

A force of nature who calls herself “an average, everyday girl who lives by the beach, wears flip-flops and no make-up” AJ Cook has been in the limelight since she was a child. Growing up on the shoreline of Lake Ontario in Ontario, Canada, she began dancing at age four and began acting at age 16- her first gig was a 1997 McDonald’s commercial. By the time AJ was 25, she had appeared in nearly a dozen films and TV shows. She propelled herself to the front of the pack with her sunny optimism, old-fashioned moral values and courage.

AJ’s breakthrough acting role came in the 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides*, directed by Sofia Coppola. Also that year, she took a starring role in the TV series *Higher Ground*, in which she played Shelby Merrick, a rough-around-the-edges teenager trying to cope with heartache and abuse. Since September 2005, AJ has starred as Jennifer “JJ” Jareau in the CBS hit series *Criminal Minds*.

AJ says she has no trouble juggling stardom with her family, the top priority in her life. “I will always just be the girl who grew up with good morals and values,” says AJ. “I am lucky that I live in Los Angeles and that I can go home to my life and family at the end of the day – that’s what’s most important!” Fortunately, acting runs in the family, which makes AJ’s balancing act a little easier. AJ is married to actor and film director Nathan Andersen, and the couple’s 6-year-old son, Mekhai Allan Andersen, is also an actor. In fact, he plays AJ’s TV son Henry Lamontagne on *Criminal Minds*. “I don’t think he looks at it as being an actor,” says AJ. “He just gets to be with Mommy and have fun.” AJ recently spoke with Travelgirl Publisher Renee Werbin.

TG: You were born Andrea Joy with the nickname AJ, and you are playing a character on your mega-hit show *Criminal Minds* named JJ. What a coincidence!

AJ: My full name is Andrea Joy and when I started acting years ago there were already a few other Andrea Cooks so my agent suggested I change my name and that’s how AJ was born. It took a long time for me to get used to AJ but now when people call me Andrea I think, who? The only person who calls me Andrea is my mother.

TG: It’s always a pleasure to welcome a Canadian on the cover of *Travelgirl*. How did you arrive in the U.S. by way of Ontario, Canada?

AJ: I started acting in Oshawa; my first feature was *The Virgin Suicides*, which was Sofia Coppola’s first movie. It was so exciting to be a part of that. From there, I was lucky to be placed in a hit series that took me to Vancouver. I consider Vancouver more my home than Toronto because I now more about Vancouver and spent more formative years there. From Vancouver, I moved to the States and I have been here ever since. I’ve been lucky enough to be part of a long-running television show; I love it here.

TG: Sofia Coppola was just beginning her career when you landed that coveted role.

AJ: To this day shooting *The Virgin Suicides* was one of the most incredible experiences and great joys of my life. It’s amazing because it was my first movie and I was just coming out of the gate. It was such a success and Sofia has a way with young people. She has that voice and she’s excellent at translating it into film. The cast was so much fun; we would be shooting and rehearsing and out of the corner of your eye you would see Sofia’s father, Francis Ford Coppola, sitting behind the camera watching as the proud papa; you could see he was so proud of his daughter. I have so much respect for both of them. It was a wild experience and I learned so much while working on that movie; I sucked it all in like a sponge and I’ve kept it and taken what I learned with me every step of the way. It was quite an education.

TG: Francis Ford Coppola is a living legend.

AJ: He is, and I am happy to say I got to meet him and hang out with them, and he doesn’t know it but he certainly affected my life. I got to work with these legends; it was the most wonderful, enlightening experience.

TG: You began dancing at a very young age. Did your family encourage you to dance?

AJ: I grew up in a creative family. We didn't spend much time watching television. My mom put me in dance classes when I was four; I grew up dancing, doing ballet, jazz, hip-hop – all modes of dance. I was at either the dance studio or at home making up a routine or putting on a play for my family. The atmosphere at home was very creative and I was always encouraged to dance and have a great imagination. It was the most wonderful breeding ground for a future actor. I started there and luckily transitioned from dance into acting toward the end of high school and it's been going very well for me ever since. I met the right people, and had the right projects and have kept marching forward. It's been a great and most enjoyable ride.

TG: Poor eyesight affected you at an early age. How were you able to cope and finally correct your astigmatism?

