



Learning To Hackett

From a pioneering bungee jump off Auckland's Greenhithe bridge 20 years ago, AJ Hackett went on to build a global bungee empire. Now 48, he's an extreme-sports legend and New Zealand tourism poster boy. He lives in the French Alps with children Dean, 16, Jayde, 11, and Margaux, seven (ex-wife Caroline takes the childcare reins when he's on the road travelling six months of the year). Random House publishes his autobiography *Jump Start* on October 20.

AJ's mother Joanne, 83, is a retired nurse aide. Last Christmas she moved from her North Shore home of 44 years down the road to Forrest Hill Retirement Home & Hospital.

AJ Hackett

I bet you want to know what my real name is. It's Alan John, but I've been AJ since I was three. There were too many Alans on our street; one lived next door. Mum would yell out my name and the wrong Alan would turn up.

I was the second of four children and the only boy — after Anna, then came Elaine and Kit. My father Jack shifted from job to job, like driving milk tankers and pulling pints. Mum worked too, mainly as a caregiver, and I had a paper run from 10. We were very poor. I didn't

have shoes until I went to intermediate, and I still like bare feet.

I always knew Mum wasn't like other mothers: she's a hard case, totally unique. During the war, just a teenager, she was an Air Force wireless operator. Then in her twenties she hitchhiked all around New Zealand, Australia and Britain.

As a mother she allowed us to do anything we wanted to, even where there was risk. She always said as long as you're not harming anybody and you're enjoying it, do it. That

philosophy was good. A lot of parents are overprotective of their children, but kids have heaps of energy — they need to burn it up. I know I needed to. I was in Cubs, Scouts, and played rugby. The girls and I ran amok climbing trees, making huts, racing trolleys. Milford Beach was only about one and a half kilometres from home, so we spent a lot of time there.

I started jumping off stuff young. My favourite jumping spot was the bridge over the creek down at the beach, a wicked 13- or 14-metre drop. And I'd leap off the smaller cliffs down at the old quarry. But I always knew there was a limit — a point where you'd really stuff yourself up.

A policeman lived on the section behind our house, so we had to be on the lookout for him, especially once we got into fires. We had huge backyard bonfires and all the neighbourhood kids would turn up. The fire brigade called round once — one of them

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grinned and said to the new guy, “Oh that’s just the Hacketts”.

We were a little wild, but we didn’t steal or anything — apart from the odd orange or lemon off a tree. There was a moral line I wouldn’t cross. I could’ve turned out a really bad bastard but Mum kept me on a straight path. She’s always had a very clear idea about what’s right and what’s not.

Sunday was our day together. For years Mum and us kids would catch the tramping club bus to the Waitakeres. There was the slow party, the medium party and we were in the fast party — we used to all run miles through the forest. We’d usually pinch a couple of native plants — Mum said that was OK because we’d be planting them and looking after them. Mum was mad keen on native trees — she planted all sorts in our garden, mostly rimu, kowhai, totara. She’s got no engagement or wedding rings because she lost them down in the garden.

Dad wasn’t home a lot. We had very little to do with the old man — he was a pretty scary dude so I was pleased not to see him, actually. He always gave off a tense, violent vibe. Mum and Dad’s relationship was a really bad one — no decent communication. I reckon they got together too quickly. They met in the mid ’50s when Mum was hitchhiking around Australia. She was thinking about becoming a nun but instead she got married!

All of a sudden Dad met this beautiful woman, got married, got her pregnant, then they moved over here and had me soon afterwards — I think the old man wondered what had hit him. I tried to talk Mum into divorcing him when I was 13. But she’s so strongly Catholic she wouldn’t hear of it.

From the tension at home, I decided quite young I wanted to be a very different, loving father. And growing up poor has definitely inspired me to make a bit of dosh. I’ve always known I could do whatever I wanted — it was just a matter of finding it. I reckon that confidence is thanks to having heaps of freedom and learning to be self-reliant as a kid. That’s thanks to Mum for not being a worrywart. I try to be the same way with my kids.

