

Weekend Fin

www.afr.com | 10-11 February 2018 The Well-Lived Life

Edited by Emma Connors (emma.connors@afrexmedia.com.au) and Andrew Burke (aburke@afrex.com.au)



MOTHER OF INVENTION

Family Her children have made waves with fast cars and slow food. Maye Musk's unconventional parenting style has produced a family of entrepreneurs, writes **Natasha Loder**.

Oh God, that is so horrible," grimaces Maye Musk, as though I had pointed out vermin in her son Kimbal's

impeccable new restaurant. All I had done was to ask for her views on the current fashion for raw-food diets. "I went to a raw-food restaurant and afterwards I said, 'Please take me out for a hamburger.' I couldn't eat anything."

Musk, a striking woman with cropped white hair, glowing skin and brilliant blue eyes, does not mince her words. As a dietician she has no truck with fads. As a mother – of Elon, the world's most famous inventor, Kimbal, a tech and food entrepreneur, and Tosca, a film director who recently started a streaming service to bring romance novels to television – she has a similarly robust attitude.

My kids do very extraordinary things that make sense.

Unlike most women of her generation – she is 69 – maternity has not defined Maye. She has run her own nutrition business for 45 years and has been a model for 54 years. In an era in which parents and children are ever more closely intertwined as they navigate the hazards of competitive education, she has a refreshing enthusiasm for her and her children's independence.

Thanks to business's growing enthusiasm for older models, she seems to be getting more, not less, successful. She has been on a cereal box, featured in a Beyoncé video and starred in a campaign for Virgin America. Once you have seen her unusual face, you find yourself recognising it in adverts.

Today, she is sitting in a pool of bright winter sunlight on the patio of Next Door, Kimbal's latest venture, in Longmont, Colorado. It is the day before Thanksgiving and tomorrow 30 members of the Musk family will gather for a meal Kimbal is cooking at his home in nearby Boulder.

He, on the other side of the table, has his mother's easy smile. After starting two technology companies with Elon – Zip2 and PayPal – in 2004 he became a founding father of the farm-to-table movement. He has built 13 restaurants since then and has more on the way. They specialise in unprocessed, locally sourced foods.

The highlight of lunch is the 50:50 burger – half beef, half mushroom and wholly delicious. "It's the best burger I've ever had and I love my food," Maye says with deep emphasis on the word "love" with her strong South African accent. The burger, explains Kimbal, is a path to less and better meat. "I don't think in 45 years I've ever seen anybody who ate enough vegetables," Maye adds as she tucks in.

Another stand-out dish is the gluten-free breaded calamari. Kimbal says his gluten-intolerant customers rave about it. Maye is unimpressed. "Gluten is so ridiculous. Don't invite me to a dinner with someone who is gluten-free. I ruin the party." She remembers telling someone their problem with pizza was not gluten intolerance – they just ate too much of it. Is there anything in Kimbal's fridge that his mother wouldn't approve of? He confesses to some almond milk. "It's not milk!" says Maye. "It's sugar water flavoured with almonds!"

They are united, though, on their core beliefs about food: the need for humans to eat good food and have access to it. Maye is involved with Kimbal's charity, which builds outdoor "learning-garden" classrooms in schools. There are now 400 in six major cities across America, with more on the way.

So much food is rubbish these days, and so many people's diets so poor, that foodies such as Kimbal and Maye talk about "real" food. Yet a good diet is the same as it has always been: full of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and packed with nutrition. Eating this way is how Maye, and the three Musk children, were brought up.

Yet raising children is about more than food pyramids. Parenting – one of the great subjects of our era – varies wildly, from age to age and from culture to culture, from individual to individual. Still, we all want to raise children who, among other attributes, have the independence and vision to make things happen. So how did Maye raise these three remarkable entrepreneurs?

Maye's own childhood was not a standard one. Family holidays were often spent flying



From top: Maye Musk at the Stella McCartney Autumn 2018 Presentation in Los Angeles last month; and, from left, daughter Tosca, son Kimbal, Maye, and son Elon at Maye's 50th birthday. PHOTOS: AP, NEW YORK TIMES



Above from left: Kimbal Musk, entrepreneur and brother of Elon Musk, in his restaurant Upstairs in Boulder, Colorado; SpaceX CEO Elon Musk. Right: An undated family photo of Maye with Elon (standing), Kimbal and Tosca in South Africa. Below: Tosca Musk, founder of PassionFlix Inc. Bottom: Maye at the 2017 CFDA Fashion Awards. PHOTOS: NYT, AP, ALAMY



over the Kalahari desert in Namibia in her father's single-engine plane – “mostly air-sick” – looking for a legendary lost city. The plane was her father's passion, not a rich man's toy: her parents were not wealthy but she remembers a home with mulberry trees, peaches, plums, oranges and lemons. At schools she was a “science nerd”, and teachers would send her to demonstrate mathematics to classes of older children. Her brains made her a magnet for bullies – South Africa was a rough place – but her larger and more athletic twin, Kaye, fought them off.

