INSIGHT

10 MINUTES WITH...

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE MANTEGNA

JOE MANTEGNA

On CBS's *Criminal Minds*, Joe Mantegna plays an FBI agent who analyzes the country's most twisted criminals, anticipating their next moves before they strike again. In reality, his job is much harder. Here, he talks about juggling Hollywood with family life, including raising his autistic daughter. **BY MELONY TEAGUE** ▶

insight

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Joe Mantegna as David Rossi on CRIMINAL MINDS

If Joe Mantegna had a shelf in the garage for his achievements, it would be full. He's appeared in countless movies and theatre productions, played agent David Rossi on *Criminal Minds* for 10 years, won a TONY award, earned numerous Emmy nominations and worked as a writer, producer and director. But it doesn't stop there. Mantegna's proudest accomplishment is being dad to his two daughters: Mia, 28 and Gia, 25. However, life hasn't always been smooth sailing—his daughter Mia was diagnosed with autism when she was just two-and-a-half years old. Mantegna sat down with INBETWEEN to chat about life with autism, being a dad and his successful career.

You've had such a successful career; were your parents supportive of your choice to go into acting?

My parents' approach was the best. They did not encourage me or discourage me but they supported me. Going into the arts is so difficult. If a person really has a passion for it, be supportive and encouraging. They need to find their way. It's really their journey.

My mother is 100 years old and I'm sure at this point she doesn't even know what I do for a living and, in a way, that is probably a good thing. My parents never really understood the whole entertainment industry but it doesn't matter because they supported me. They would have supported whatever I decided to pursue in life. I think the best thing that they did is that they were there.

When your daughter was diagnosed with autism, there wasn't really a lot of information out there. How did you cope?

We found out that Mia had autism in the 1990s. There wasn't much going on at the time in terms of support, but you find out [what it is] and delve into it. Something changed along the way and there has been more attention to autism and there have been strides in the medical field, but it doesn't change the fact that she has it. It's like when I was a kid and polio was a big deal. Everybody was trying to avoid getting polio until they found a cure, but that didn't help the people who already had it. Someday they will discover a cure for autism, too, through research, but as of today, autism is something we just need to deal with.

How do you react to people who don't understand what it's like to be a parent of an autistic child?

Well, I think I am beyond that. It doesn't matter. Nobody gets a free ride in this life. That is something that we, as a family, deal with and, of course, the circle of people that surround us and it is OK. It is just another aspect of life. I am not asking people to ▶

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Mantegna with his family

understand. It is one of those things, and [some] people who have met my daughter and interact with her often say, "I get it because I have a family member affected by autism." I just hope that people nowadays are understanding and have more acceptance now that autism is more prevalent.

From your perspective, now that Mia is grown up, is autism more difficult to live with as a child than it is as an adult?

When you are young, you are protected and nurtured and cared for. As an adult, it is a little trickier. Some people are more able to function independently, but in my daughter's case, she does need some kind of help. She's like a stranger in a strange land in many aspects, and she is going to be an adult for more years than she was a child, so it is something we have to consider for the future and when I am not here. That's life.

Family is obviously important to you. How did your family life influence your career choices?

We made many decisions based on family life. The decision for me to do series television was greatly influenced by that. It was a conscious decision as my children got older. When they were little, they travelled with us when we travelled the world. We did this as a family, especially considering my eldest daughter's condition. It was vital because it was more important that we were all together. Not like, you know, daddy goes off for a month or two to make a movie, leaving my wife to handle things. We made the choice to travel together and it was great.

When they got older, that became more difficult with them going to school and they had their own lives. I had a great career in theatre on Broadway, movies and television. The movie aspect of it was taking me here, there and everywhere without any sort of logic. I could finish a movie in Moscow one day and start another movie in Toronto the next day. But over 10 years ago [when my daughters were teens], I made a conscious decision to redirect my career choices. I geared my career for a lifestyle that would keep me home and I have been fortunate to be on the cast of *Criminal Minds*. I've been coming home every night. I love that. I have no regrets. I don't ask myself what my film career would have been like if I stuck with it.

What was the most important life lesson your parents taught you that you will pass on to your daughters?

That is a good question. My mother is 100 years old and the reason she got to be 100 is that she lives life on a very even keel. There were no tremendous highs or lows. In other words, she cruised through life nice and easy and I tried to take that lesson through life. My father had a tough life medically and physically and died fairly young, but cruising through life...I would like to emulate that—not get too wound up or too wound down. ■