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of us

MARGARET & DWAYNE FERNANDES

to know whether he needs help. He should have somebody who can look after him. You can't go to clubs and dancing forever.

He knows we are his parents, but as he grows older I think the relationship changes [to becoming] friends. We're quite free with each other. He loves teasing his mother. He calls me "old lady" and all sorts of funny things. He is a good son and family means a lot to him. I don't think we'll be left alone in our old age. We used to worry whether he would walk and now he climbs towers! Whatever he does, he knows he has the support of his family.

DWAYNE: At the age of 16, Mum was the only person working in a family of seven. They lived in a house [in Mumbai] that was half the size of our current living room, with no running water and a community toilet. I remember stories of my mum buying the first radio in that small slum area. The entire community would come out and listen to it on a Friday night.

I still live with her, so we usually share a cup of coffee each morning and talk. But there are times when we disagree. Actually ... every day! As Indians, if we have a thought, we generally express it. So we have loud discussions on topics from marriage to house ownership to study, even tower climbs. I want to travel and see the world while I'm young, and Mum wants me to work and study. I would like to be more independent for a while prior to marriage. She worries, which is what all good mums do.

No one wakes up and says they want to be an accountant. But it's fun. The accounting degree was [my parents'] advice; they were thinking what type of job I could do long-term even if the legs give up. I do tend to resist study. I'm all about living in the moment. That's why I started tower running.

Mum means the world to me. As people we get along well; we've driven all the way up the east coast of Australia together. On those road trips, when we got to a campsite and rum was involved, there was lots of singing and dancing.

Education support officer Margaret Fernandes, 56, left India with her family in 1995. Three years ago her son, accountant and double amputee Dwayne Fernandes, 26, became hooked on the sport of stair racing, climbing such skyscrapers as Sydney Tower and the Empire State Building.

MARGARET: Dwayne was born without a fibula and all the little connecting bones in both legs. They could never tell us why. In India there are no ramps and it takes ages to get a wheelchair. I had to carry him up three floors of stairs to get to school; it was a bit tedious.

When Dwayne was 10 we left India [for New Zealand and then, four years later, Australia] to give him a better life. My husband and I arrived in New Zealand with two children [Dwayne has a 19-year-old sister, Dyanne] and \$3000. It was a big decision but we knew we didn't have a choice.

Dwayne's feet couldn't take the weight of his body, so the best solution was to get them amputated. It wasn't a surprise but it was hard to come to terms with. I thought we should do one leg at a time, but Dwayne [then aged 11] told the doctor they were his legs and he wanted to have them both done together.

Seeing him so strong and confident made us think maybe it would be okay, and how right he was. He was out of hospital in three days and on his [artificial] feet in a month. He could then do all the things everyone else could do and more: without his feet he could

swim better than with them – he was like a fish!

The first time he climbed up a tower in 2008, I thought he was a bit crazy. I said, "What's wrong with you?" He said, "I'll do it", and was the first double amputee to climb Sydney Tower. You've got to admire him. He could have taken the easy way out, but he hasn't. When he puts on his artificial feet, it looks difficult, but he's used to it. He has to wear about six pairs of socks and sometimes gets blisters, but nothing stops him. He works hard that way [although] when he relaxes he's very lazy. If I don't give him a coffee, he'll do without it.

I always told Dwayne he has to study and go to university. Now I'm encouraging him to finish his CPA [Certified Public Accountant] qualification. In our social network all the kids study; it's very competitive. I'm proud of what he's achieved so far, but I would like him to balance his climbs with his education so that he has a bright future. Dwayne likes to socialise more than study, I think; he's an extrovert. He loves to go dancing. On his Facebook page he has a thousand photos of girls. I ask, "Who are they?" and he says they are just random people! But he's 26 and he hasn't found anybody. I want

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Strong bond: (above) stair-running amputee Dwayne Fernandes says his mother, Margaret, "means the world to me".

get along well; we've driven all the way up the east coast of Australia together. On those road trips, when we got to a campsite and rum was involved, there was lots of singing and dancing. But on the way, there was yelling and fighting. When you argue, she jumps from one topic to another. So you lose, because you're not progressing!

Indians are not very private, we're always in each other's faces. I'm at the age where I want space, so it complicates things. She says I should start looking for a girl, but at this stage I'm just young and having fun. I'm thinking of moving out and figuring out how to stand on my own two feet in that sense. She's being protective, as mums are, but my objective is to live in the world by myself to see if I can. I need to know if I can by myself, before I can with someone else. I know she'll miss me if I move out. I'll miss her, too. But for me to make change I need the easy option not to be there.

My profile is apparently on shadi.com [an Indian dating website]. I've supplied my parents with some pictures, and I'm like, "Go ahead, build it and have fun." But at my age I just want to cut loose for a bit. I expect to be married early, but right now I'd rather go out and climb a tower. She wants to see me studying, at all times, and believes if she's not seeing me, I'm not doing it. She's headstrong [but] she's on my side, I know that.

She's done a lot to get us over here; it's been a great journey. We're linked, so I'll need to take care of her eventually, when she's older. That's why they're worried, I guess! **GW**