Independence came early, thanks to her striking features. She was modelling at 15 but expected the work to dry up by 18, so she studied dietetics. By 21 she had her own practice.

A year later, in 1970, she married an engineer, Errol Musk. Elon arrived nine months later, Kimbal arrived about a year after that, and not long after came a daughter, Tosca.

Maye's marriage lasted nine years. After the divorce, she took the children and started on her own as a single, working mother. Money was particularly tight. The family couldn't afford many things, such as eating out and movies. Maye managed by juggling her private practice as a dietitian, wellness talks and modelling. She cut the children's hair, gave them manicures and pedicures. “You have no idea how nasty it is to give teen boys a pedicure,” she says. They were a well-behaved bunch, and weren't given a choice in the matter. “I wouldn't allow them to be brats, I couldn't afford that.”

In contrast to today's tiger mothers and helicopter parents, Maye did not hover over her children, schedule their lives, read to them or check their homework; indeed, they learned to forge her signature to sign off their work. She was hands-off, just as her parents had been. “I didn't interfere with your lives,” Maye says to Kimbal, who responds that they felt very independent as children. When asked about her approach to child-rearing she says deadpan, “I was a perfect mother.” She and her son both break into gales of laughter. “Everyone should take lessons,” Kimbal teases. Was she ever worried about whether they would find their way in life? “No,” she answers quickly, and then, “I didn't have time to.”

Her business, run from home, provided

her children with training as budding entrepreneurs. The children all helped out: Tosca remembers writing letters for Maye and answering the phone. “It really helped us to get a sense of independence as well as understand work ethics,” she recalls. During parts of their teenage years, the boys chose to go to live with their father – a decision that Elon has since said he regretted.

Left to explore the world for themselves, each child spontaneously developed strong – and very different – interests. Elon was an obsessive reader and thinker from an early age, so absorbed in his own world that his parents thought he might have a hearing problem and took him to the doctor. Drawn to computers he sold his first computer program when was 12. He struggled to make friends at school and was badly bullied. But he developed strong, lifelong bonds with his brother and sister which, to this day, seem to serve as a stabilising influence in his life. After Thanksgiving, he posted a picture of himself and Kimbal in the Rockies, arms around each other with the message “love my bro”.

Tosca, too, had her enthusiasms lit at a young age. When she was four she watched the musical fantasy film *Xanadu*, which gave her a passion for movies. By the age of 18 she had landed a job in a studio and from there went on to become a film director. As for Kimbal, Maye recalls taking the children to a grocery store when the boys were in their early teens. “Elon would take a book and read. Tosca would hang around me, and Kimbal would be picking up the peppers and smelling them and saying ‘aaah’.”

While Maye regards cooking as “torture”, Kimbal was always an enthusiastic and ambitious cook. At 14, his sister recalls, he came home with a fish too big to fit in the oven, wrapped it in foil and stuck it on the barbecue. “He cooked it to perfection,” Tosca remembers. “To perfection! I don't know how he knows how to do that.” Kimbal's cooking created connections. He says when he cooked, “people would sit down. My family would sit down. When I didn't cook, the food wasn't very good...” – he pauses briefly to say a soft “sorry” to his mother – “...we would just peck at it and go and watch TV. You didn't really sit down and

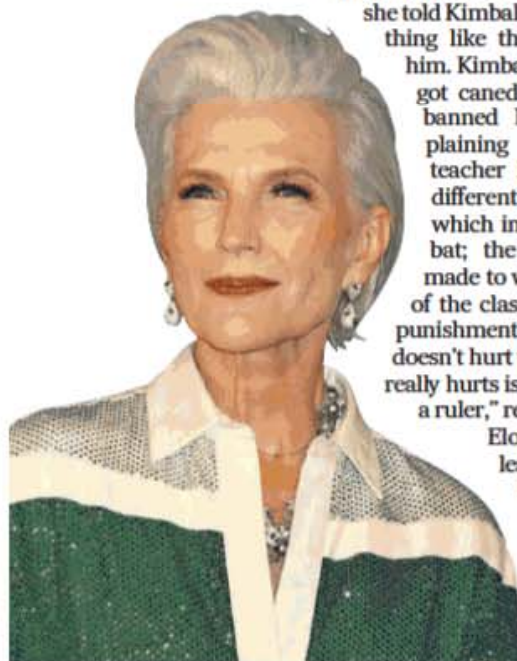


connect.”

