

# The Gift of New Life



By Sherris Moreira-Byers



**H**ELENE ROBERTS LOVES BEING A MOM. She also loves being a grandmother. In fact she loves the experience so much, she shares it with others.

Literally.

The 47-year-old Shenango Township woman is, what is commonly termed as, a surrogate mother, though the current term is gestational carrier.

"I love being a mom, no ifs, ands or buts," said the mother of four and grandmother of three. "That's part of the reason I do this. So people can experience what I have. My kids are everything. We're still close. We hunt, we fish, we bowl."

At 42, with her children grown, she decided to look into being a surrogate mother. "I remember when I was younger, people who couldn't have (babies)," Helene said. "I'd say I'd help you if I could. But (surrogacy) wasn't very well known then."

After reading an article in a newspaper, she searched on the Internet and found fertility lawyer Melissa Brisman. Helene was sent a packet of information. And it didn't take long for her to hear from a potential set of parents, though the next step was extremely intense.

"Believe me, they check you out, every toothache I've ever had, when I was potty-trained, your family

life, your sex life, your school life, everything," Helene said. "Then they do medical testing. My first set of blood tests took 23 vials of blood. Then they do psychological testing to be sure you are mentally capable of doing this and in the right frame of mind."

She explained that the lawyer had to accept her, the physician had to accept her, the psychologist had to accept her as well as the intended parents. "Or I can just say, I don't want to have a baby for them," Helene said. "Part of that is in the profile. You can pick if you don't want to have a child for a gay couple or one for a different race. It's all optional. I didn't have a preference. If I (feel) sure the baby is going to a good, stable home, then I will have it."

Another stipulation is that the gestational carrier must already have children. "That way there is less chance of (a surrogate mother) keeping it," she said. "I know the baby is not mine. I'm only helping the parents. I have nothing for myself intended. But I always thought it would be a neat thing to do. I carry kids easy. I love being pregnant. I never get sick a day."

Overall, the testing takes no more than two months, Helene said, adding that her family was also supportive of her decision to pursue this path.

Once everything was deemed OK, Helene worked with a couple from New York, Nan and Peter, who wanted to have biological children, but were unable to because of Nan's difficulty conceiving. "Every time I got pregnant, I miscarried," Nan explained. "It appears my body rejects fetuses as a foreign substance."

Jason Kapusta

Though the couple adopted a son, Nicholas, from Russia, they were still interested in having biological children as well to give their son siblings. But despite repeated fertility treatments, Nan was unable to carry a child.

“I knew I couldn’t go through these disappointments anymore. I had to have a backup plan,” she said. The couple decided that maybe a gestational carrier was the answer. They, too, contacted fertility attorney, Melissa Brisman who eventually got them in contact with Helene.

“We liked what we saw on paper so a meeting was set up,” Nan said. “And when we met, we really realized what a wonderful person she is. But there was nothing binding until all parties signed and until we all had gone through psychological counseling and testing. That’s all part of the process.”

After the third embryo implantation attempt, Helene was pregnant – with twins!

According to Helene and Nan and Peter, an agreement had been struck prior to the implantation attempts that in the case of a multiple pregnancy, they would keep all the children. Helene explained that without it designated in a contract, the worst-case-scenario is that a couple might say they only agreed to keep one child created from the implantation process.

“It’s all in the contract,” Helene said. “If they get a divorce or die, (the baby) will go to either parent or who they have set up in case of death. The child is not mine. All I do is nourishment. (The baby will) have no DNA that will match me. Of course I would keep it if no one wanted it, but that is not a problem.”

But Helene said that was certainly not the issue with Nan and Peter. “They were thrilled,” she said.

“It was our ideal,” said Nan. “Both Peter and I are older parents and we had thought the ideal number of children for us would be three, so this kind of made it

a faster process. She didn’t have to go through pregnancy twice. We were very happy about it actually. And when we found out it was boy/girl twins, we couldn’t have been more ecstatic.”

The couple kept in contact with Helene throughout her pregnancy.

The twins, Alice and James, were born in July 2004.

“When we got to the hospital, I immediately burst into tears. It was very emotional,” said Nan. “Nicholas’ association with hospitals was people being really sick, since my father had died a couple months earlier, so he was a little cautious, but then he saw us laughing and crying, and he got really excited too.”

With the success of her first surrogate pregnancy, it didn’t take long for another couple to contact Helene via the attorney.

“If you’ve been a good surrogate and they



Helene holding twins Alice and James, her first delivery as a surrogate mother.

still think you are of good health, they ask you if you would consider doing this again,” she said. “At my age, I don’t want to wait forever, but I said if you had someone soon, I would consider it. There’s a lot of people that can’t have children. So we started right off the bat again.

This time, a childless New York couple in their 30s, who struggled with infertility due to the wife’s medical condition, contacted Helene.

Sharon, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was on medication that may have impeded conception as well as cause Spina Bifida in babies. But going off the medication was not an option. “When I did (try to conceive) I wasn’t feeling well. I was in bed constantly. I was not functioning like I normally function,” she said. “At that point, we realized that natural pregnancy would not be the way to go and my husband (Michael) was also concerned about postpartum depression on my part.”

