



TWO OF US

STORY BY Nicole Partridge | PHOTOGRAPH BY Nic Walker

Chelsea Bonner (right), 43, founded Bella, a modelling agency with a twist after forging her own path as a plus-sized model. Her glam mum, Nola Clark, 65, is her best friend after having survived her daughter's turbulent teenage years.

CHELSEA: Mum and I have always been best buddies. My earliest memories of her are of cuddles on my parents' big brass bed when I was five, and watching her cook brekky in an oversized T-shirt and no make-up. Mum was a successful model in the 1960s and '70s and wore the most outrageous clothes. But she was so chill at home despite her high profile.

She was quite the exotic creature for a Melbourne suburban primary-school mum. Our dress-up box was hilarious: white vinyl knee-high boots, paisley skirts and crazy wigs. She'd often collect me from school after a photo shoot with her hair and make-up done, looking fabulous. Kids would stare at her open-mouthed. "Wow, Chelsea, your mum is so cool!" they'd say. I remember taking home a good-looking, sporty boy from my primary school. I was in love with him, but he was completely besotted by Mum. He never stopped talking about her. Ten years later, he was still asking, "How's your mum?"

As a little girl I knew I didn't look like her but it wasn't until later that I realised how different our body shapes were. Mum never pointed

that out, but other people did and it was hurtful. Nevertheless, I had seen the lifestyle modelling afforded and it was attractive. At 14, I turned up to a modelling agency fully expecting to follow in Mum's footsteps, but was told I was too big and needed to lose weight. Around the same time we relocated as a family to Queensland. Mum and Dad's marriage was falling apart, my hormones were raging, and I was questioning everything: "Who am I? Why do I have to get a period? Is there a God?"

Poor Mum really didn't know how to handle me. I didn't know how to handle me. I started taking appetite suppressants and stealing Dad's alcohol and cigarettes [her father is actor Tony Bonner]. I recall saying to myself, "Chelsea, you're tragic and feeding into this celebrity-child-lunatic-thing." Mum was terrified by my behaviour, but I never felt any judgment.

In my 20s, I moved back to Melbourne, got a gig doing plus-size modelling and, at 29, established my own agency, Bella. Mum asked how I was going to live. I was resolute: "I am trying to change opinions; I don't care about making money." Mum ended up my greatest supporter.

Today, we're closer than ever. We travel together a lot and have the same sense of adventure and silly sense of humour. We've sung in karaoke bars in New Orleans, danced on tables for her 50th and swum in our bra and undies through a water feature to get back to a hotel room in Noosa – drunk, of course.

Once I was at a Miami cocktail bar with her and one of my top models, Robyn Lawley, when this handsome young guy approached us. I was thinking, "Here we go – I'll have to protect Robyn from this." But he sat down next to Mum and started chatting her up. It was too funny!

Last year, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and was in so much pain I could hardly walk. Mum accompanied me to the US for treatment; on the first day I couldn't stop vomiting. Mum was terrified for me. On the second day, as the drugs kicked in, I began hallucinating. The treatment room was warped and wavy and Mum looked just like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings* – big head and bulging eyes. We both thought this was hilarious. Thankfully, the treatment worked.

NOLA: I was only 22 when I had Chelsea. She was the first of my three girls and was a bright, happy baby who morphed into an independent, strong-willed little girl.

One day when Chelsea was four, I went to collect her from daycare. The teacher looked a little worried. "Um, Mrs Bonner," she said, "can I have a word?" Chelsea didn't want to participate in any of the organised activities, like reading and drawing, and had apparently rounded up a group of kids to do dress-ups. I couldn't help but laugh. Chelsea has always been like that – fearless and not afraid to take the lead.

At home, when life got a bit tumultuous in my marriage to Chelsea's father, she was supportive and protective of her sisters and me. Chelsea has always been moved by any kind of injustice and is not afraid to speak up. She shows a similar compassion for animals. I recall our cattle dog, Mrs Bates, following her around the house when she was just a toddler. When she got older, Chelsea would often bring home stray dogs.

Although she is such a beautiful girl, she developed insecurities about her body image as a teenager, which wasn't helped by the rejection from a modelling agency. I watched her confidence take a dive. Insecurity and negative self-talk crept in. I intervened, putting Chelsea through a beautician's course and teaching her basic office skills, before introducing her to friends in the modelling industry.

I remember the day she called me with the news of her first big assignment as a model: "Mum, I've been asked to do a lingerie photo shoot." I was elated: "Go for it, darling – you have a beautiful figure." She blossomed and followed her convictions by opening her own modelling agency specialising in plus-size models. It was a bold move, but that's Chelsea. She has this extraordinary ability to get on with things and give them a go.

Despite the fact Chelsea has experienced challenges growing up, struggled with her identity, married and divorced when she was in her 30s and suffered crippling fibromyalgia, she has proved she can take every negative and turn it into a positive. She's that fearless little girl rising up and taking her place in the world. ■

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