

Surrogate Mothers' New Niche: Bearing Babies for Gay Couples

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On a spring morning not long ago, Lura Stiller sat in her stocking feet in a sunny cottage in Cambridge, Mass., helping Cary Friedman and his partner, Rick Wellisch, calm their daughter, a 3-month-old in a pink T-shirt.

Ms. Stiller, 34, a homemaker from the Dallas suburbs, likes to say that the number of gay people in her acquaintance before she met Dr. Friedman, a psychiatrist, and Dr. Wellisch, an internist, amounted to zero. "Everything I knew about gay people I knew from TV, which meant that everything I knew about gay people I learned from 'Will and Grace' and 'The L Word,' " she said.

In December, Ms. Stiller gave birth to the baby, named Samantha, for Dr. Friedman and Dr. Wellisch, conceived with a donor egg and the sperm from one of the partners. (They chose not to know which.) In her decision to work with them Ms. Stiller is part of a small but growing movement of surrogate mothers choosing gay couples over traditional families.

As legislatures debate giving gay couples the right to marry - 14 states have amended their constitutions to prevent it - hundreds of couples are finding ways to create families with or without marriage through surrogates like Ms. Stiller, who are willing to help them have children genetically linked to them and to bypass the often difficult legal challenges gay men face in adoption.

The exact number of surrogates who have worked with gay couples is unknown, but close to half of the 60 or so agencies and law firms around the country that broker arrangements between surrogate mothers and prospective parents work with gay couples or are seeking to, through advertising.

Within the close-knit world of professional childbearers, many of whom share their joys and disillusionments online and in support groups, gay couples have developed a reputation as especially grateful clients, willing to meet a surrogate's often intense demands for emotional connection, though the relationships can give rise to other complications within the surrogate's family and community.

Many surrogates who choose to work for gay couples say they feel ill equipped or reluctant to deal with the sense of hopelessness and failure expressed by married women and men who have struggled unsuccessfully for years to bear children. Still others are drawn to men as clients because they fear the possible resentments and jealousies in working so closely with other women.

Surrogates, who are paid about \$20,000 above and beyond medical expenses to carry a child, are responsible for approximately 1,000 births a year, according to the

Organization of Parents Through Surrogacy, a nonprofit group in Gurnee, Ill., that records births brokered through agencies and privately over the Internet.

The many surrogates who choose not to work with gay couples frequently cite a spouse's disapproval or fears that their own children might be stigmatized by classmates and neighbors. In some instances surrogacy brokers bow to their own reservations. Ann Coleman, an adoption and surrogacy lawyer in Greenville, S.C., said she would not pair women with gay couples.

Though she once represented a lesbian couple in a custody suit against their former husbands, Ms. Coleman said she believed gay couples should pursue children through adoption, not surrogacy. "I don't know that I'd go to the extreme to help them do this," she added.

In the last 13 years, Ms. Stiller has had five children: one with her first husband, two with her current husband and two more as a surrogate.

Her first excursion into the world of surrogacy, for a Florida husband and wife, left her feeling unappreciated and depleted, she said.

Though the couple visited her in her 18th week of pregnancy and brought gifts for her children, Ms. Stiller sought a deeper relationship with the intended mother, a 40-year-old doctor.

"She would call me as if I were working on a project," Ms. Stiller said. "She wouldn't say: 'Hi, how are you feeling? Are you enjoying the weather?' Nothing. There was never any chitchat."

In her 37th week, Ms. Stiller experienced early contractions and called the woman, who drove to Texas right away, but Ms. Stiller remained displeased with her level of engagement.

"She was here for two and half weeks, and she never made an opportunity to share in my family," Ms. Stiller said. "It was very important for me to have my children see that we were helping to create a family, that Mommy wasn't giving away a brother or a sister."

A friend in the surrogate world suggested she find a gay couple through the agency Circle Surrogacy.

John Weltman, a Boston lawyer, had a challenging time finding women to carry children for gay men when he founded Circle Surrogacy a decade ago. Today, he said, 80 percent of the surrogate mothers who come to him say they would be willing to work with gay couples, and half prefer to work with gay couples.

In Los Angeles, Growing Generations, a company formed to help gay couples become parents through egg donation and surrogacy, is responsible for over 300 births, increasing from four births in 1998 to 108 within the last 17 months.

