

# I BECAME A SURROGATE MOTHER - TO TRIPLETS

## AND THE EXPERIENCE WAS AMAZING, SAYS BENONI WOMAN

**W**HEN she heard she was carrying triplets, Zaida Steenkamp, 36, was taken aback.

Now she feels blessed, even though the two baby boys and a girl are not with her at the Benoni home that she shares with her husband and two daughters.

"They're with their father, a single gay man who commissioned her as a surrogate."

"I know how desperately some people want children and I believed this is something I really needed to do," she tells Verve in an interview.

"I discussed it with my partner, who said I must follow my heart. I started researching surrogacy and came across a website called babyzinnom.co.za

"I liked what I read and phoned Jenny Currie, who runs it. I believe it was meant to be, because in no time she matched me with a single guy of the same age as me, who desperately wanted kids."

"He and I met and clicked immediately. I found him soft-hearted and genuine. He said he liked my sense of humour and my outlook on life. I'm a calm person even though I'm a performing artist - I write my own songs and perform at corporate gigs and festivals."

"As the incubator, I think it's important that you are calm because the babies can feel if you are stressed or anxious."

"The commissioning father and I entered into a legal agreement, and the fertilisation of his selected donor eggs with his sperm took place at a fertility clinic in Sandton."

"The doctors at the fertility clinic normally implant two or

*Sir Ethon John recently did it, as did Sarah Jessica Parker, and childless men and women in South Africa have been arranging to have children by surrogates legally since April last year, writes Heather Dugmore*

three fertilised eggs into the surrogate mother in the hope that at least one takes. In my case, all three took.

"When I heard I was pregnant with triplets I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The commissioning father was speechless and ecstatic. He said he couldn't have asked for anything better," says Steenkamp.

**Even though they are not my babies, it is natural to feel an attachment to them**

ZELDA STEENKAMP

"He has a wonderfully supportive family, and he and his family were completely there for me during my pregnancy. If he could not make it to the scan, his mom or sister would come with me."

(Single males or male couples must, by law, provide proof that there will be a female influence in the child's life.)

"The back-up from my family was also incredible," says Steenkamp. "My daughters would rub my feet at night and they all helped me so much because, as I'll term approach, it became very heavy carrying three babies."

"I knew exactly where they were all lying and they behaved differently at different times. The baby girl was always active

when I was in the bath. At 33 weeks, my waters broke and my family rushed me to the Sandton Clinic. The father-to-be and his family were there to support me."

Steenkamp gave birth by Caesarean section to the triplets on October 24 last year. The babies each weighed 1.5kg and were moved to the ICU neonatal unit where they stayed for a month.

"When the father first held them, he said he had never felt so in love in his whole life," says Steenkamp.

"All three of them are absolutely perfect and gorgeous. He adores them and is a hands-on dad, feeding them, changing their nappies and spending all his time with them."

"As their surrogate mother I am so happy they are in such good hands. Even though they are not my babies, it is natural to feel an attachment to them."

"Unusually, their dad has asked me to remain in their lives. Most surrogate agreements stipulate that the relationship ends at the birth," says Steenkamp. "He wants them to know I carried them and I am happy about this."

"I wouldn't be a surrogate again because, as I said, it was quite heavy carrying, but it was an amazing experience and I feel I will be truly blessed for the rest of my life."

According to South African

law, surrogate mothers have to have at least one living child. This helps to minimise emotional complications when it is time to give up the child.

For commissioning parents, the process can be an expensive one as they have to pay legal fees to draw up surrogacy agreements, pay for in vitro fertilisation, cover the mother's

**I had no idea of the costs involved when I decided to be a commissioning parent**

STEVE, A GAY MAN

medical expenses and her loss of income during pregnancy.

Another gay man who commissioned his surrogacy agreement in April cautions other commissioning parents to have a clear idea of the process and costs involved.

Forty-year-old Steve, who wants to stay anonymous, says: "I am fortunate enough to be able to pay the R450 000 it will ultimately cost me, but I had no idea of the amounts involved when I first took the decision to be a commissioning parent."

Steve, who is gay had to find an egg donor and a surrogate. Selecting his donor eggs was highly important for him. "My first criterion was intelligence. You are given a comprehensive background on the person and,

while it is difficult to gauge intelligence on paper, I chose someone with a university degree and a good family history."

"I also selected on lifestyle and physical attributes - I am fair with light eyes, so I chose someone with similar characteristics as I would like the child to vaguely look like me."

The egg donor remained anonymous.

With his choice of the surrogate mother, he was more concerned that she was a healthy, relaxed person because he believes the experience in the womb plays a significant role in the child's life.

"I read an article in Time Magazine that explained how one-third of a child's make-up is nature, another third is nurture and the final third is their experience in the womb."

Steve is awaiting the second fertilisation process. "The first did not succeed."

"I am happy with my surrogate mother, but I am using different donor eggs this time as the doctor was not completely satisfied with the first ones," he explains.

Steve says that while he would have liked to become a father with a partner, he has not yet found the right person and did not want to wait any longer. "Doing it on my own is daunting but I have strong family support. My mother's support really surprised me because she comes from a strong Christian background."

"I want to have a child while I am still young enough, so that I can take him or her camping and hiking and do all the dad things."

## HOW THE FAMILY LAW FIRM IS INVOLVED

SOUTH Africans have been entering into surrogacy agreements for decades, but with enormous potential risk.

Internationally, there have been well publicised cases of surrogate mothers claiming the child as their own midway through pregnancy or after the child is born, causing huge grief and financial loss to the prospective parents.

But since last April, when the new Children's Act was promulgated, all parties to surrogacy agreements in South Africa have had the protection of the law.

