

Alta Bates

IN VITRO FERTILIZATION PROGRAM

Jan and Carter's Story

"I'm moving to California to be close to my family," I announced to the disbelief of my friends in the city. A cheap rent-controlled apartment on busy St. Marks place in Manhattan's East Village had been my home for 18 years. This great neighborhood, many circles of friends, a gym with a swimming pool and a fantastic church kept me busy day after day, month after month. Years rolled by and in a blink of an eye, I found myself in my forties and childless. Having always assumed love would come at the 11th hour just in time for children, the big house and pets, I actually thought it had in the fall of 1999. But this man announced he was "afraid of intimacy" so I moved forward in my plans to become a mother, determined to do whatever it took.

The era of dancing at hip New York clubs, chi-chi restaurants with the girlfriends, fashion shows, parties downtown and celebrity events was over. No more daredevil rollerblading down noisy Fifth Avenue, no more chatter with the corner green grocers, no more fun shopping on lower Broadway. Packing up the contents of my cramped New York apartment (the equivalent of a 3-bedroom house, according to the movers) after nearly two decades was a horrendous ordeal. After a thousand good-byes, hundreds of tears and four going-away parties, I left Manhattan one dark November evening to drive cross-country alone. My journey was rich in emotion, music and American wonders: I trekked around Monument Valley, Mesa Verde and ancient Indian architecture of the Southwest. This last (some might say reckless) solo travel adventure of my pre-motherhood days ended with the frightful experience of being lost in the depths of Arizona's Canyon de Chelly at night, but finally I arrived in California.

The next few months were spent in Los Angeles with my sister, having several earnest talks with my mother and mournfully visiting sperm banks online. I was ready to take the leap. It wrenched my heart to not live that lifelong dream of a baby with a loving husband but soon I found my donor man – I call him Andrew. After the first artificial insemination by my doctor there I drove to nearby Santa Monica beach where I liked to say I got pregnant. I lay there motionless, hips elevated (whether necessary or not) for one hour with men passing by trying to chat me up. "Don't bother me, I'm getting pregnant!" I yelled. Needless to say, they quietly stepped on by, shaking their heads. In fact I *was* getting pregnant, as the test proved days later – the doctor and her staff were elated. I immediately phoned friends in New York including the minister at my church and started gearing up to move to the Bay Area where my parents were.

I was stunned when I saw how enormous a moving truck was necessary to transport 'my home' from where it had rested in storage those months in LA. How would I drive this giant rental the 400 miles north? It was a hair-raising trip up I-5 in that overstuffed vehicle, eye level with other truckers in their 18-wheelers. When I stopped to fill my 50-gallon tank with diesel, they'd ask, "You drivin' this thing by yourself?"

"Yes sir!" I replied, "and pregnant too!" I was ecstatic and wanted to tell the world. I sent out a group email to hundreds of friends and family announcing my good news. But ten days later I was flattened by shock and sorrow with a miscarriage at 11 weeks. My life froze but all was not lost – I still had enough hope to try again that spring.

I underwent four more inseminations with Andrew's sperm (exceptionally fine sperm, I might add, according to the lab technicians at the time of thawing) but to no avail. My group of doctors in Walnut Creek had begun to seriously disappoint me as well with their misinformation, unprofessional office and

lackadaisical attitude. "I'm wasting my money while my eggs dwindle away!" I thought. My optimism had drooped considerably. Then two unrelated sources recommended a fertility specialist in Berkeley, Dr. Chetkowski. My first conversation with Barb, his wonderful office manager, set a positive tone and I soon became his patient. I was impressed with him and his staff who were never (or never appeared to be) annoyed by my multitude of questions. They always provided straightforward information but the doctor frankly did not see me as any kind of success story. He gave me chances of slim to none of bearing a child with my own egg. It was not news I wanted to hear but I appreciated the honesty. Reluctantly he agreed to treat me because my fertility indicators read like those of a younger woman (FSH level was still under 10, thick uterine lining, etc.) If I responded well to the initial drugs he would go for In Vitro Fertilization, he explained, but still he remained realistic. With 30% success rate among all women and 5% among women over 38, at my age it was less than 1%. I left his office in tears more than once. But the drugs worked well. I produced about a dozen eggs and he was able to extract nine of them. Six of those fertilized and four made it to the transfer three days later.

