forward to going home and being near old friends.



their girls



NITHIA PILLAY (32)

grandparents and love her unconditionally, and now we live a very connected family life.

My ex-wife's parents and family have always played a role in Shailee's life and my sister Natasha continues to provide a great influence. All these layers of love surround us and make life really rich. Most importantly, Shailee has a healthy relationship with her biological mum, Marilyn.

Parenting is very active – it takes up space and time and one has to sacrifice many things to receive this great gift. I gave up freedom and the potential of being a great sportsman. But I don't regret any of that. My greatest wish for her is that she is able to achieve what she wants in life. I want her to grow up knowing that there is nothing she can't do.

'I finished my degree while Shailee was sleeping at night'

For a number of good reasons, Shailee came to live with me when my ex-wife and I got divorced. I was 27 and Shailee was eight years old at the time.

There have been challenges – for a long time, I was the only dad at school events! – and I had to restructure my career a little. But apart from that, it has been the adventure of my life.

When my ex-wife fell pregnant, I had to mature overnight from being a carefree varsity student to being a father. I finished my degree while Shailee was sleeping at night.

I had to find a softer side to cope with a daughter's needs. I had to learn how to juggle a career during the day and then come home to a little person each night. I am not sure how single mums do it!

I relied on close friends (especially Manny and Mark, who gave me great support), and my parents have been remarkable. We were living in Durban when Shailee came to live with me, and my mum came down from Jo'burg for long periods to help us.

I found myself 'screening' potential girlfriends – a bit unfair I suppose, but there was always Shailee to think of. Don't even ask about boyfriends for Shailee – I'm sure I'll be having a difficult time come her first date.

I then fell in love with Katie; we married and the three of us moved to Jo'burg. Shailee and Katie accepted and loved each other from the start and they continue to enjoy a beautifully healthy relationship. Shailee calls her 'Mama' and Katie is an additional mother figure in Shailee's life. Katie's parents have become her

SHAILEE (13)

My dad is so charming! I just love him so much. He is confident, successful and caring and I am *soooooo* proud of him. I remember him working at night on his university degree – I must have been about seven or eight at the time. What a dad, hey?

Katie is awesome. My mom and I also see and chat to each other, so I guess I can call myself a lucky chip having two mums and loads of family around all looking out for me.

I can talk to my dad about pretty much everything and Katie and I chat about the girl stuff, so there is a lot of talking going on!

And that's good – because it means we don't fight very much.



LEIGH SHEPERD (47)

'We run on love here, not fear'

When my ex-wife met someone else and moved to Durban in 2006, our daughters were well settled at their schools and so they decided to live with me. All in all, it was an easy transition. The only casualty was my girlfriend (now ex): she and my daughter just did not get on, and yes, blood is thicker than water!

Obviously there is less freedom for me having the girls live with me. It is easier now that they are older – I have time to train and to work the hours I need to. Kelsey is 21 and she has her driver's licence, so she is able to help with lifting. My girls look after each other well.

They speak to their mum every night on the phone. I am lucky in that I can leave all the girl-talk to her. There are things daughters will only tell their mums; that's just the way it is. I am not much of a talker anyway. I know that when either one of them is sad or having a difficult time, they are there for each other.

We live and function very comfortably together. There doesn't seem to be much antagonism or angst, and I don't have to discipline them or draw a line. We run on love

here, not fear. I like Kelsey's boyfriend and Nicole is a bit young to have one. They are both level-headed, sensible girls so I trust them out in the big world.

It's a little difficult for me to sustain a relationship with anyone else. I completely understand the difficulties that a single mother must go through: battling on without maintenance, working a full-time job and all the parenting falling onto their laps. I think it's harder being a single woman raising children.

Nicole has decided to return to her mum at the end of this term, and go and live in Durban. It is her decision and as difficult as it may be, I have to respect that. Being younger, she probably needs her mum more. It's been a gift having this time with my girls. Not many men get it.

KELSEY (21)

It was a major change living with my dad! My mum is like most mums – she is more emotional and so living with dad is a bit more breezy. When we first moved in with him he had a girlfriend and that didn't quite work out, but now it's just the three of us and it's cool.

Dad and I are good mates but there are things I prefer to discuss with my mum. Dad gets to know stuff on a need-to-know basis. And, of course, there is Nicole, my little sister and greatest friend. I'm going to miss her so much, but thank goodness for e-mail and Facebook.

I cook and wash up and do all those kind of chores, and it's fine. It's part of the deal, I guess. Thankfully, Dad likes my boyfriend and we have no issues over that. I am 21 after all!

We don't have much conflict, but if something gets really bad then we have to chat – and we do. My wish for him? I want him to be happy.

NICOLE (15)

I was 13 when I began living with my dad and it has been quite hard. I miss my mum very much. I need structure in my life. She is that for me, so I have decided to go back and live with her in Durban. My dad wasn't that happy about it, but he has accepted it. Of course, I will miss him and my sister.

He is a fit, strong dad and I love him. We are all comfortable in our home together. My wish for him is that he does well in his sport. ♣

PHOTOGRAPH OF BILSTON FAMILY: SUPPLIED