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My Best Friend Offered to Be My Surrogate – And It Was the Greatest Gift I Ever Received

For years, Stephanie and Mike Lanzerotti struggled to have a baby. When friends stepped in with an unexpected offer, the two couples became more like family.



BY [JUDI KETTELER](#) PUBLISHED: NOV 2, 2023



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Couples Stephanie and Mike Lanzerotti and Melly Gonzalez De Acevedo and Cody Epperson have the kind of friendship it's a dream to develop, especially as adults: The men became close while working together as engineers, and their wives quickly bonded in their own right. Soon the four were nearly inseparable — they went on vacation together, got to know one another's families and were privy to one another's joys and heartbreaks.

But in the fall of 2021, Melly and Cody offered a gift Stephanie and Mike had never expected — one that would change the course of all their lives.

Stephanie and Mike got married in 2016 and “spent a year loving being newlyweds,” Stephanie says. The Cincinnati couple were having a great time traveling, going out on the town and cooking delicious meals. Then, when Stephanie got pregnant in the spring of 2018, they were excited and ready to grow their family — but soon devastated when that pregnancy ended in miscarriage. They tried again, and Stephanie had another miscarriage. Since she’d already had two losses, her ob/gyn suggested that she see a fertility specialist to determine whether there was a problem with her eggs or her uterus. Multiple tests, including two painful biopsies of her uterus and a test in which dye was run through her reproductive system to check for blockages, came back normal. “They were afraid my uterus had deteriorated, but that wasn’t the case,” Stephanie says. In fact, she had the uterus of someone 10 years younger. So what was the problem?

Their doctor wasn’t sure, but he suggested that they try [in vitro fertilization](#). This process involved stimulating Stephanie’s body to produce as many eggs as possible and then retrieving them and combining them with Mike’s genetic material to create viable embryos, which were then frozen. Stephanie went through the cycle seven times, which gave them just a handful of viable embryos. The first implantation worked, but Stephanie had a miscarriage a few weeks later. Then the same thing happened again.

The theory about why Stephanie struggled to keep a pregnancy was that she had juvenile arthritis (now called juvenile idiopathic arthritis, or JIA). An autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks healthy cells, JIA was essentially causing her body to attack an embryo. While it wasn’t a conclusive explanation — the doctor said half of his JIA patients were able to get pregnant and carry a baby to term — it was the only one they had. “Ultimately, the doctor told us we either needed to change the eggs or change the basket,” Stephanie says, meaning they might need

to consider using another woman's uterus via surrogacy.

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Meanwhile, Melly and Cody had gotten married, moved home to Florida and had a baby — a daughter, Farah Willow, born in 2020. They watched as Stephanie and Mike dealt with loss after loss. “I think it was Cody who first brought up whether we would be willing to offer surrogacy,” Melly says. “We agreed that we would, because we knew we had a lot of love to give.”





This photo of the two families served as the announcement of Stephanie and Mike's coming baby.
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By then the couples lived in different states, but they talked constantly, visited each other frequently and still vacationed together. It was during one of these vacations, in August 2021 — shortly after Stephanie's fourth miscarriage — that Melly and Cody told Mike and Stephanie they had something to discuss with them. "I remember I was wearing pineapple PJ's and looked a hot mess," Stephanie says, laughing. Melly and Cody told their friends about how much joy Farah Willow, who was 1 at the time, had brought them and that they wanted Mike and Stephanie to have that joy too. They told the Lanzerottis they wanted to help them build their family through Melly's carrying their child. "I remember not needing to think before saying yes," Stephanie says. "I just started crying."

There were no guarantees that an implantation would work. And there were

dozens of questions to answer and a legal, medical and psychological process to follow. But something else bubbled to the surface: hope.

The type of surrogacy Melly was offering is called gestational surrogacy. This is when a person who is not the egg donor carries a baby intended for another family. This is different from genetic, or “traditional,” surrogacy, in which a person who carries a baby intended for another family is the egg donor.

Mike and Stephanie had been seeing a specialist at the [Institute for Reproductive Health](#) (IRH), a Cincinnati-based fertility center. They decided to keep working with the center because IRH had an established protocol for gestational surrogacy. The couples started IRH’s process in the fall of 2021. Melly needed various medical tests to make sure she was healthy enough for a pregnancy; Cody had to take some tests too, as he was her husband and sexual partner. Both couples also had to go through a psychosocial evaluation in which they met with a counselor, first individually and then all four together.

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“We knew each other so well. Our values were aligned from the start.”

The counselor, who was also a doctor, walked them through various scenarios, such as *What happens if the pregnancy ends in loss?* and *What happens if Melly’s life is in danger from the pregnancy?* “We knew each other so well. Our values were aligned from the start, so these were all things we could talk through,” Melly says.

They also talked through what the relationship would be between Melly and Cody and the child, and how transparent they would be with the child as the child grew, to make sure everyone was on the same page. “It was less evaluative and more like training and preparing us for the great abundance of emotion this journey might create,” Stephanie says.