Dawn Buras, a Pennsylvania mother of four, has been to a fertility clinic in Los Angeles three times to receive embryonic transplants for a male couple in Milton, Mass. On each occasion the men accompanied her to the West Coast. They took adjacent hotel rooms, dined out and visited the set of "Desperate Housewives." The pregnancy attempts failed, but still the men try, refusing to work with anyone else.

And Ms. Buras remains committed, and plans to return for another attempt in June, despite the limitations their efforts have placed on her intimate life. According to her contract, Ms. Buras cannot have sex with her husband from one month before the transfer to one month after. Though her husband has been very supportive, she explained, "I can't say that it doesn't bother him, because it does."

Nearly all agencies require that surrogates already have children of their own and that they and their husbands undergo medical and psychological screening to determine that they can handle the strains surrogacy inevitably levies on families.

When Ms. Stiller sent her 13-year-old son to school with a strip of pictures of Samantha and her two fathers in his knapsack, the boy tucked the pictures of the two men away, worrying that he or the situation itself would be made fun of.

Dr. Hilary Hanafin, the chief psychologist at the Center for Surrogate Parenting in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Encino, the country's largest surrogacy agency, said many surrogates with teenage children shy away from working with gay couples for such reasons. "The mother does not want to show up for a middle-school track meet and say, 'I'm pregnant for a gay couple,' " Dr. Hanafin said.

And sometimes relatives cannot withhold their judgments. "I had one surrogate whose mother-in-law disowned her," said Amy Zaslow, a consultant in Acton, Mass., to surrogates and prospective parents. "She did not walk into the house through the entire pregnancy." At Christmas, Ms. Zaslow said, the woman's children went to their grandmother's house, and she was not invited along.

Most surrogates today, for heterosexual or gay couples, work as gestational carriers, meaning they bring children to term but not with their own genetic material. (Couples availing themselves of surrogacy typically get eggs from banks where donors are identified by their height, weight, College Board and I.Q. scores.)

For Ann Nelson, 36, a mother of four in Wheeling, W.Va., an urge toward surrogacy began to surface in college. The first couple with whom she tried to work, a man and a woman from New England, asked her to sign a contract before insemination that stipulated she would eat no processed foods or refined sugars during her pregnancy.

"I thought, 'Have you ever been to Wheeling, W.Va.?' " said Ms. Nelson, who decided not to go forward with that couple. "Where was I going to find these things?"

"I knew that surrogacy was not going to be a cakewalk, but I hadn't expected and wasn't prepared for this level of micromanagement."

She has since borne three children for two gay couples.

The typical surrogate, according to the Center for Surrogate Parenting, is a woman of 21 to 37, who has had two children and 13 years of formal education. In many cases, she is motivated by a desire to be pregnant, as well as by a desire for attention.

Working with gay couples, psychologists say, minimizes the need for a certain kind of emotional vigilance that can displace the surrogate's own needs from center stage. "Surrogate mothers who work with heterosexual couples need to be incredibly sensitive to the loss and trauma that the infertile woman has suffered," Dr. Hanafin said.

Some surrogates also say they find the sense of defiance in providing gay couples with children meaningful.

"In all honesty, there's a bit of a rebellious nature in me," acknowledged Shannon Klein, a mother of three in Cypress, Calif., who home-schools her children. "I know that there are people who wouldn't approve of being a surrogate for gay parents, and that has made it more intriguing."

Ms. Klein has borne two children for two gay couples, and she is pregnant with twins for a third.

"When she initially approached me with this, I said, 'You want to do what?' " commented Ms. Klein's husband, Mark. "But we've developed friendships with these people, not fly-by-nights, but lifelong relationships with people we may never have met otherwise."

Ms. Stiller's visit to Cambridge in March was her second. She made her first, as a surprise to the future fathers, when she was 35 weeks pregnant, to reciprocate for the flowers they sent and the visits they made, including one for her ultrasound test. They cared for her children in Texas while she recuperated from giving birth to Samantha before Christmas. Seeing the baby for the first time, she said, "was like seeing the baby of your best friend."

Dr. Friedman said, "We didn't go into this saying, 'We want an intense relationship,' but I didn't necessarily expect that we'd develop the bond that we have."

They will have little competition for Ms. Stiller's affections. She will be working with no other couples in the future. When her husband, Keith, returned home last month from Iraq, where he had been stationed for a year, he told her he did not want her to work as a surrogate again.

"He was concerned for my health and emotional well-being," Ms. Stiller said. "For a year your life is devoted to someone else's."