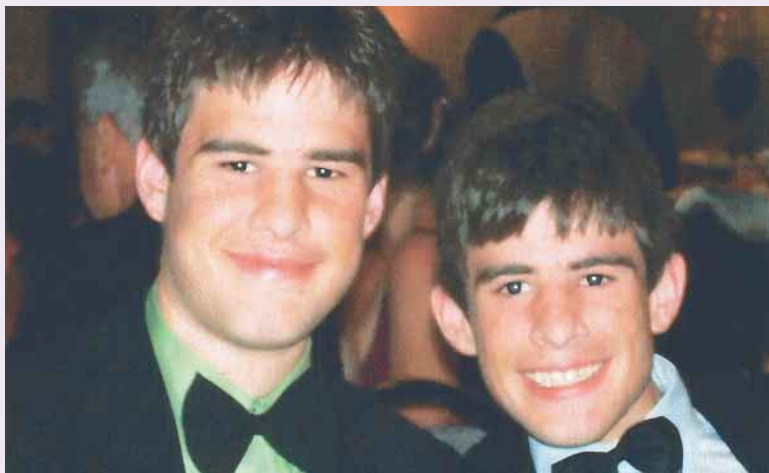


Robert and Stephen



Stephen (left) and Robert (right) attending the Mater Dei Year 11 and 12 Formal last year.

We already had two beautiful children, Jane aged 6 and Phillip aged 3, when Robert and Stephen were born. We don't have a history of twins in our family and Jane and Phillip were blue eyed blondes, so when Robert and Stephen came along, dark haired, brown eyed and olive skinned, it was a shock in more ways than one. They were both born in the breech position and weighed about 2.6 kilograms (5 1/2 pounds) each. They were both healthy, normal babies who were placid and fed well. It wasn't until a visit to the clinic at about 6 months, when Robert didn't do what he was supposed to do (pick up things with a pincer movement) that alarm bells started to ring. The clinic sister started to use the term "delay". I thought she was an idiot - there wasn't anything wrong with my perfect little boys. There were so many milestones though that they were so slow to reach, or didn't make at all without assistance - sitting up, crawling, walking, talking. At age 3 an occupational therapist gave me a brochure on autism and said she thought both boys were autistic. I was horrified. My knowledge of autism was minimal, and all I could imagine was our two little boys each trapped inside their own world. My GP was furious that someone had said this to us and reiterated that it was "developmental delay". However at the age of 5 the term "developmental delay" automatically changed to the term "intellectual disability".

Meanwhile the placid little babies had turned into two hyperactive toddlers, full of energy and mischief, but at that stage no speech. Robert and Stephen could trash their bedroom, very quietly, in record time: bring the curtains down, strip the beds, pull the

ability to slow down, see things and absorb them and gave our whole family a chance at normality (only a chance, I don't think we'll ever quite make it!). Both boys went through the public school system in Primary School with a lot of ups and downs. They both went to Glenfield Park Special School for an 18 month period because of problem behaviour. Stephen settled down right away. However this was not the case for Robert and I had the Principal ring me up one day asking for ideas on what to do with him! During this period they started going back to their home school two days a week. However, we were encouraged to transfer one of the boys to a different home school as the school felt they couldn't cope with both of them. Stephen was transferred to Camden Public School as we thought he could cope better with the change. A few years later his teacher told me that one lunchtime Stephen had found an empty soft drink can on the ground, picked it up and had a long "phone conversation" with Robert who was at the other school.

In the meantime both boys had tested with a mild intellectual disability and Robert had been diagnosed as moderately autistic. The boys were now aged 9, and after years of unusual behaviour, these words and the diagnosis no longer terrified us. We could see Robert and Stephen had skills and interests, distinct personalities and differences.

Stephen has always liked the garden and sound systems and computers. From an early age Robert has been fascinated with electricity, flags, signs and some other unusual and wonderful things including wanting a working EXIT sign for Christmas.

mattresses off and strew anything else around. When you went in to see what they were doing, two angelic little faces peered up from a sea of disaster!

At age 5 Robert went on the medication, Ritalin, and our lives turned around. It gave Robert a real chance at life, an

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Robert and Stephen can wire up speakers, microphones and cameras and have them set up all over the house, so we can hear them but not always see what they are doing. Stephen could never understand how I would know when he had said something rude and he now believes that mothers know everything.

When High School came around we made the decision to send them to Mater Dei. This is the best thing we have ever done for them. They love the school and their friends and the staff. They are accepted for who and what they are. They have achieved so much. Stephen is Vice Captain and has been a counsellor and Robert has been a counsellor twice. They have both represented Mater Dei at sports days and functions and these are things that could not have happened to them in a Public High School. We regret that they didn't go to Mater Dei from Kindergarten onwards. The type of caring is what has made the difference.

The fact that the boys are twins has its ups and downs. They always have a friend and someone to play with. They each know they are perfectly normal because the other one over there is just the same as them! The downside is that they can set each other off on some pretty horrendous behaviour! They always have a partner in crime, and two 17 year old boys who aren't particularly happy with each other is not always a pleasant environment.

We as parents accept that we are going to get some strange looks and comments when we go out as a family but it's a lot harder for siblings to deal with this and for our older two children these have been difficult times. The impact of having a child with a disability in the family, positive and negative, is for life. For us, it has been a long 17 years. It has been our faith in God (for we consider Robert and Stephen to be a special gift), a very strong sense of humour and an ability to bend without quite snapping in half that has got us through. These, and the fact that we love them both to bits and wouldn't swap them for the world! (But if someone wants to take them home for a night or two we wouldn't object!!)

Ann Sehlmeier



Stephen and Robert aged 2.