

Maria Kondilis, 45, is a single mother of two, including George, her blind and handicapped son, who needs constant care. Her mother, Laura Stavrow, 68, was widowed at 51, after caring for her wheelchairbound husband for 25 years. Laura now cares for her grandson almost full time; Maria visits daily, as well as helping her own daughter, who has five children.

# 2 of us

Maria Kondilis & Laura Stavrow



**M**aria. Coming from a Greek background mum was strict. She did the disciplining. Das was in a wheelchair with multiple sclerosis. He was a beautiful man, kind. But we had to feed him, look after him.

We had a takeaway shop in Surry Hills, in Sydney. Mum ran it, we worked there. I got married when I was 14. I went to a Greek dance, and met my husband. He was 17. We didn't go out at all. He asked my parents, and I went to court for it. I wish mum had said no. But she didn't mind at all: grandkids and everything. At the time I was happy... I thought I'd have a better life. He turned to be an alcoholic. I had my daughter when I was 15, Georgie when I was 16.

My husband was a good person. But when he drank he'd hit me and pull my hair. I never told my mum; I hid it. I was divorced at 18. I was a child! I raised my children on my own. But mum was always supportive. She'd take George overnight, for a month; she's always been great. But he started to just want to be with me, so I had him for about four years straight. I reached breaking point. It was terrible, I couldn't cope. I arranged respite care four days a month, but mum hated that. She wouldn't talk to me for weeks. "You're no good. Why do you do that?"

And then I really broke down. I thought "I just

**"I know it sounds terrible, but I'm too young to sit at home with George alone... every day, year after year. Nobody came to visit me... Only Mum"**

a hand at all. Only mum.

Georgie's been with her nearly four years. I take him home some days. But he's mostly with her. I live close, I come every day to help. She's much stricter than me. She won't give him a glass of water if he doesn't play the piano or shower himself. He's improved heaps. He's calm and more independent. I'm so grateful. He loves her so much, I come second: thank God, thank God. I felt trapped with him, but my mother's not trapped. She goes everywhere with him.

Her positivity is her best characteristic. I know

from myself: I'm a bit negative. But she has huge amounts of happiness, energy. It's a very good way of living. The other day George had tests [to assess his suitability for a future bionic eye implant]. I thought of putting it off. I didn't want to hear bad news. But she supported me. Otherwise I wouldn't even have gone. And it was good news. He might see shadows. But just so he's not dragging off me; so we can walk as two people.

I feel like I never had a life. And the worst thing is not having a partner to support me. Mum's not like that. She's never been with another man; never wanted one. Because she's such an outgoing person she's had a lot of offers, but she says, "No, I loved your dad too much".

I can't bring myself to think about anything happening to her. I don't drink, because I get very emotional. About George, my mum - I drive myself silly. I keep thinking I want to go and see someone, because what would I do without her? It's in my mind, like a panic. But it's silly. She might be here longer than me.

**L**aura. As a little girl, Maria very outgoing, very friendly. A very good worker. Washing and cleaning. Very mature. She grown up with a sick father, she worked before school. When she was 14, she was like a 30-year old.

I'm pleased when she gets married. Her husband, this boy the best boy to come into my house, my heart. But he can't control his nerves because he grown up with one drunk father. Maria say, "If I marry I have a good time". But not a good time. When the doctor say to Maria "blind", in the hospital with George, he was drunk, my stupid son-in-law, and he break the teeth of her. "Why you bring blind baby, blind boy"? Instead of hug, the punch.

Maria is crying at first. But she's a very good mother from the beginning. A number one mother. She's like a tiger for the kids. But she is still shy - "why my baby like this?" And she's not a trainer. So when he was 21, 22, 23 George was crazy, crazy. Terrible temper from school. He broke his cup, cut all his hands.

So now, George stay with me most of the time. I take him to the parties, I take him to the dances. He had to do what I say. With me he can't be angry, because I'm training him. I don't like him to go to respite because what happens. He sit, do nothing, get fat, everybody comes and push him. He used to go to school, and people jump on him, and he gets frightened, he can't see, he get angry and break everything.

I don't mind for Maria to have a freer life now. I want to see her happy. She doesn't go out by herself. She come with me, but I'm not going to the young parties. She no have a nice life; if she has a nice life with her husband, like me, maybe different. I have a lovely life with my husband. We married nearly eight years when he gets sick. I piggyback him up and down the stairs when he is in the wheelchair. He was an angel.

Maria now is a very tight person. Different from when she was young. She's meeting some men, but no one good. You know the mens today. They just look for your body, they don't look for you. And Maria never give compliments for the men. She only thinks of the house, the kids, the family.

I feel sorry for her, doing so much. I say to her - "You have to worry for yourself too". She not dressed nice I say "Listen! I don't want to feel shame; I'm dressed nice and you're my child look terrible. If you come to me you have to dress beautiful. When you dress nice, you feel nice. And she say "Why? I'm not going to work, I'm not going anywhere, why?"

Mothers, daughters, we fight, yes, but she cry, I cry. If my prayers were answered, I want Maria to be happy. She is crying to me, and together we are not going well. She comes here, and she wants to clean. I say, "Don't clean, sit down, have a coffee. I want to talk to you". She never stop, that's a sickness. Too much cleaning. But I love Maria and she is crazy for me too. She's got a good heart.

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