



Although his family has made heaps in the rag trade, Jason Kimberley has found bigger mountains to climb, satisfying an urge for adventure that has been with him for most of his life. Lawrence Money meets a man who has done very well for himself, considering his father was worried he'd turned out to be "a bum"

# Denim daredevil

self-taught wilderness photographer.

At Melbourne's Kozminsky Gallery recently, he opened an exhibition of pictures he had taken on that three-week Antarctic trip, huge framed and signed works, and sold more than \$30,000 worth on the first night.

At age 39, Jason has covered an amazing amount of territory but here is perhaps the most impressive thing: on that one-year drive in 1999-2000, he says, he had had only one cross

word with his wife. "We probably jammed five years of marriage into one," he says. "We weren't more than 100m apart the entire trip but on that particular day we'd been driving eight hours and you know that male macho thing - 'I just want to do that extra half hour'. But as we were coming into Hay in New South Wales, Caroline burst into tears. She asked, 'Why did we have to do that? I've only been out of the car once in eight hours!' I had no idea!" Dutifully, husband found the best motel in town, bought take-away Chinese, brought it back, apologised to wife. End of crisis.

One of the first things to cross your mind with a bloke like this is, OK, easy to do all this when your dad's on the Rich List. ("Here, son, have a million bucks to get started"). But

Craig Kimberley reckons that if his son Jason had been born 150 years earlier, he would have been on the Burke and Wills expedition. Pals joke that there would be a statue of Wills and Kimberley down at the City Square today.

Craig is the Just Jeans tycoon and his surviving son Jason (another son, Marcus, died aged six) is a born adventurer. Jason has climbed mountains, kayaked in Alaska, camped in the Antarctic and spent a year with wife Caroline driving around Australia.

He has renovated houses, run restaurants, picked fruit, gone bush, backpacked the world and, yes, worked in the family business, but recently he has become an outstanding

PHOTOS: DAVID MASON

it seems this was far from the truth.

So let's start from the beginning. When Jason was three, Craig and wife Connie had this crazy idea: why not open a shop which sold only jeans. Back then jeans, if sold at all, were tucked away among the slacks and trousers. The idea revolutionised the clothing trade.

For 10 years after that venture began, Jason did not see much of his parents on Friday nights and Saturdays. "They were always working. Eventually they had about 30 stores. We lived in a big old rambling house in Hampton, then we moved to a run-down old place in Brighton and took 10 years to renovate it."

There is one sister, Chloe, five years younger, in Sydney. Jason was a self-confessed "terror" at his first school, St Joan of Arc in Brighton. "I was sort of the leader of the pack and if anything went wrong, I seemed to be the first suspect."

Oddly, he recalls clearly the transgressions of which he was NOT guilty. "One time a chair was broken and I had to take it home and have it fixed. When Mum came to pick me up, I was standing outside holding a chair leg in one hand and the rest of the chair in the other. It needed welding. I hadn't broken it. The chair went out in the next garbage."

At age six, the terror was sent to Brighton Grammar where he finished his schooling, but his real interests lay elsewhere. Young Jason had a picture book on the Burke and Wills expedition, following their trek north from Melbourne. "Really dramatic illustrations," he says. "I also wore it out. Read it constantly. Seeing these guys in rags, staggering around the desert. What sort of inspiration would lead people to do this? That stuck with me. I was interested in the race to the South Pole in 1912, too. A lot of stories really resonated with me. Always wanted to be a Robinson Crusoe."

In those early years, Jason's late grandfather Joe Russo would take him out each Saturday morning: rabbit shooting or fishing for squid. "He was Italian. He would come for me at four in the morning and we'd drive off in his big Ford. Come back later and cook up a meal."

Having finished school, Jason drove to the Northern Territory with a mate, David Fisher, and worked on cattle stations and fruit plantations. He did six months at university but lost interest, then worked as a labourer helping build developer Max Beck's Brighton house. "I did all the lousy jobs. Bought a bottle of beer a day for lunch for all the Italian concreters."

Then he was off again: 18 months backpacking through Asia, Europe and the U.S. "I raised the finance but Dad was worried I'd become a bum so I arranged to spend a month at a leadership school in the U.S. We went kayaking on Prince



*Jason at his recent Antarctic exhibition.*

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William Sound in Alaska. It was fantastic. I was only 19."

In 1992 Jason went with Peter Hillary, son of Sir Edmund, to climb in South America. He spent three weeks scaling Mt Aconcagua, the highest in the world outside the Himalayas. "That's when you have to turn terror into exhilaration. The closer to death you are, the more you feel alive."

Jason got the taste for it. Two years later he joined Graeme Joy, first Australian to the North Pole and a past headmaster at Timbertop, in a climb up Alaska's Mt McKinley, the highest peak in North America. "I didn't get to the top. I had shocking back spasms on the last day, could barely move. Just woke up and couldn't go on. But by the time I got off the mountain it had sort of fixed itself."

It was during his round-Australia trip that Jason experimented with his mother's old camera. He proved a natural and published a book of the photos. It sold 10,000 copies.

In 2005, again with Peter Hillary, Jason flew to the Antarctic to photograph the "world's last great wilderness". But he found the remorseless march of mankind was having its effect. Penguin eggs found with traces of DDT, plastic rubbish bags washed ashore. "Down there, even the imprint of a car tyre can remain for 10 years."

So that's the story so far of the son of the jeans tycoon. In some ways, Jason faces the same strange "problem" as Ted Baillieu: a background of wealth and privilege. Says Jason: "If you go in to the old man's business, you only made it because you're the old man's son – but if you strike out on your own, you only made it because he gave you a leg-up. I stopped worrying about that 20 years ago. The most important thing is to have a picture of yourself and go and do it."

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