My mother and I held our breath. She had been phenomenally supportive through all this, administering the drugs in my backside daily for two weeks. A call at my office on December 22nd, 2000 devastated my spirit for those darkest winter days and weeks...no pregnancy. That all-important hope factor had nearly reached zero. Dr. Chet advised against trying again, encouraged the use of donor eggs and remarked that he didn't want to waste my money. Again, I appreciated his integrity but I wanted to make one more attempt. It was expensive to be sure with none of it covered by insurance. But once again I rounded up the drugs at discount through mail order, former IVF patients with leftover vials and Costco pharmacy. And another regimen of shots – nearly 60 alone in the month's attempt – from the incredible nurses at Dr. Chet's, at home in my thighs and at mother's twice a day. Mother said little through all this and made light jokes, not wanting to express her feelings of empathy with me. But we methodically persevered. In the hospital bed I cried after finishing the initial prep before heading to surgery for another egg extraction. The nurse was encouraging – my hemoglobin was the highest possible and the oxygen in my blood was 100%. How healthy our tests can be but oh, how unhealthy a woman can feel when bearing a child feels near impossible. The doctor was his usual tender and competent self but this time the egg retrieval proved difficult. He only got five of the twelve I produced. The next day, however, he brightened to inform me that all five had fertilized (60% is the normal fertilization rate) and things were looking good. Three days later, Dr. Chet with his masterful steadiness implanted the eggs perfectly as my mother stood by.

Twelve days later the receptionist at my office rang with a call from my doctor's. I had asked the nurses to phone me late to avoid another day spent sobbing at the office. At this point, I assumed they were leaving early and could wait no longer to deliver the bad news. Calmly the nurse began, "I know you wanted us to wait 'til five to call"...I froze..."but I figured it was OK to call early if the news was good."

I wanted to scream, I couldn't breathe, my head pounded. I couldn't thank her enough. All the despair, the doctor visits and the bills disappeared from my mind. I knew my child was on the way! If any egg can make it through the trauma of an IVF it's going all the way, I reasoned. My estrogen levels were so high it appeared I had twins...and I did. Soon enough, as Dr. Chet had predicted, I lost one of them. But nature does what's best and I was thrilled to have my one well-developing 'Grade A' egg, as labeled by the embryologist. The doctor was clearly pleased and became more so with each subsequent visit. He called me his star patient, "the champ" who would soon break his record for the oldest successful IVF patient. After some weeks, he graduated me to a regular obstetrician.

Through all this I learned more about the human reproductive system than I ever wanted to know. But it is fascinating and I am thankful for the technology and for Dr. Chet's expertise in using it. Though experiencing this without a partner still made me sad, the excitement continued to build and the weeping never returned. I was plagued by big-time morning sickness and carpal tunnel but nothing went wrong with my pregnancy. I stopped the rollerblading early on but swam five days a week through October and kept up the gym and nightly yoga until the end of my pregnancy. Genetic testing revealed a low chance of chromosomal disorders despite the five percent risk of a Downs Syndrome baby at my age. I skipped the amniocentesis thinking that a 1-2% chance of miscarriage was high compared to my chances of getting pregnant again.

An ultrasound showed that my baby was a boy but I had already known that from three definitive dreams I'd had early on (one had revealed twins too.) His name would be my mother's maiden name, Carter. I phoned my father in Oregon with the happiness a woman might have when calling her husband with this news. Though I had no preference for a boy, I knew my dad did and he was thrilled that he would soon have his first grandchild to carry on the family name.

Every morning from the day of implantation until the end of November, I photographed my blooming bare belly for a 270-some photo collage. At my job I worked in a company of mostly men who rubbed that belly every day. (I just rubbed theirs right back.) Strangely and often sweetly, many of them acted very protective of me, saying things I'm sure they wouldn't say to a married woman. Nearly all the dads stopped by to recount their wives' labor and delivery stories in full detail. The jokes were flying. Anyone, man or woman, with a spot of any sort above the waist was lactating. Anyone with a spot or a spill below the waist had just had his or her water break.

Childbirth classes in the evenings, on the other hand, brought my mood down. It seems everyone is married in suburbia. I sat among the solicitous husbands and happy wives feeling low about my lot in life while maintaining an upbeat face. I was very open about my path to pregnancy and I never wanted anyone to think my child was a mistake or the result of a one-night stand.

