Love can happen in the most unexpected ways. Noah Bell and Marc Cruz met 12 years ago in college and later fell in love and decided to create a life together. At that time, however, neither could have conceived that in the future they would jointly fall in love with Jodi Bubenik, the woman who would carry their twin boys, and that their ‘big love’ would radiate to all of their respective extended clans, with many family members and friends also getting caught up in the miracle of creating life in the form of two adorable little boys.

This is not your average love story. It transcends the traditional format of two people coming together to have a child. In addition to the three main characters, this love story involves many people of various backgrounds, cultures and ages. It describes a love that stayed strong during the complex surrogacy process that tested Marc, Noah and Jodi when they endured failure, disappointment and fear.

It is readily apparent in talking to the three adults that love is in the air. You feel the love the two men have for each other. You feel the love Noah, Marc and Jodi forged during their life-altering odyssey, beginning with their match meeting, when they all realized they were meant for each other. And of course, there is the love everyone exudes for the adorable twins Austin and Avery, who were born on November 8, 2013.

Rewind to when Marc and Noah decided they wanted to have a baby. As all male same sex couples who want children know, building a family can not happen without other people’s help, whether that be through adoption or surrogacy. At first, the idea of having someone else have a baby for them seemed unattainable. But Marc and Noah were encouraged and put at ease by family friends who had successfully built their family with the help of a surrogate. This inspired Marc and Noah to research surrogacy agencies, resulting in them selecting CSP.

The BellCruz Project
Noah and Marc also decided to document their experience in the ‘BellCruz Project,’ a journal chronicling their journey to fatherhood as well as the ups and downs of the surrogacy journey. They also hoped to one day show
their child the unique measures they took to make his or her birth possible. The entries we have taken from their journal are italicized.

Let’s start from the top. After 10 years together, Marc and I (Noah) have decided to take the plunge and build a family via a gestational surrogate. For the past five months, we’ve been interviewing surrogacy agencies along the West Coast, had our noses buried in legal contracts, listened to IVF podcasts until our ears bled, had psychological testing, and have been poked and prodded with needles for medical clearance. We finally have all our ducks in a row and are ready to sign on the dotted line with our agency, the Center for Surrogate Parenting (CSP) in Los Angeles, CA.

Noah’s and Marc’s family friends also gave them advice about collecting a team of ‘people’ who were experts in all aspects of surrogacy, including legal matters. The men admit that initially their knowledge was very limited and they were going to forgo using an egg donor and opt for traditional surrogacy. Once they met with a lawyer, however, they learned Washington State (where the couple lives) would not be a good state to legally pursue surrogacy, while in California they could have both of their names on the baby’s birth certificate.

They felt very comfortable and in good hands with CSP staff members Joanne Bubrick and Karen Synesiou, who treated them like family. Additionally with relatives in Los Angeles, they had a place to stay for appointments, as well as sources for emotional support.

**First Date**

At the Center for Surrogate Parenting, surrogate mother candidates accepted into our program are given several profiles written by intended parents. The profiles are chosen based on their stated preferences about the type of parents they are interested in helping. If the surrogate mom feels a connection or expresses an interest, a meeting is arranged, which most intended parents and surrogate mothers describe as being akin to a first date.

Jodi, a northern California wife and mother of three teenagers, recalled: “I was pleased with the thorough process and screening to find a couple. It felt like Match.com, but...
initially I didn’t ‘feel’ anything for the intended parents whose profiles I read. Donna (Robertson) and Hilary (Hanafin) kept saying I would like Marc and Noah. By the end of reading the guys’ profile, I was in tears. They really ‘had me’ with the last line, which stated “their child(ren) would be surrounded by unconditional love and laughter.”

Jodi Had Them at “Hello!”

For Marc and Noah, however, Jodi ‘had them at hello’ and they fell in love with her instantly: “Jodi had a glow that made us want to be friends with her. She has such a vibrant and genuine nature about her. Though we were nervous about meeting, we felt that immediate connection with her as well as with her husband. We could tell instinctually she would genuinely care for our baby.”

Jodi too was nervous and ‘scared to death,’ but was immediately made to feel comfortable around Marc and Noah: “I liked them right off the bat. We went to an outdoor café in Sonoma (CA) where there was a solitary bee buzzing around and harassing us for the entire meal. Noah pointed out that bees are a sign of fertility, so that was a good omen.”

In addition to the bee that graced their lunch, Marc, Noah and Jodi kept looking and found several other good luck signs during their journey, like two fortune cookies with the same message of “This year your highest priority will be your family.”

Ready, Set, Go, Stop

BOOM! All of a sudden things are rolling. After months of what felt like endless evenings emailing, reading, re-reading, signing, re-signing, scanning and faxing contracts from our various lawyers, agencies and clinics, our ‘homework’ is finally complete.

