From the Cover

Surrogate

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Go, the men say again. "We'll be right here," Aaron says.

Jeremy disappears into the operating room to be with his wife. The other two — the fathers of the babies — wait outside.

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Starting in 2010, whenever Aaron Bell and Sid Cuecha could, they would sign on to the website of Growing Generations, a California surrogacy agency. To have a child, the 40-something businessmen in Phoenix would first need an egg donor and then a surrogate to carry the baby.

They would spend a few moments during lunch, then again in the evenings, and log on for hours on weekends. They scanned the profiles of the women, reading their statements, studying their pictures and videos. This one was pretty and articulate. That one athletic and intelligent.

"It *is* a lot like online dating," Aaron says, laughing.

When he and Sid met online 18 years ago, it seemed impossible that two gay men could ever become fathers. But that came to be what they wanted, more than anything. "Family is so important, to both of us," Sid says.

A state away, in Lincoln, Calif., a mother of two, sitting in her kitchen, was sifting through the same website, reading about the couples who desperately wanted to have a family.

Heidi Grosser probably first heard about surrogacy on an episode of "Oprah." It wasn't something to which she gave any thought. But then she met a woman at bunco night who was a gestational surrogate, pregnant for the third time, carrying a baby genetically unrelated to her.

"I got totally teary-eyed," Heidi says. "I thought it was amazing."

She talked to her husband, Jeremy, and he suggested she look into it. By the time he got home from work the next day, she had filled out an application online. They had been married for 11 years. He knew that once she set her mind to something, she would do it.

"I think everyone deserves a chance to have a family," Heidi says.

In their profile, the men wrote, "There is no doubt in our minds that our child will be the center of our lives." Looking at pictures, Heidi could practically feel how warm they were. In one, Aaron and his sister are sticking out their tongues. Her own son is named Aaron, too.

The first time Sid and Aaron, Heidi and Jeremy met, on Aug. 13, 2010, was carefully planned. Heidi and Jeremy flew in from Sacramento; Sid and Aaron drove from Phoenix to the Growing Generations office in Los Angeles.

They were told to arrive at specific times, staggered so they wouldn't run into each other before they could be properly introduced by a case manager. Aaron and Sid were nervous, and scouring the neighborhood to buy flowers for Heidi. Heidi and Jeremy were early and stopped at Starbucks.

As the appointment approached, Sid and Aaron rushed in the back door to the elevators, out of breath, and all four came face to face. Awkwardly, they all shook hands, and then the doors to the elevator opened.

They squeezed in with the office workers and smiled nervously at each other each time the elevator stopped to let other people off. At the top, they realized the elevator went only as high as the 12th floor; they were supposed to be on 13. They searched for a stairwell in vain and then went back to the lobby and realized they needed to take a different elevator.

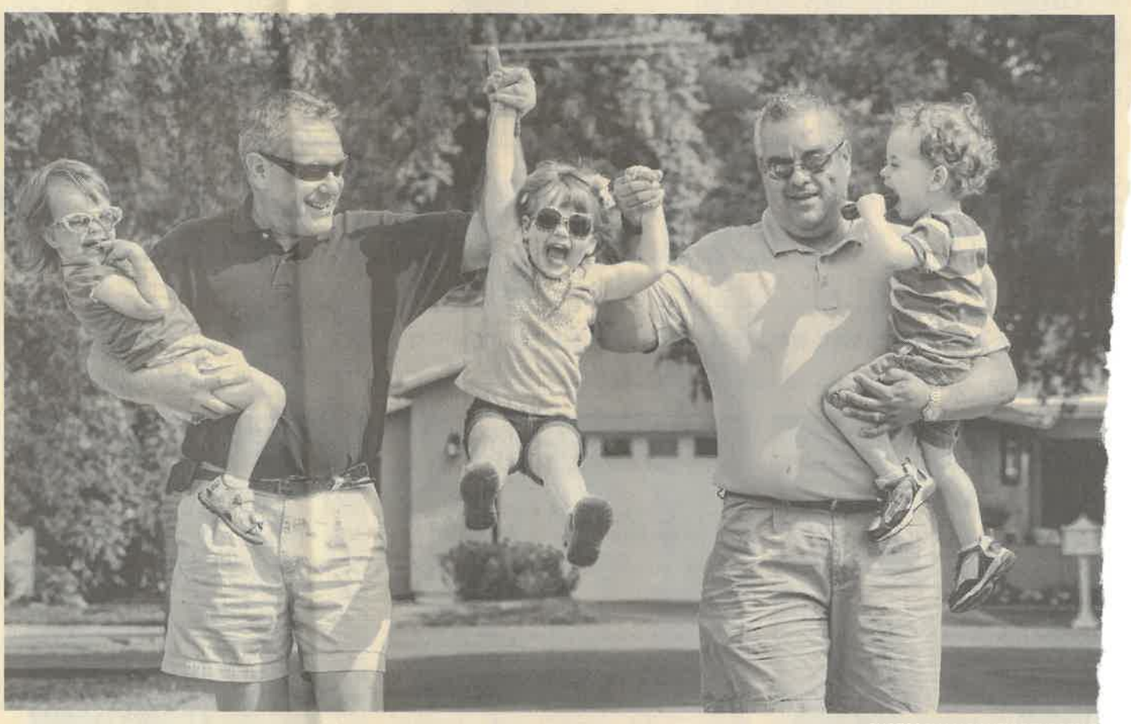
By the time the doors finally opened on 13, they all stepped off together, laughing.

The conversation to begin surrogacy, though, is a serious one.