Though the couple looked into international adoption, they ended up getting in touch with a fertility lawyer – the



Helene plays with Alice, while twin brother James swings with mom Nan. Helene is in her second surrogate pregnancy during the visit with the first family she carried children for.

same one connected with Helene. But the couple went through seven potential carriers before they came to Helene. "It was a long, grueling process to get to Helene," Sharon said, adding that it became the "best experience of my life. First of all, thinking that you cannot have children, your own biological children, then finding a scientific way to have children with the aid of another person is wonderful."

The pregnancy process yielded a son for the couple in May 2006, and they got to cut the cord as Helene gave birth to him. "I was very excited and a little loud. I was kind of like screaming. I was saying, 'Helene, I love you' and hugging her," Sharon said.

Helene said after that birth, the couple asked her if she would carry another child for them, to give their son a sibling. "I said if you don't wait long," she said. "I would consider it. So six months after the first child was born, they contacted me. It took about a year for it to happen, so that puts about two years between the children."

Helene delivered their second child,

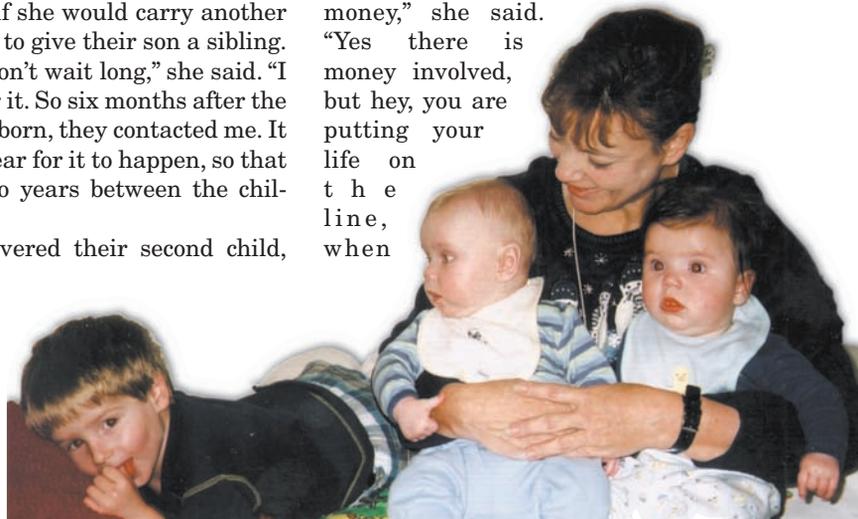
also a son, in February.

When asked about the whole idea of a gestational carrier, Sharon understood people's concerns. "They just don't understand the story," she said. "They haven't gone through it themselves. I think it's a question of trust. Helene trusts us 100 percent and vice versa. That's why it worked. I never worried (about her) taking care of herself, therefore taking care of our child. It was a leap of faith, but it was the only way we could have had our biological children. And having Helene was the big plus of it."

Sharon added that, not friends, but associates questioned the whole process. "They were skeptical; they believed she was in it for the money," she said.

"Yes there is money involved, but hey, you are putting your life on the line, when

Helene visits with Alice and James and their big brother Nicholas.



you carry a child for someone. You deserve every penny.”

Nan agreed. “Having our children was the most incredible gift we’ve ever been given except for Nicholas. They are equal huge gifts. Helene is one of the most incredible women I’ve ever met. Truly generous of spirit and loving and giving. I don’t know that I’ve ever met anyone quite like her.”

Helene, who declined to discuss financials, said that gestational carriers can get paid or not. During the screening process, a financial background of the potential carrier is also an issue. “They don’t want this to be a job,” she said. “You have to be financially solid. But everything’s basically a choice of what you want in the contract.”

Both couples remain in contact with Helene.

“A lot of times, if you are a surrogate, that’s all you are and no contact afterwards. Instead I now have an extended family,” Helene said. “You’ve never met people who are more appreciative in all their life.” She has visited with both families and their children since their births.

“I can’t imagine not keeping in touch,” Nan said. “Though it wasn’t her expectation, I could never imagine giving birth to a child and not knowing what’s going on in that child’s life. It would be the most searing pain. I feel this way about Nicholas’ mother. We don’t know her at all.”

“The biggest question – is it hard to give them up? No,” said Helene. “They’re not mine. I have my children. I have my family. It’s actually very rewarding to give something like that when others can’t have them. Basically at my age, what is there to accomplish? You’ve worked. You’ve had your children, your grandchildren. Not everyone can do this and have really long-lasting effects. I’ve been blessed to be part of their families.”

Sharon agreed. “I feel like I’m so close to her. She’s a wonderful person and she gave us our own genetic children. Just the entire experience, we never had a problem with it, it went so smooth. She’s so responsible and warm and loving and down-to-earth. I can’t say enough good things about Helene.”

Helene said she was just happy to be of help to the couples, then said laughingly, “I’d stay pregnant forever, but I’d look funny in a nursing home pregnant.”

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*Photos contributed except where noted.*