



# Finding their way

Sometimes the most beautiful lessons in life are learnt only after going through the unthinkable. Auckland parents **Mimi Gilmour Buckley** and **Stephen Buckley** share their incredible journey with us

WORDS: HOLLY JEAN BROOKER PHOTOGRAPHER: ALICE VEYSEY

It's one of those love at first sight stories that makes your heart melt. Guy meets girl at bar, they connect and the rest is history. Stephen explains, "I was working in media, I'd just interviewed will.i.am and was at an after-party. This confident woman struts in with power shoulders and walks up to me. We get talking and she starts discussing PNLs (profit net loss) and I thought, 'Woah, this girl is smart'. I was captivated."

Six years later, with forces combined, the couple are navigating marriage, parenting and business with their trademark optimism, vision and determination – characteristics that have become a vital part of their story.

When the couple met, Mimi, a restaurateur, was in the process of selling out of her eatery chain, Mexico, and launching her new restaurant concept, Burger Burger. Today, there are Burger Burger restaurants throughout New Zealand and Stephen has stepped in to run the business side of things. Mimi's work focus is on her newly launched marketing consultancy, Mates Agency, and another fresh project, Braveface – a community of motivated humans with informed perspectives, dedicated to building resilience and happier, healthy lives (starting with skincare and a podcast!). Four years ago, with dynamic careers mid-flight, the couple also embarked on the journey of parenting. Their path has not been straightforward and these short few years have brought Stephen and Mimi more challenges to navigate than most parents encounter in an entire lifetime.

## WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS EXPECTED

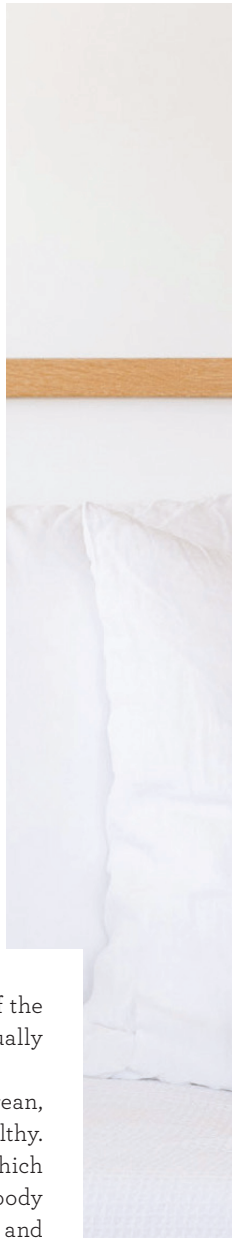
While becoming parents for the first time is incredibly exciting, it is also daunting and Mimi acknowledges that many of us go into motherhood with our blinkers on.

"No one really talks about how unrealistic this dream of the perfect birth, the perfect baby and the perfect family actually is," reflects Mimi.

"When Olympia was born via an emergency Caesarean, she was absolutely beautiful and seemed fine and healthy. But within hours she started having mini seizures which the doctors couldn't explain straight away; at times her body was showing signs of seizing but her brain was fine, and at other times her brain was seizing and her body was still. She was put on an ECG for three days and received an MRI the day after she was born. I can clearly remember our obstetrician and her neurologist coming into my room in the hospital to talk to us with tears in their eyes. I remember thinking, 'I just want my mum and dad!'. Dad's a doctor and flew straight over from Sydney to support us. The news we received was devastating," recalls Mimi.

"The doctor said, 'I'm so sorry. It's one of the worst brain injuries I've seen in a long time.' Hearing that news, life just exploded right before my eyes. Olympia was diagnosed with quadriplegic spastic cerebral epilepsy – we were told she would never walk, never talk. I have a few blanks, it was a lot to take in as new parents. We were in hospital for 22 days, with doctors bombarding us with information about what could happen, palliative care, worst case scenarios ... it was intense. She was my baby!"

The couple's strategic skills came into play immediately and they spent hours discussing their future. Everything had changed in an instant, as Mimi reflects. "We had to figure out what we were going to do. Stephen was researching everything he possibly could to understand more. I was feeding every three hours and pumping seven times a day. It was the only thing I felt I could control, I became obsessed with it."





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During this time, Mimi and Stephen’s family and friends surrounded them with support, offering company, food and camaraderie. “Everyone was grieving. It was a huge shock and incredibly upsetting to see our baby in seizures constantly. I went through waves of feeling really angry and although everyone was so kind and caring, I had these weird feelings of wanting to just yell at everyone that they don’t understand! Looking back, I now know that people don’t need to fully understand to love you and support you. I’m so glad they were present and there with us,” Mimi explains.

#### **FROM ONE ADJUSTMENT TO ANOTHER**

That first year of parenting was gruelling as Mimi and Stephen navigated the steep learning curves of parenting in general, while also striving to understand Olympia’s needs and constantly sourcing the right medical care and specialists to support her. Most mothers know the struggle of sleep deprivation. However for Mimi, with a baby with high needs, the exhaustion was extreme, pushing her to her limit. Olympia had spasms throughout the night and vomited often, so needed constant attention to ensure she didn’t choke in her sleep. It simply wasn’t sustainable for Mimi and Stephen to carry on without help.

When Olympia was around five months old, Mimi had what she describes as a nervous breakdown from the sheer exhaustion and strain. “A friend rang me to check in, and I told her how exhausted I was. She suggested I get a night nanny. I’m pretty stubborn and determined so straight away said, ‘No, I can do this.’ A few hours later I came around to the idea and decided to call up Karitane for a night nurse. I ended up sobbing down the phone, telling them everything. The nurse said she wouldn’t be able to get someone to me for a few days, but during the conversation she realised how bad the situation was and decided we needed help immediately. So that night we had our night nurse arrive, a beautiful woman called Jayne who came over four nights a week for an entire year. It was life changing.”