Perhaps because they lived in Africa, perhaps because it was a different era, perhaps because their parents were busy with their careers, the young Musks' childhood had more than a pinch of “Just William” or “Huckleberry Finn” about it. Led by Elon, the brothers created home-made rockets and explosives. They raced their dirt bikes so hard that Kimbal fell into a barbed-wire fence. They walked door to door at night in a dangerous country selling Easter eggs at a scandalous mark-up: Kimbal told customers sceptical of the price, “you are doing this to support future capitalists.” They tried to start up a video arcade. Parental attention didn't always point them in the right direction: their father took them to a casino (gambling was illegal).

Elon has spoken with sadness of the relationship with his father, but Kimbal is more relaxed about some of the trials of growing up. Family difficulties aside, South Africa could be a brutal place. When Maye found out that a child had been caned at his school, she told Kimbal to tell her if anything like that happened to him. Kimbal replied that he got caned every day, and banned her from complaining about it. His teacher had a drum of different implements, which included a cricket bat; the children were made to walk to the front of the class and pick their punishment. “A cricket bat doesn't hurt that much; what really hurts is the thin cane or a ruler,” recalls Kimbal.

Elon was the first to leave at the age of 17, using a Canadian passport Maye had obtained for him and a bit of money she had set



aside. Tosca was also determined to leave but was too young to go on her own. She persuaded Maye, who wanted to do a PhD, to visit Canada to see if she could study there.

While Maye was away she sent back a particularly upbeat report about Toronto. That was enough for Tosca: when Maye got home, she found that her 15-year-old daughter had sold the house and most of its contents. All that was needed was Maye's signature. She signed. By way of explanation she says, “my kids do very extraordinary things that make sense.”

The two women joined Elon and they all moved into a cheap rental apartment in Toronto. Capital controls in South Africa meant they had limited access to the funds from the sale of the house, so once again, the family started up again with almost nothing. Kimbal spent a year finishing school and then joined them. They all went to university and lived frugally. Maye signed up as a model, started her PhD and began the slow business of building up a dietician's practice again from scratch.

When the children eventually moved out, Maye relished her independence. She ate food the children didn't like; she walked naked round the apartment. She decided to move to New York on the grounds that New Yorkers walked fast and talked fast and were therefore her kind of people. Kimbal, a successful tech entrepreneur, wanted to learn how to cook, so he moved there too in 2000. Then one bright September morning two planes brought down the World Trade Centre and he became a volunteer cook for the firefighters. In the most extraordinary of times he found himself reminded of the power of food to bring people together, and by 2004 he had opened his first restaurant. Eventually the whole family ended up on the other side of America. Elon and Tosca live in the Los Angeles area, and Kimbal is in Boulder. When Tosca had twins, Maye packed up once again, and moved out West to help.

In a way, the journey that made the Musks is a classic American one, of people who arrived the hard way from a difficult country. Kimbal has spoken of the difficulty of giving his children the sense of urgency he once had when he first arrived and feared he might have to go back to South Africa. Elon has tackled this dilemma of child rearing by setting up a private school, which his five children attend, that teaches problem-solving and matches the curriculum to the aptitudes and capabilities of the child. It is called Ad Astra, meaning “to the stars”. Yet even the name of the school conceals the same lingering irony about parenting. The Latin phrase that the space crowd live with is actually: “*per aspera ad astra*” – through hardships, to the stars. If necessity is indeed the mother of invention, how are successful people to raise enterprising offspring? They cannot, without fear of being unkind, foist upon their children the challenges that they overcame.

Yet it seems reasonable to believe that Maye had some influence on how these three individuals turned out. And her approach to parenting was very different to the modern norm. By today's standards, she gave her children an outlandish degree of freedom to take risks, extraordinarily little supervision and made no attempt to shape their interests or to determine their futures. They made adult decisions at an early age, and even though the family was separated often, the bond between them remained strong.

When lunch is over, Kimbal hurries off to start cooking his Thanksgiving meal for the clan. Maye lingers. Her future looks bright. She has worked hard all her life but she has no desire to slow down. Her mother, she says, worked until the age of 96. “I'm just getting started,” she laughs.

1843 MAGAZINE

Natasha Loderis The Economist's health-care correspondent.