AJ: I started wearing eyeglasses in either first or second grade, and I must say it was a bit awkward. I was this little kid with Coke bottle glasses that weighed more than I did. My whole life I've had to wear glasses but because I was a dancer I had to start wearing contact lenses very early. I couldn't go on stage with my glasses on; they would fly off, and I couldn't go on stage *without* them because I couldn't see, I would have fallen off the stage. I was all set for Lasik surgery but found out that my astigmatism was too severe that I wasn't a candidate for it. I was down about that; it was a very hard moment because I was back to glasses and contacts. I later found out about contact implants; they make a tiny incision and put a contact in your eye, and you see instantly. It was a game changer for me and completely corrected my vision to 20/20. I am so grateful they developed it.

TG: Can you have it all? You certainly seem to have success and a loving. Beautiful family.

AJ: In my 30s, I finally figured out how to do it – the elusive work-life balance. I went on a crazy search to find balance. I figured out that the best way to balance is to let yourself fall to one side and focus, giving it all you've got. Then you fall to the other side and give that priority 100 percent focus. When I am at work I focus on work; when I am home, I focus exclusively on my family so I can be the best I can be at any given moment in my life. I can't change what happened yesterday, but I can be sure I have a positive attitude and life will work itself out. In order to get the things you want in life you need to be grateful for what you have; then life all of a sudden becomes a whole hell of a lot easier.

TG: Your son is becoming an actor. How do you feel about mommy's little boy acting alongside you?

AJ: My son plays Henry on my show, *Criminal Minds*. They asked me if I would want to use my son if they wrote in a son. We shot it and he was a natural. It was fun for him but I was a nervous wreck. It's easy; Mekhai comes to work and gets to see mom and his buddies at work. People give him candy and cookies and he gets to play; what's not to like? It's super fun for him and I don't think he looks at it as being an actor. He just gets to be with mommy and have fun.

TG: Since we are on the subject, please talk a bit about the cast of Criminal Minds.

AJ: We are a family over here and I love the entire cast. It is such a wonderful talented team; it's always a beautiful experience and it's fabulous to have my son involved. The cast is one big dysfunctional family. We love hard, we fight hard, and it's a great, joyful play to come every single day.

TG: Do you have any advice for those young hopefuls just starting acting school?

AJ: Like anything in life, if you really want something you have to focus, put all of your energy in and give it 110 percent. You have to believe it's going to happen because if you don't believe it, no one else will either. You need to dive in headfirst and keep chipping away. It doesn't happen overnight and that's the big misconception: people think it happens immediately. It took me forever to get an agent. Back when I was a dancer, I didn't have a demo reel. I realized early on that anything worth having doesn't come easy but is ultimately worth the hard work. You are going to have dark times and it's hard, but just keep focusing.

TG: *Travelgirl* reader what to know, is there one particular item you never leave home without?

AJ: I never leave home without my phone, it's my lifeline to the rest of the world. I despise it, but need my phone. It's a love/hate relationship. I also have to have lip balm with me.

TG: Does your family have a favorite destination?

AJ: We love to travel, and because it's easy to get to, we love to visit the North Shore of Oahu. It feels far away but it's not too far from Los Angeles. It has beautiful beaches and great surf. We also love gorgeous Santa Corsica, Costa Rica. The surf is amazing, the jungle is so lush; it's a wonderful place to be with the family. We love being outdoors and love to hike and camp; we just love being active.

TG: You were on the cover of the men's magazine MAXIM earlier this year and said your motto was "you only get one life. Live it." Would you talk about that statement?

AJ: It's not that I'm old; I'm certainly not, but I reached my 30s and suddenly I have an appreciation for life. Something just clicks in your brain when you turn 30. You learn to appreciate life and not sweat the small stuff. You realize that holy smokes, this is my one and only life, this isn't a rehearsal; this is for real so let's have fun and do it right. I don't want to have any regrets wishing I had done this or that. I want to live life be happy, and not worry about what anyone thinks. I want to try to be the best I can be and leave the world better off than when I entered it

TG: You are in a very successful, long running, very popular show.

AJ: We are in Season 10! We are going strong and I am so happy. A huge JJ (my character) episode will air on January 14th. JJ is kind of coming to terms with what happened to her during the two previous episodes. It's a really well written, beautiful episodes and I am thrilled about it. I will be on a very busy press tour pushing that. Please tune in!

TG: You have lots of followers on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Where can our readers find you?

AJ: People can find me on Twitter at @ajcookofficial, Instagram @ajcook, and on Facebook at AJ Cook.