As they worked toward getting medical clearance, both couples had their own legal representation. It was important that everyone’s interests be protected and that the couples carefully navigate the different laws of Ohio and Florida. In Ohio, the genetic parents are automatically the parents, but in Florida, whoever gives birth to the baby, regardless of the baby’s genetic parentage, is the parent — meaning that in a case like theirs the court must be petitioned to issue a new birth certificate. The couples wrote every detail into the surrogacy contract, including how many implantations Melly would undergo in attempting to get pregnant and what would happen immediately after the birth. There was no money exchanged, but the Lanzerottis would pay all the medical bills, just as if Stephanie were carrying the baby.

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Finally, it was time: On March 21, 2022, the embryo was implanted into Melly in Cincinnati. She had a series of inconclusive pregnancy test results in the weeks that followed, and then she started spotting. Stephanie and Mike hopped on a plane to Florida so as to be at the six-week ultrasound. “I wanted us all to be together for whatever the news was, good or bad,” Stephanie says.

That was when they saw the tiniest bean on the screen, and then an electrical signal that would become the heartbeat. “I got tingles and realized it was really happening,” Stephanie says. There was one more scare at around 20 weeks, when they had to get a fetal echocardiogram to check the baby’s heart. Everything was fine. “That was the moment I could finally let some anxiety go and embrace joy, because we were past many of the scary milestones,” Stephanie says.

Stephanie and Mike visited Florida each month for the duration of the pregnancy, using credit card point hacks and scouring the Internet for cheap flights. “We wanted to be near our baby,” Stephanie says. They always stayed with Melly, Cody and Farah Willow, which only solidified the bonds between the two families. They did whatever they could to spoil Melly, though she usually didn’t let them do much of anything. “It was rewarding and fun having them over every month, because it was like being roommates all over again,” says Cody, who had lived with Mike in their younger years.

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Hazel is “surro-cousins” with Melly and Cody’s daughter, Farah Willow, who “surprises us with how much she understands,” says Cody.

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Melly’s due date was December 7, but as babies do, theirs decided to come on her

own schedule. Hazel came flying into the world on December 14 at [Rockledge Regional Medical Center](#) in Florida. The birthing center staff knew the plan and were supportive because the couples had worked ahead of time with Meghan Christie, R.N., the pregnancy concierge at the hospital. She had helped them create a detailed plan, including for Stephanie to have skin-to-skin time with Hazel immediately after birth. “I held her like she was the most precious thing,” Stephanie says.

The hospital cared for Melly as a person who had just given birth while treating the Lanzerottis as Hazel’s parents, setting them up with her in a room across the hall. “There is so much education that happens for parents in a hospital with their first newborn. It was very important that Stephanie and Mike get the same care,” Christie says. As Cody tended to Melly, Stephanie and Mike got to know their daughter. “Everything I saw, from start to finish, was this amazing collaboration of both families,” Christie says. She was deeply touched by the friendship between the two women. “I cried the day they left,” she says.

Stephanie and Mike arrived back in Cincinnati just before Christmas and a huge winter storm. They woke up on their first day home to subzero temperatures and icicles hanging on their house. But at last they had Hazel, with her huge eyes and sweet smell, inside their cocoon.

“The number one question I get is if I was worried about ‘giving the baby away.’ Those are so often the words people use,” Melly says. “But creating a motherly emotional connection with Hazel was never a concern for me, because I was just providing a space for her to grow.”





After Melly gave birth, “I held Hazel like she was the most precious thing,” says Stephanie, shown with Mike and the baby.

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Though her family was supportive, they also had some reservations. “Like many families, mine is very passionate about their family dynamics,” Melly says. For example, some family members wondered what their role might be in Hazel’s life. But Melly and Cody were able to have conversations with them to explain that this was different. “I explained that carrying Hazel was like baby-sitting for an extended period. My goal was to get her safely into the world so our friends could take their baby home,” Melly says. She loved holding Hazel for the first time, but she loved watching Mike and Stephanie hold her even more.

From the beginning, they were transparent with Farah Willow, who quickly grasped the situation. “Mommy’s belly is holding Kiki and Uncle Mike’s baby,” she would tell people (“Kiki” is Farah Willow’s nickname for Stephanie). “Farah Willow constantly leaves us in wonder and surprises us with how much she understands. We were excited to provide Mike and Stephanie with the opportunity for the same with their own child,” Cody says.

The Lanzerottis recently visited Melly, Cody and Farah Willow in Florida and got to see Farah Willow making 4-month-old Hazel giggle for the first time. (“They’re surro-cousins!” Stephanie says.) She and Mike are already reading Hazel children’s books about surrogacy like [*The Kangaroo Pouch*](#) by Sarah A. Phillips. They want her to know her origin story without its ever feeling taboo or like a burden. “We just feel so thankful that Hazel is here,” Mike says. “The journey was unexpected, and it was hard, but it was such a gift,” Stephanie agrees. “We got to have this incredibly special and unique experience with people we love and admire,” she says. “How many parents get that?”

Melly has been taking the year to recover and focus on self-care, but she and Cody plan to grow their family soon. When people ask her if she would recommend becoming a surrogate, she says it’s not a question she can answer. Too often surrogacy is either put up on a pedestal or talked about in hushed tones as something that must be difficult and emotional. Describing it in such limited ways misses the point, though. “Cody and I never set out to be the couple who were surrogates,” Melly says. “It was a real-life challenge our friends had, and we had the opportunity to offer a solution. We’re the lucky ones.”



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