In September 2001, my church in New York planned a baby shower for me so my big belly and I made the trip. The Sunday shower in the church social hall was a day of joy and craziness, lots of food, decorations and gifts, even from people I'd never met. Two days later we were scheduled to depart from Newark airport. But an earlier flight from Newark also headed for California that Tuesday changed the course of history. I was headed downtown close to the World Trade Center that morning to buy souvenirs for a friend when the disaster occurred. Soon after, I walked the streets of Manhattan with the other thousands of dazed and frantic New Yorkers, hearing the fighter jets overhead and smelling that awful air. Strangers stopped to tell me "Take care of yourself and that baby," as I questioned everything and my future with my child. A few hours after the attacks I ran into a former neighbor in my old apartment building. He looked at my pregnant figure with disgust. "You're bringing a child into this world?" he sneered. It is always hard to balance the delight of impending motherhood or a smiling baby with the grimness of political affairs, but we can only vow to make this planet a better place and teach our children to do the same.

With three more baby showers in California, at times I caught myself thinking that if for some reason my mother couldn't make it to the delivery room and I was surrounded by a group of strangers I'd still feel comfort, love and fearlessness just knowing the depth and breadth of my friendships. One shower was given by a friend at my mother's retirement center, a 'grandmother shower' for the both of us. Most of the elderly women there, both with and without children, fully understood my efforts at all cost to become a mother, even if IVF and anonymous sperm donation were unheard of in their day. It was reassuring to hear "you don't want to be our age and end up without a child" and "you're doing the right thing."

Labor came well past my due date and dragged on for 24 hours. I had guessed my musculature would make for some extreme conditions in delivery and it did. As if I needed confirmation, the monitor showed that I was having very strong contractions. But once I was in the pushing phase, my boy arrived in less than 10 minutes. This precious bundle was placed in my arms for only a quick look at his lovely face. I wanted to kiss him for hours but Carter had gotten meconium in his lungs and was whisked away to 11 miserable days in the Natal Intensive Care Unit. I now recall that period as an exhausted blur but I came to the NICU daily and sat at his side from 9 am to 10 pm. I was stressed but not depressed, knowing he'd pull through. With my head bent over his fighting little body, I prayed and sang songs hour after hour. I know some of the nurses felt sorry for me, there without a husband, but I had a whole church in New York and scores of friends keeping us strong and in their prayers. For as sick as Carter was, the doctors said he healed very quickly – one lung showed evidence of pneumonia and had partially collapsed. But he was tough, yanking out a ventilator that ran down to his lungs and had been securely taped to his face. (He didn't need it.) Soon after he pulled a feed tube out of his nose that was sending my milk to his stomach – he was ready for proper meal service, he decided! He then took to the breast and never looked back. He tormented the nurses until they finally sent him home where he settled down beautifully.

Life with Carter has been a whirlwind of action, worry and fun – a snowballing of layers of understanding, happiness and development. We've been learning and expanding in new ways together as he's grown from an amazing baby to a confident second-grader who cleverly teases his mother. His four grandparents enjoy their time with him and I am thrilled that they can enrich his life and he theirs. I'm in constant wonder over this best buddy of mine. Carter's a sociable guy who loves sports, math, singing and playing the piano. He spoke early, learned to read at three, and was fearless in the pool by six months. By six weeks, he was sleeping through the night and remains a good sleeper now at seven years. He knows more about nutrition than most American adults and prides himself on his healthy eating.

Carter had me in tears of frustration twice the first month of his life but since then I've shed only tears of joy over him. He is worth every year of waiting, every penny I spent and all the medical intervention. Do we really appreciate things more if they don't come easily? It feels like it. I am still in awe of his birth and am humbled in extraordinary gratitude. We have a fierce bond of mind and soul that increases every year. He expresses himself well, asks the deep questions of life and maintains a spirit of compassion and curiosity. Since his first New York City venture as an infant (for a glorious baptism at the church) he has been a good traveler. He studies the globe with plans for our next vacations and appreciates other cultures and languages. Already Carter knows that waste is bad whether we're talking cheap plastic toys, food, energy or war. In school he talks too much but excels academically. At home he is surrounded by powerful love which he gives back with mad affection and glee. With Carter I am newly loving baseball and soccer, enjoy all the holidays once again and have built up a huge repertoire of corny songs. I'm still overwhelmed by the enormity of motherhood and would never trade it in for my old life. My world BC (Before Carter) feels like ancient history now. But we have new history to make, more experiences to share, big adventures to find.

When we're out and about people sometimes tell me what a handsome boy he is. Unlike most mothers, instead of saying "Thank you," I reply (almost incredulously), "Yes he is, isn't he?" How can I say thanks for something I had nothing to do with? His beauty is a gift from God. And his existence is a gift from God and Dr. Chet. I give them both monumental thanks.