Advocate Liza Segal, of the family law firm, Ad Idem in Illovo, Johannesburg, says she is pleased that the section on surrogacy has been well drafted. Over the past eight months she has drawn up several surrogacy agreements.

"The fact that all people in South Africa, irrespective of whether they are single, married or gay, can now legally apply to the High Court to have a surrogate mother carry their child or children is a positive step forward as it offers far greater protection all round."

It's now possible for an individual or couple to partner

their sperm or eggs - by law, the genetic material of at least one parent must be used - with donor eggs or sperm and have a surrogate carry the fertilised egg to term.

South Africa has clinics and agencies that provide genetic material or surrogates, which are subject to strict laws and regulation.

"This is not 'design your own baby'," Segal explains.

"The law stipulates that no court may confirm a surrogacy motherhood agreement unless the commissioning parent/s are unable to give birth to a child and the condition is permanent and irreversible."

Surrogacy is a vital lifeline for people desperate to have a child, Segal says.

She was involved in a case where a married woman had to have a partial hysterectomy after the birth of her first child and could not carry a second child. In another case, a childless married woman had developed an illness that made it life-threatening for her to carry a child. She had already had several miscarriages.

"There are many different reasons for surrogacy," says Segal. "A single man or a gay

male couple might also want to have children."

When it comes to having a child, South African law does not discriminate on grounds of sex or marital status.

"What it does assess is the surrogate mother's suitability to carry the child, whether all parties are competent to enter into the agreement and whether the commissioning parent will be suitable parent."

"I would appoint a social worker or psychologist to determine this and furnish a report for the court application."

According to the act, if the surrogate has a husband or partner, they must consent to the agreement. In certain circumstances, the courts may override the husband or partner's refusal to consent.

Legally, a doctor may only do the fertilising of the sperm and eggs after the High Court has approved the agreement.

Other than for medical reasons, the agreement may not be terminated after the fertilised eggs have been implanted in the surrogate mother. The agreement lasts for 18 months and the artificial fertilisation of the eggs has to be done according to the provisions of the

National Health Act

"Following the law is critical," emphasises Segal.

Even where the egg and sperm are those of the commissioning parents, if the surrogacy agreement does not comply with the act and is not confirmed by the court, the child born is deemed to be the child of the surrogate mother. Finding the money to go the surrogate route is another key issue.

While the surrogate may not be paid for carrying the child, all her expenses, including her medical care, life insurance, vitamin supplements and loss of income during the pregnancy must be paid.

"The going rate with all costs included starts at about R250 000 and can easily be R400 000 or more," says Segal.

Some commissioning parents pay for the surrogate mother's food too as they want her to eat healthily and they may also stipulate that she may not smoke, drink or take drugs during pregnancy.

They can even specify that the surrogate participates in a certain amount of exercise, or play classical music to the unborn child.

Safrazone X

JENNY Currie established baby2mom, her egg donor and surrogate agency in 2007.

"I was having in vitro fertilisation and I realised the need for this kind of service, especially after my husband and I were blessed with a little girl.

"Since 2007 I've been involved in over 400 egg donor programmes and 68 surrogacy programmes. Over 50 percent of the surrogate mothers have conceived."

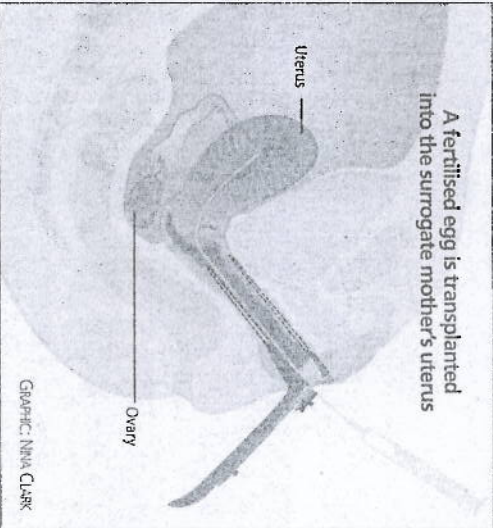
Currie says egg donors need to be between the ages of 18-34, have a healthy body mass index and participate in a medical and psychological review.

While their names are not disclosed a full profile of their physical attributes and their cultural, spiritual, academic, psychological and social background is provided.

Surrogates, on the other hand are not selected on their physical, academic or other attributes, and they can be 50 years of age or even into their menopause, as long as their uterus is healthy.

"What is important in a surrogate is that she is a nurturing person who is committed to leading a healthy lifestyle

A fertilised egg is transplanted into the surrogate mother's uterus



GRAPHIC: NINA CLARK

during the course of her pregnancy and who is a good personality match with the commissioning parent/s."

Adds Currie: "The law does not discriminate against gay couples or single people, and the surrogate might be a gay woman. As long as both parties are comfortable with each other, there is a match."

Supporting egg donors and surrogate mothers requires empathy and dedication. "They approach me, often through my website, and I have a close relationship with fertility clinics in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Bloemfontein."

Currie says that while surrogates may not profit from the process, they are compensated

for the time they are unable to work.

"Loss of income can vary from R1 500 to R50 000 a month.

"Some surrogates work throughout their pregnancy, others take off the several months or even the full nine months, depending on their agreement," she explains.

Having operated for three years before surrogacy became law, she says she has always encouraged participants to back up agreements with legal contracts.

The restrictive side of the new law for surrogate agencies is that they may not charge a fee for facilitating surrogacy programmes.

"There is a lot of work involved, including thoroughly briefing surrogate mothers and commissioning parents, and supporting the relationship, sometimes throughout the pregnancy," says Currie.

"But even if I may not charge for the surrogacy side of my business, I will continue offering the service.

"It is incredibly rewarding when a commissioning parent phones and says: 'I now have a child.'" - Heather Dugmore

# surrogates