

Two of us: John Stevens and Mandy Nolan

December 13, 2014

☆ Read later

Helen Chrystides

[Email article](#) [Print](#)

Academic John Stevens, 54, and comedian Mandy Nolan, 46, live in Mullumbimby in northern NSW with their "funny blended family" of five children ranging in age from five to 19.

Mandy's story: We met at the parent pick-up of a Catholic primary school in Byron Bay in northern NSW. Looking back, I don't think you're actually meant to use it to pick up the other parent.

John was freshly divorced with one child and I was married with three children by two partners. We got on well; he tells me I was one of the only mums who'd talk to him after his divorce. We remained friends for years and John would always have a spunky-looking girlfriend. When I dropped in one time, his house was bare and he was alone. "She's gone. All I have is this broken ice-cream scoop and apple corer," he told me despondently. "I'll hook you up with one of my single girlfriends," I said. But he wasn't ready. We kept running into each other and finally I realised I liked him myself. My marriage ended and we got together.

John always wanted a big family. He met me, we had Ivy, and he went from one to five children. Ivy is the only one genetically related to everybody; she unites our funny blended family. Our annual family portrait shows our strangeness and dysfunctionality: one year we all dressed as zombies, another as bogans.

All the other men I'd been with were artistic types; John was the kind of man I'd always previously found a bit boring. As an educator [adjunct associate professor of health sciences at Southern Cross University] working in aged care and lifestyle medicine, his focus was on improving circumstances for people. I found that attractive, as being an entertainer can be narcissistic.

I told John about the humour workshops I was running throughout the NSW far north coast for people with dementia. Originally I'd thought the workshops were meant to be for the carers, but it turned out they wanted a break! I struggled until I realised people with dementia live only in the moment. So I brought in costumes and put them in situations where they'd react spontaneously. The laughter in the group amazed me, as you have to understand to laugh: it's a high-level cognitive function. John was intrigued and we applied for research funding. He wrote some papers, we set up training and presented at conferences.

John sometimes gives terrible presents, which he thinks are meaningful. He got the broken ice-cream scoop and apple corer, which he kept because he hoards everything, and put them into a rock sculpture. It was so ugly I had to hide it. I told him I put it somewhere special and then I threw it out. It was a nice idea, though: symbols of his emotional ground zero.

I always tell men, when they get involved with me, that I create a generic husband in my comedy, a combination of the best and worst bits of all of them. As a comedian you highlight your struggles and vulnerabilities. When you're trying to impress a new partner, they're the things you try to hide. John understood from the start.

I'm a perfectionist, a control freak, and John's really easygoing. I have a cushion addiction. At last audit I had more than 100. John doesn't know, but I've always got cushions on lay-by. He accused me of emasculating my son with the 12 cushions on his bed. He annoys me by stacking the 15 cushions on our bed weirdly.

John is a loving, caring, affectionate partner, although I almost black out from boredom when he goes into some ridiculous detail about his work. "Oh, please, tell me about that really great statistic again."

John's story: The first time I laid eyes on Mandy, all she had on was a large cowboy hat. She was encouraging hundreds of other naked people to do star jumps in front of the police and council on Belongil Beach, at Byron Bay. I'd arrived from Bathurst [in central-west NSW] to live in the area and gone for a swim. Mandy was daring and hilarious, MC-ing an event to keep the beach nudist. I took off my bathers and joined in.

Much later we met while picking up our respective daughters from school. The two of us - the newly-divorced man, the rude anti-Christ - along with a lovely eccentric older lady who'd come for her grandchild, would have great conversations. When Mandy discovered I was single, she was determined to match-make me, but I wasn't interested. She kept chipping away at the emotional wall I'd put up. When it came down, I was looking at the love of my life.

She sees the funny side of everything. I think we're chatting, but she's testing out her material. I'll laugh at her joke on stage and think, "That's the necktie conversation we had."



John Stevens and Mandy Nolan. Photo: Paul Harris

She's committed to many things - first and foremost the family: looking after the children, making sure our relationship is taken care of. Then there's her dedication to her work. Stand-up comedian is just a role. She's a coach, motivator, community leader, activist, feminist, journalist and author.

I've seen her help many people: the thousand or so who have taken her comedy course and workshops don't just learn comedy, they do therapy on themselves. I've seen withdrawn, bullied boys become confident young men. Those with dementia go from being isolated to engaging with others and remembering skits from week to week. In the public performance that culminated from the workshops, a woman with dementia dressed as an Arabian princess with two suitors fighting over her. Someone in the audience yelled out, "Which will you pick?" "Whoever lasts the longest," the woman replied cheekily. There was a crash as her daughter fell off her chair, laughing. She hadn't heard her mother talk in two years.

There is a theory that dementia causes brain inflammation, which may block memory pathways. We need more research, [but] perhaps laughter triggers an anti-inflammatory response.

Mandy has a drive for cleanliness and household perfection. The irritating part is she expects everyone to come along on the same ride. And I'm a hoarder. She's like a surgeon, "Get rid of it. Cut it out. Toss it out." Her energy is nitro-charged. How she managed to fit writing books in our life of ordered chaos amazes me. Her latest book, *Boyfriends We've All Had (and Shouldn't Have)*, is outstanding. There's nothing left to the imagination. Mandy's material doesn't shock me, what shocks me is what she can turn into material.

I'm so glad Mandy didn't give up on me. My relationship exhaustion disappeared and I saw what she was actually saying was true, that we were really well suited. She's incredibly beautiful and a stunning partner for me in every possible way.

Recommended



[Red clothing makes you seem angry, aggressive and...](#)

Technology



[US presidential contender Jeb Bush flames out on Iraq...](#)

World



[Johnny Depp's dogs to be seized by Customs](#)

Life & Style



[Australian sisters make over \\$160,000 a month from...](#)

Essential Kids



[Inside Killing Kittens, a sex club for women](#)

Daily Life

Promoted Stories



[7 landscaping tips to increase your property's value](#)

Domain Blog



[10 tricks to learn any language from a man who speaks 9](#)

Babbel



[13 of the Worst Tattoo Misspellings of All Time](#)

Answers.com



[Vladimir Putin: A Real Threat To The West Or A...](#)

The Economist



[18 Family Photos That Are Just Wrong, But We Can't...](#)

ViralWorld

Recommended by

[Email article](#)

[Print](#)