Would Heidi be willing to carry multiples? the case manager asked. Were the men ready to parent and support more than one child?

Then, a tougher question: Would you be willing to reduce the number of embryos for medical reasons, to protect the health of Heidi or the babies?

There was silence. No one wants to



PHOTOS BY MARK HENLE/THE REPUB

Kelsie Bell, Aaron Bell, Caitlin Bell, Sid Cuecha and Riley Bell take a morning walk in their north Phoenix neighborhood. Starting a family throu surrogacy was "the best thing that we've done our entire lives," Aaron Bell said.

Qualifying as surrogate

At Growing Generations in Los Angeles, the agency Sid Cuecha and Aaron Bell of Phoenix used, only about 2 percent of the hundreds of women who apply every year clear the rigorous screening process to become surrogates.

Kim Bergman, a psychologist with Growing Generations, says the women who become surrogates often have a personal motivation, a gay uncle or a friend with fertility problems.

Typically the women are 25 to 35. Surrogates can't drink alcohol, smoke or use drugs, or have any history of postpartum depression or mental-health issues. They must be financially secure; they can't be dependent on surrogacy fees. A surrogate typically receives $25,000 to $35,000, paid in monthly stipends starting in the seventh week of pregnancy and the final one-third after delivery. All travel and medical expenses are covered.

Bergman matches surrogates and families carefully. Surrogacy is a complex arrangement that includes counselors, lawyers, insurance agents and doctors. It's important that everyone gets along.

The majority hope for a warm, cordial relationship throughout the pregnancy and birth. Afterward, contact varies. Some families keep in touch, sending cards and pictures and visiting occasionally. Some have no contact at all. The bond between Sid Cuecha and Aaron Bell and their surrogate's family is rare.

Details: growinggenerations.com.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Karina Bland has been a reporter for *The Republic* since 1990. She also writes a column, "My So-called Midlife," which runs on Sundays.
How to reach her
karina.bland@arizonarepublic.com
Phone: 602-444-8614
Twitter: @karinabland

Only a minute later, the door opens again. Baby B, also a girl but smaller. Someone calls out, "3 pounds, 11 ounces." And she's a shocking shade of violet.

She's not breathing.

Her face disappears under an oxygen mask. In the second incubator, gloved hands rub her chest, jostle her gently.

"Breathe," Sid says softly, over and over again. "Breathe."

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A nurse from the lab had called with the results of Heidi's test for the hormone human chorionic gonadotropin, better known as hCG, which is produced during pregnancy, on Jan. 30, 2011. Any reading above 25 indicates pregnancy. Heidi's result was 797.

"Congratulations," the nurse said. "You are *very* pregnant!"

An ultrasound at four weeks showed that Heidi was carrying triplets. She called Aaron to tell him.

"Oh, my God. Wow," he thought, and in

Sid Cuecha (left) and Aaron Bell have a special bond with Heidi Grosser, the surrogate mother of their children. Grosser visited the men and Kelsie (from left), Caitlin and Riley in April.

sound technician moved the wand over the baby, a girl, and the baby opened her hand, like she was waving.

"Well, hello there," Heidi said, waving back. She nicknamed her "Houdini."

But one doctor would recommend they terminate the third baby. The fetus was likely undeveloped and could have birth defects. Another doctor said reducing at 15 weeks into the pregnancy could put all three at risk.

Heidi wanted to keep all three. Jeremy agreed.

"Are you sure?" Aaron asked. They were, and Sid, too. Sid said, "God obviously has a plan for us."

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Finally, there's a cry from the second incubator outside the operating room.

A pink spot appears on the top of Baby B's head and fans out, creeping down her face, moving almost in a perfect line as if she is being scanned by a machine. The violent violet changes to pink, the line moves along her tummy, down her legs to her tiny toes.

It takes just minutes. It *feels* like hours. A nurse looks over at the men and tells them, "She's fine now."

The men wipe their eyes, and from inside the operating room, on the other side of the door, they clearly hear screaming. Baby C, the boy, breathing — apparently angry, but breathing.

The door opens, and Sid and Aaron hear *and* see just how angry. His scrunched-up face is red.

Someone calls out, "5 pounds, 4 ounces."

The babies are wrapped snugly in white blankets, the incubators unplugged from the walls, the wheels unlocked. The teams race for the elevators. The neonatal intensive care unit is one floor up.

Tyler. On one visit, Sid made his carne asada.

Heidi, her belly big with babies, would watch the two families together, and think that she had made a perfect choice.

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Inside the operating room, on the other side of the door, all the focus is on Heidi.

Heidi is still groggy; she complains of being nauseated. Tubes suction out blood, and Jeremy watches as one container fills and the blood flows into the next one.

"That's a lot of blood to be coming out of her," he thinks.

One floor up in the NICU, Aaron and Sid are torn. They want to be with the babies, but they are worried about Heidi. Aaron doesn't know why, but he feels like something is wrong.

"Is everyone OK?" Aaron asks. "Can we go downstairs and check on Heidi?"

Go, a nurse tells them. Go.

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For Sid and Aaron, they were giving their families great news. They were going to be parents.

For Heidi and Jeremy, it was more complicated.

To explain it to their sons, who were 2 and 4 at the time, Heidi read aloud a children's book about young kangaroo Oliver, whose mother helps another family have a baby, carrying it in her pouch for them. Later, Heidi explained that a doctor put Aaron and Sid's babies in her belly. "I'm going to have the babies for them, and then the babies will live with Aaron and Sid," she told the boys.

"OK," said her oldest, Aaron. "Can we have a Popsicle?"

It wasn't as easy to tell their parent Jeremy's family was hesitant but accep