

The Surrogacy Experience

Part Two

An interview with Leanne and Antionette

25 November 2010

VOICE OVER:

The Surrogacy Experience.

This is program TWO in a series of THREE podcasts about Surrogacy, presented by the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority or VARTA in Victoria, Australia....at VARTA.org.au.

Important changes to legislation since 1st January 2010 mean that surrogacy is now legal in Victoria.

In this podcast we hear from a mother, Leanne, whose son was born through a surrogacy arrangement. And we meet the surrogate who made this possible.

For Leanne's mother, Antoinette, the idea of helping her daughter have a family had always been on her mind. She had already helped Leanne with a kidney transplant. To act as a surrogate was an offer that she made easily.

ANTOINETTE:

Hello, my name is Antoinette and I'm the mother of Leanne who gave birth to my grandson in 2006.

So her doctor said that she... I could have the baby for her even though I was 52 years of age and I'd donated a kidney as well. So we got permission from our doctor that it was OK for me to carry the baby and it all went through.

I really said yes straight away without even speaking to my husband. But when I went home that day my husband said "yes", he was very enthusiastic about me doing it.

The Surrogacy Experience

LEANNE:

At that stage because of her age we didn't think that was possible till we met with the specialist that said yes it was. And I suppose by the time we got to that point with that surrogacy process I was well aware of my contacts; who I need to speak to. I was an expert in the process. And I think too, once you go from having... she was a family friend and in a sense then you go to your Mum who you have, one of the closest bonds you have with anyone. I think that was such a natural progression having someone that I totally trusted, somebody I could be totally honest with. She was totally sympathetic of our situation of how we got to that point.

We still had to have meetings with psychologists, with psychiatrists, with a legal representative, make sure we met with the counsellors with the relevant infertility clinic. And once we got approved we did an embryo transfer and she fell pregnant first time.

ANTOINETTE:

Actually the treatment was a lot better than I expected. I'd gone through menopause. Once we went to Sydney and spoke to the doctor he gave me some drugs which brought back my periods. So I got two periods. And we went ahead with the actual transfer. And it was the easiest pregnancy that I've ever, ever had.

VO:

We're talking with Leanne whose mother Antoinette acted as surrogate mother to her daughter to give birth to the child that Leanne could not carry.

LEANNE:

And then I had a little bit of fear once that had happened because my Mum was a lot older than a normal woman would be being pregnant.

I had this balancing act, that I'm worried about these two people. So there was this life, this little baby growing inside and then there was my Mum. But we just made sure that we did our research. Another thing we looked into even prior to my mother falling pregnant, we wanted to make sure we sourced a good obstetrician. Making sure that a good relationship had been established with an obstetrician, was aware of that arrangement that could work for us within that arrangement. And making sure he or she could take on the case once the surrogate became pregnant because we didn't want to chase our tails once the surrogate became pregnant and then having to source an obstetrician to deal with an unusual situation. So we kind of did all that leg work as well prior to her falling pregnant.

The Surrogacy Experience

It just made the pregnancy so much easier because we did all the establishing network of support once the pregnancy had occurred. And that's just a lesson you need to be concerned about.

It was funny, with my Mum she was very much not excited from a mother's perspective but very much with her first grandchild that was growing. And I even remember the first ultra sound we went to, Mum was about 8 weeks pregnant and she laid there on the ultra sound table, and she made the comment - my husband was there and I was there - and she made the comment, "just pretend I'm not here". And you talk to the doctor and discuss... and pretend I'm not here and tell me all about it when I leave, like yeah.

So she was very much made a concerted effort that it was going to be as much our pregnancy as hers. She was very selfless in that way of approaching it that way. So yes, it brought us closer together and very much my mother would say "now Leanne, you read all the books and you let me know what I have to do". So it was very much about you take control of the situation and I'll be the one that grows this little baby inside here and you drive it.

VO:

This was not to be an ordinary birth. As the pregnancy developed Leanne and her husband continued with their preparations. How would the delivery be handled in the hospital with both mother and daughter so intimately involved?

LEANNE:

We'd also set up a meeting with the nurses on the ward. I think it was about a month before the baby was due to be born. And even little things like that we wanted to make sure that the staff were across our situation. Obviously we have a situation where a woman's giving birth but she's not going to be the care giver or taking that baby once the baby is born.

We didn't want a situation where nurses were coming into the room and not being aware of the situation. So we had a meeting with the head nurse of the ward and she briefed all her staff and was very much aware of the situation.

