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## Owen revered his famous father

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"Wrestling is not 9-5 and weekends off. There is a show every night, " Owen Hart once said about his showbiz-circus-athletic career that is pro wrestling.

And so it was that the professional wrestler known as the Blue Blazer was called to perform again on Sunday night. This time in Kansas City -- another bout, another city -- and he was ready.

The youngest son of the famous Calgary Hart family was born into the wrestling business. His famous father, Stu Hart, built a family of 12 children on the foundation of Stampede Wrestling, televised bouts featuring noble, good guys and slippery villains.

Owen was inured by the glamour and the heartache the business and the sport generates.

"Mom handled the business side and would be up to 1 a.m., taking calls with that night's receipts," Owen once said. "We thought we were rich but sometimes there was hardly enough money for gas."

Owen revered his father. Stu taught him to wrestle but more importantly he taught him to respect his brothers and sisters and to be dedicated to his schooling.

"If you missed the (school) bus you had to break it to Dad," Owen recalled in a Herald interview. "I remember running down the lane with my socks and shoes in hand."

The Hart family's roots were set in the 1930s. Stu Hart, whose family had lost everything in the '20s, was given up to be raised by the Salvation Army. He promised himself four things: he'd keep his family together no matter what; there would always be lots to eat; he would have a nice, big house; and anyone would be welcome there.

While growing up in Edmonton, Stu found competitive sports -- swimming, soccer, hockey, football, baseball, softball and wrestling. He played with the Edmonton Eskimos in 1938 and '39. But it was wrestling that snared him.

After the war, Stu became a professional wrestler but soon started promoting bouts. He created Stampede Wrestling in 1948 about the same time Smith, his first son, was born.

Remembering his childhood, Stu bought the biggest house he could afford in 1951 -- the Crandell House and about 30 acres of land.

In the 1920s the house had been an orphanage for 60 children. Today, the mansion is a provincial historic site surrounded by posh condos, apartments and homes on Broadcast Hill in southwest Calgary.

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Visitors to the house included the likes of the Maguire Twins, Andre the Giant, midgets, boxers Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano and Olympic medallist runner Jesse Owens.

By the time Smith was 17, the family had grown to 12 children -- eight boys and four girls.

"I have done a lot of business with the tooth fairy over the years," said Helen.

Sports were a ritual on Sunday afternoons. The basement where the children learned to wrestle was known as The Dungeon.

"We had our own house league," Owen recalled.

Three of the four girls married wrestlers. Seven of the eight boys were all in pro wrestling for a while. Today, three of the boys are teachers and one is a firefighter. Owen and brother Bret were the most-famous stars in the World Wrestling Federation.

All of the children went to the same schools: Wildwood Elementary, Vincent Massey Junior High and Ernest Manning High. Owen and Diana, the two youngest, seemed to "fall into the groove" made by their brothers and sisters, Diana once told the Herald.

Owen even had two older brothers, Bruce and Keith, as substitute teachers.

"Usually you can joke and fool around with subs. Not with your brothers," Owen recalled.

In an unusual twist, Owen fought brother Brett for the World Wrestling Federation title in 1994. The two brothers battled it out in the ring before millions of North American viewers during Wrestlemania X before a sellout crowd of 19,000-plus in New York.

The brothers sweated and battled and grunted and slammed each other in earth-shaking fashion.

When it was over, the victorious Owen mocked his older brother before the huge audience: "I'm the best there is, the best there was and the best there will ever be."

The family has become an institution in Calgary because of their tight bond and high profile. Sunday family dinners, with upward of 40 children, grandchildren and in-laws, are surely unique in the city. But they have suffered other tragedies, losing Dean Hart to kidney disease in 1990 and a grandson, Matthew to flesh-eating disease in 1996.

Owen took time out from his busy schedule to return home last year to fight for his parents.

Stu and Helen wanted to sell a parcel of land they had hoped to subdivide. City hall refused. Owen and Bret wanted the fight to be best two out of three falls.

"(It's) just so wrong," Owen said at the time. "There were many years when my dad gave away more than he made."

Owen had his share of drop-kicks to the chops during his career. He was often overshadowed by Bret, who had bigger fame and made more money.

But he never regretted stepping into the ring versus a life as a wrestling promoter.

"(Dad) wanted to pass the reins on to his sons, but I didn't want to get involved," Owen once said.

"I didn't want to be responsible if the ring didn't show up, or if the world champion's flight was cancelled. "

Stu and Helen Hart's children

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12 children -- eight boys and four girls.

From oldest to youngest:

Stu and Helen Hart's children

12 children -- eight boys and four girls.

From oldest to youngest:

Smith

Bruce

Keith

Wayne

Ellie

Georgia

Bret

Alison

Ross

Dean

Diana

Owen

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**GRAPHIC:** P Photo: Stu Hart; Photo: Stu Hart; Photo: Bruce Hart; Photo: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald / Owen, left, and Bret in March 1998.; Photo: Keith Hart; Photo: Smith Hart; Photo: Owen Hart; Photo: Ellie Hart; Photo: Mike Sturk, Calgary Herald / The Hart family, with dad Stu, with his arm around wife Helen, and Owen holding daughter Athena in March 1998.; Photo: Owen Hart ; Photo: Diana Hart

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