After Dad died of skin cancer in 1984, Mum lived alone for almost 20 years, no worries, then three years ago she got run over by a car. She was hit at 50 kilometres per hour and bounced off the windscreen into the gutter — 80 years old and didn’t break one bone! Unbelievably lucky. She was quite fit — she used to walk to Takapuna on a regular basis — but she lost a bit of confidence after that.

I come back to see Mum two or three times a year. We don’t talk on the phone much because she’s deaf. But hopefully we’ll be able

to soon — we’re about to get a new hearing aid for her phone at the rest home with all sorts of fancy gadgets.

Mum’s a stubborn old thing. She didn’t want to leave her house and her trees to move to the rest home, but my sisters and I felt she needed the care. We’ve kept the house so she can come and visit, or stay when one of us is around. Right now we’re both sleeping here and doing a big clearout — Mum’s such a hoarder. Then we’ll have a big bonfire down the back, just like old times.

The Hacketts at Mt Egmont, 1973. Joanne and AJ with Anna and Elaine (seated).



Joanne Hackett

AJ was always a jumper — off bridges, out of trees. When it was meal time and he was climbing a tree I’d call out jokingly, “One less to feed!” Naturally AJ had lots of adventures. I didn’t go sneaking around to find out what he was doing. I was out working, and even when I was at home I was always so damn busy the kids were let loose.

There was none of this wrapping the children in cotton wool — you had to let them go and that was all there was to it. They built tree huts, made fires and trolleys out of lawnmower wheels and a bit of rope, and raced them down the hill. Selwyn Crescent had about four kids per house, so there was a serious traffic flow of young scallywags through our place. The door was always open to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

But my kids weren’t always playing — they all had chores. Like weeding the vege garden and knitting — AJ was a great little knitter. There was a dishes duty list with all our names on it, and every night one of us had the night off. The kids helped with the dinners too. Once AJ arrived home with a whole lot of eels and

said proudly, “Look what I caught, Mum”. I cooked them up and mmmm they were delicious.

You could feel the tension when the husband came home. We weren’t lovers — I slept in a single bed in the living room. The marriage was bound to collapse. He liked his grog and he was a man’s man — not a woman’s. AJ was the man of the house to me and his sisters from about 12. I felt very sorry for the kids — the husband was particularly hard on AJ. I tried my utmost to relax the atmosphere.

I think AJ and I got so close for the simple reason he was the only boy. The three girls were a tight unit and used to look after each other, though AJ could definitely always look after himself. Once he and his friends were hitchhiking to Napier and realised they didn’t have a penny among them. They went knocking on doors in some wee town saying, “Please have you got any empty bottles?” and took the bottles to the nearest dairy to swap for money. I was absolutely rapt he’d had the sense to do that. I would’ve done exactly the same thing myself if I’d been hitchhiking. I was never happier than when I was on the road — I didn’t like feeling closed in.

Like me, AJ thrives on being outdoors. He could never ever be a lawyer in an office. His jumping off things on ropes has never bothered me in the least — he could get killed crossing the road. He’s done nicely, but I would be just as proud of him if he’d done office work wonderfully well.

AJ’s about to take me on holiday to Bali. Once he took me back to France with him for Christmas. It was fantastic. I stayed a night in London first and AJ organised someone to meet me at the airport and take me anywhere I wanted. I said I’d love to see the hospital I worked in in ’49, ’50. It had closed down, but I looked over and bugger me, there was a number 22 bus, the one I always used to catch! It was such a treat seeing it again.

AJ’s always been a bloody good son. I expect every son to be good to his mother, so I’m inclined to take it a bit for granted. But I hope I don’t. You’d go a long way before you’d find another guy as thoughtful or caring. It wouldn’t matter if he was your son or a stranger — if anything happened to you he’d be first to help. And he can’t stand to see anyone hard done by.

No matter where he’s been or what he’s doing or how long he’s been away, AJ always finishes up calling in at my house and sleeping there. He’ll just walk in unannounced — as he should. It’s his home. When my time comes, I’ve told him to sell the house only to someone who’ll look after the trees. And I know he will.

Sarah Lang ■