We even discussed things prior to the birth like who was going to hold the baby first. I know that sounds like something quite trivial but we even discussed those things. Mum said to me I want you to be the first to hold the baby then your husband and then I'll be third to hold it.

So even things like that were discussed in the room. And even it was good in the sense that the obstetrician said to us right from the start, "look my No 1 focus is to look after your Mum, she's my patient even though you're the biological mother and father of this child. But while that child is inside your Mum she is my priority".

The Surrogacy Experience

In our situation my Mum gave birth via a caesarean. So my husband and I waited anxiously all gowned up in the waiting area while they prepared my mother for an epidural and then we walked into the delivery room and Mum was laying there getting ready. And I started crying holding Mum's hand and saying, "Oh Mum! I'm so sorry I'm putting you through this". I was so excited I was about to give birth to this long-awaited child that again, seeing my Mum lying there I was concerned for her and I was holding her hand. My husband was waiting quite eagerly for the birth to happen and I'm holding Mum's hand and I'm crying.

ANTOINETTE:

I was getting ready to go into theatre. And my daughter was looking, sort of holding my hand and my son in law was at the birth and I had a caesarean. And as they were preparing me and getting everything ready for the birth I turned around and said, "will you stop caring about me and have a look at the birth of your child because you won't get this chance again."

So it was just a fantastic feeling. And I sort of made it... I didn't want to actually even hold the child. Not because I didn't want to. I wanted her to have the whole experience as if it was hers. Even all the doctors visits that we went to. I didn't even want to know I was pregnant, but they had to tell me which I was very disappointed. I wanted her to know before me.

I just wanted her to feel it was her child.

Even to this day I don't interfere, I never look at him as my son - he's my grandson.

LEANNE:

I have a beautiful four year old son.

When Kai was first born I remember holding him and my husband holding him. Then they said to us we could take Kai back to our room. That was quite nice because Paul and I did have some time with the three of us. But then I was just remembering wanting to be with Mum making sure she'd recovered from the cesarean and was OK. And because everything was so pre-planned and he was such a long-awaited baby that everyone was so excited... And the other person involved was my Dad because obviously he had my Mum's health concerns there as well. He was kind of waiting to make sure she was OK as well.

The Surrogacy Experience

We went back to our room and we had a room full of people. I'll never forget, we had this little boy sitting in his cradle in the hospital and everyone was oohing and aahing over this beautiful boy. And Mum was in the other bed because she'd had a reaction to the anaesthetic and she was quite sick. So she was actually vomiting into a bucket. And I just remember looking in the room and everyone didn't even notice my Mum. Everyone was just looking at this baby. And I thought, this poor woman, she's just given birth and she's over the other side of the room so sick. And everyone's just oohing and aahing over the baby. And I remember going up to Mum and going, "are you OK?" Because everyone had forgotten that she was even there. So that was something that I did, even though I was so happy that I'd just become a mother I made a concerted effort to make sure that I involved her, to make sure she was OK.

But once the baby was born and it was kind of separated from her as an individual everyone had kind of put her to the side and all that focus was back on the baby. I remember... This was another thing we discussed prior to the baby being born. I said to Mum I wanted her to come home with us and the baby because I want her to feel like that once the baby was born she was going to be cut out.

Because I was just aware that I didn't want her to feel like, that she'd just given us this baby and we'd forgotten about her so that was another thing. I wanted it to be her decision when she was ready to move away from the situation. And I think she was grateful for that and probably after about five days she said no, I think it's time I went home.

Not only was she a surrogate but it was also her grandchild, her first grandchild. So I didn't want her to miss out on having that time with him as well. That's the other thing that we discussed.

It's funny, when we were in the hospital Kai would wake up every three hours for a feed and Mum would be sound asleep. She would not wake. And I obviously had it through to my brain that I had to wait for the cry. And I'd say to Mum: "Did you hear him crying?"

And she'd say: "No not at all, he's not my baby, he's your baby. I'm sleeping." It's funny how she already, obviously, she'd already psychologically disconnected herself from being the mother of the child and being the grandmother of the child. I think that's something that she really made an effort in doing, yeah.

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The Surrogacy Experience.

This has been program TWO in a series of THREE podcasts about Surrogacy - from the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority or VARTA in Victoria, Australia at VARTA.org.au. Made possible by the Victoria Law Foundation. Our thanks to Leanne and Antoinette for sharing their story.

The Surrogacy Experience

For more information surrounding assisted reproductive treatment and surrogacy go to VARTA, that's V.A.R.T.A. at varta.org.au.

The Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority in Victoria, Australia.