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Miracles of motherhood

Mom of 4 to celebrate 1st Mother's Day

By **Bonnie Miller Rubin**
Tribune staff reporter
Published May 12, 2007

After four years of infertility treatments, Donna Flynn of Hinsdale willed herself to make one last attempt at motherhood. She would hire a surrogate to carry her embryos, though a doctor said the chances of success were slim.

Miles away in the Quad Cities lived Julie Gottwald, a mother of five children, ages 5 through 20, who thought she could help someone else become a mom.

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As a result of their partnership, Flynn and her husband, Mike, will celebrate their first Mother's Day on Sunday as the parents of triplets -- three 11-month-old girls -- carried and birthed by Gottwald.

Surrogate arrangements, while growing in numbers, remain a rare choice among infertile couples. Multiple births are rarer yet, because implantation of multiple embryos has become less common in recent years. Moreover, the surrogate or the intended parents often choose to reduce a multiple pregnancy for medical or personal reasons.

So to have triplets by a surrogate? "Very, very, very rare," said one expert.

But the story doesn't end there. The Flynns also have a fourth child, age 3 months. He was a complete surprise, arriving the old-fashioned way.

The Flynns, both 41, hadn't expected such a large brood at one fell swoop, especially with Mike's two sons from a previous marriage, ages 15 and 12, living with them half the week. But after so much heartache, the couple took a deep breath and enthusiastically embraced the news.

And having navigated the delicate territory between surrogate and genetic mother with little friction -- also not an

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everyday occurrence -- Flynn and Gottwald remain fast friends long after Suzanne Julia, Margaret Claire and Sophia Faith entered the world June 8.

"It really is a miracle," Mike Flynn said. "You keep looking for something to go wrong ... and then, the dream is real because of the incredible gift of someone else."

Gottwald, her ex-husband and their kids attended the girls' christening and will be on hand for their first birthday next month. The Flynns named one daughter after Gottwald and her youngest child. Phone calls, e-mail and photos have become the glue of day-to-day life.

"Initially, I envisioned having a surrogate, a baby born, and then saying goodbye, going home and ending the relationship and contact," said Donna Flynn, whose business partner is currently running the executive consulting firm she owns. "Now, I can't imagine not having Julie in my life."

The first meeting

The two women met in July 2005 in the offices of Alternative Reproductive Resources, the Chicago-based agency that matched them. It was one of about 30 gestational surrogacies -- meaning the carrier has no genetic connection to the child -- the agency has facilitated since 2001.

Having endured three failed in-vitro attempts and two miscarriages, the Flynns hoped a surrogacy would end their heartache. But, accustomed to disappointment, they had already filled out the paperwork for a Guatemalan adoption.

Donna Flynn wrestled with her emotions. She felt embarrassed to seek help from another woman, an outsider. "No one does this out of convenience," she said. "You do this because your body can't do it on its own... . It's a very public failure."

Gottwald, who lives in Bettendorf, Iowa, and works for Alcoa, was a typical carrier in many ways, though older than some. (She's now 38.) She loved being pregnant, had an altruistic streak and had a personal connection to infertility: Her sister struggled for years with the condition before giving up.

"I just thought that this was something I could do for someone else," she said. "You're giving a couple the opportunity to become a family."

To be sure, surrogacy is also a commercial transaction, and of the \$65,000 in fees paid by the Flynns, Gottwald would receive \$20,000 to \$25,000 -- for child care, lost wages and other expenses. But "no one," she said, "would do this just for money."

During that first meeting, they talked about how the arrangement might unfold and shared photos of their families.

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