A night nurse isn’t government funded and doesn’t come cheap, but Mimi reflects, “Having Jayne stay saved us. We



spent a large chunk of what was supposed to be our house deposit on her, and it was honestly the best money I have ever spent.”

Clearly not a family who shy away from challenges, two years after Olympia's dramatic arrival her little sister, Octavia, was born. Having a second child wasn't a decision the couple took lightly. Mimi reflects, "I think I have always known that what happened to Olympia was an exceptional circumstance. I spoke to many doctors about it and most of them assured me that it was highly unlikely to happen again. We wanted a bigger family so I had a little chat with myself and decided that as long as I had good support around me, I would be safe!"

When pregnant with Octavia, Mimi chose to use her previous obstetrician. "I was reasonably calm for most of the pregnancy, but towards the end I started having wee panic attacks. In these moments I just booked myself in for an extra scan and medical check for reassurance. Octavia was also born via scheduled C-section at 37 weeks, just to ensure nothing could go wrong during the labour."

#### HELP IS AT HAND

The adjustment to motherhood is difficult for many women and an area Mimi feels passionate to speak into. She explains, "Often, as parents, there is heartache. It's hard. It's different from how we expected and we should be honest about that. You know, I struggled with the changes in my body. It changed how I viewed myself sexually. I was sleep deprived, and breastfeeding felt really unnatural for me."

An advocate for professional counselling, Mimi has seen a therapist regularly since becoming a mother, to help her process her emotions and thoughts. Having struggled



with depression in the past, going through a nervous breakdown when Olympia was younger was especially tough on Mimi. “There was a lot of crying. It was really confronting for me. I’m very strategic and creative and I found it so hard to be in that place of weakness. I couldn’t function like usual. I knew to go and see my doctor and book regular therapy.”

“It was hard for Stephen because I’m usually very capable and he understands me when I’m in that space. He stepped up, wanting to be the strong one. I think it’s hard for men to be able to let go and not cope as well though. It’s expected for the mum to find things difficult but everyone expects the dad to be fine - I think we should give them the space to acknowledge those big feelings and discuss them as openly as women do.”

The couple are both intentional about getting the support they need, when they need it. Another avenue they really appreciated was a parenting course run by Parenting Place. “We did the Baby and Toddler Years Toolbox course and loved it. It was so practical and helpful and I refer back to the notes regularly.”

#### **PULLING OUT ALL OF THE STOPS**

Mimi says the best advice she was given was from a therapist who said, “It’s okay for you to be her mama, you don’t have to be her carer as well.” Realising she didn’t have to do it all was profoundly refreshing for Mimi. “I could be her mum and let the experts and therapists do the things I wasn’t specialised in. It gave me permission to be okay with that.”

The couple work really hard to ensure their girls get the support they need, with specialist care for Olympia being a high priority. Mimi says, “I never thought I would be at this point in my life and not own our own home, but we’ve needed to invest that money into our family and that’s okay.” Olympia cannot

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move 95% of her body and at three-and-a-half years old is still fully tube fed. She can go through stages of having multiple seizures a day and the family are currently trialling new drugs plus a ketogenic diet in the hope of getting these under control.

Mimi and Stephen pay for physiotherapists to work with Olympia four days a week, helping her develop strength and movement. They also employ two nannies to help juggle childcare and multiple weekly medical appointments. “Hayley and Leanne are beautiful women and full of energy! I’ve had friends text me saying, ‘I walked past your house this morning and saw your nanny dancing and singing full bore and the girls were cracking up watching her.’”

#### **THE BEAUTY OF BRAVE**

Putting on a brave face is something Mimi has learnt to do on the toughest of days. She’s incredibly open about her struggles and is passionate about empowering other women to speak their truth.



Braveface, Mimi's latest project, is a range of skincare products that nurture your skin while teaching you how to care for your wellbeing too. Inspired by Olympia, Braveface promotes the same wellbeing practices that help Mimi cope with the challenges in her own beautiful, but busy, life. The products will come with digital resources to help the Braveface community develop life skills and strengthen resilience for when life's storms hit.

Mimi's vision? "With Braveface, it's okay to say life is hard. And it's okay to find whatever solutions are available to us, and to get the support we need. I hope to encourage people to want to change their world; to build resilience and confidence, develop themselves, understand grief, have those difficult conversations in relationships and learn how to budget! It's an opportunity for people to focus on what they can control, and learn skills to let go of what they can't."

#### THAT ELUSIVE BALANCE

Working hard is important to Mimi and she strives to do her best at everything she puts her hand to. She explains, "My parents instilled in me as a young girl that I can have anything if I have a strong work ethic. Nothing

is owed to you in life - if you want it, you need to go out and get it. A lot of people talk about balance, but I honestly don't think there is such a thing as balance if you want to succeed in business and be a parent. I definitely have days when I feel the balance is off, but so do most parents I know. It's hard to find someone who sits there saying, 'I am doing everything exactly right in these two areas of my life.' So why punish ourselves if we're not saying that either? I try really, really hard and do the best I possibly can in both parenting and work, and I think that's what's really important."

Mimi reflects on the family's journey thus far with inspiring perspective. "I have loads of mothers reach out with questions and encouragement and it's amazing to know everyone loves and supports you, even if they don't live it and don't truly understand it. I'm almost embarrassed by how I felt about special needs before I had Olympia. It's a beautiful life in so many ways. It's terrifying, but it makes you see the world in a new way. As a couple, it's brought us closer together. It's opened our eyes and I know it has opened the eyes of our family and friends, even our team at work, to how beautiful it truly is." •

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