After finding Dr. Robert Boostanfar of the Huntington Reproductive Center (HRC) in southern California on Google and then being referred to him by the CSP staff, Marc and Noah were ready to begin the medical process. Jodi’s initial appointment went splendidly, with the doctor declaring she had a “beautiful and boring” uterus. Once they received legal clearance from their donor, everyone was ready to cycle before Thanksgiving. Unfortunately though all indications pointed towards a positive result, on Thanksgiving night Marc and Noah were heartbroken to learn this first round of IVF was unsuccessful.

The past few weeks have been extremely difficult for us. After receiving confirmation of our failed attempt, we were devastated, completely heartbroken. For some reason we were certain that it would work for us and that we would have this fairy tale story of achieving pregnancy on our first attempt. Perhaps that was our biggest mistake. Being overly too confident. Well we paid for it dearly emotionally.

As much as this failure was devastating, Marc and Noah nonetheless garnered the strength to forge ahead with their plans to become parents. They recalled: “If there was a silver lining from our failed attempt, it would be that it strengthened both of our resolve to be fathers.” They mobilized by choosing another egg donor, this time focusing on her proven fertility as the top priority in addition to academic achievements and other important characteristics. Jodi also was very positive about jumping back on the surrogacy horse. Plus they had other good news to share:

The boys at four weeks.
Thanks to the passing of referendum 74 in Washington State legalizing same sex marriage there, Noah and I tied the knot today in front of a small group of family and friends. Bell-Cruz...has a ring to it don’t you think? Our plan all along was for all of us, me, Noah and our future kiddos to have the same last name. So, Bell-Cruz was what we came up with.

Firm in their commitment to become parents, Noah and Marc soldiered on and made plans for the second transfer. With a new donor who had produced 38 eggs, out of which 20 frozen embryos resulted, they and Jodi were ready to move forward. But there was some drama, with Jodi’s plane arriving late to LAX (Los Angeles International Airport) and Noah maneuvering his way through the highways and byways of Los Angeles to get her to HRC Fertility on time for the embryo transfer. However, the HRC staff went the extra mile by accommodating them with the after-hours transfer.

Dr. B. sat us down to review our little embryos and reassured us that we each have some strong little fighters ready to implant. Marc’s was actually trying to hatch!

After the transfer, Jodi was so excited to learn the results that she took a few home pregnancy tests. The second one showed a big fat positive (BFP in infertility lingo) and immediately texted the guys with a picture of the test. Of course, they were over the moon with joy and excitement. Two embryos had hatched and implanted. They were having twins!

The first semester proceeded smoothly until the 12th week when Jodi took the nuchal test (NT). The NT is a noninvasive test conducted using an ultrasound to measure the soft-tissue thickness within the nape of the fetal neck. It assesses a baby’s risk of having Down’s Syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities, but it also has a high false positive rate and the results may not be definitive. Though Marc and Noah expected the test as part of routine prenatal care, they were not prepared for the preliminary results that indicated Baby A could have Down’s Syndrome. Though understandably frightened and concerned, the couple knew that further testing, such as chorionic villus sampling (CVS) or amniocentesis, would be required to be absolutely sure. They opted for a CVS with fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH), which expedited the results. However, the couple was confident in their commitment to raising both children, regardless of the diagnosis. Fortunately the results of the CVS showed that both children were perfectly normal. The pregnancy was back on track and the next few months proceeded without any hiccups.

Babymoon Cut Short

With the babies’ due date rapidly approaching, Marc and Noah started to prepare for their arrival by taking a babymoon near Jodi’s hometown, a mini vacation that is becoming the traditional last hurrah for prospective parents before life changes dramatically for the better. In addition to being in beautiful surroundings close to Jodi, they were able to meet many of Jodi’s and her husband’s relatives and friends, who were all excited to meet the soon-to-be dads and support their journey.

Sure, perhaps we will miss some of those activities, like our last quiet dinner or our last movie sans kids,

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but we’re also excited for the many firsts that come with being a new parent. Like the first time we hold the boys or the first time we see them smile or the first time they say da-da. We’ve had some friends call us crazy for be willing to give up our lives to be parents.

Noah and Marc accompanied Jodi for her routine 37-week nonstress test. But quickly routine turned into active labor after the midwife’s exam precipitated Jodi’s. She progressed from two (2) cm dilated to eight (8) in two and a half to three hours. Austin was born vaginally, but then Avery had complications with the cord wrapped around his neck and required an emergency C-section. The latter complication was a scary moment for all, but Jodi pulled through like the trooper she is. Austin weighed 5 lb., 8 ounces and Avery, 6 lb., 4 ounces.

The dads were thankful that Avery was in the NICU for only three days and quickly started improving. Noah and Marc received a lot of help from the NICU staff, who always were so positive and reassuring. Despite the harrowing moments brought on by the C-section, Jodi is grateful for her fabulous experience as a gestational surrogate: “I was on this ridiculous emotional high and bonded with all the nurses on the maternity ward. The experience also brought my husband and I closer together. It was like love and happiness radiated to everyone. I tried not to watch the news because I did not want to be brought down. It reminded me that there is good in the world.”

Life as Dads

Meanwhile Marc and Noah stayed away from the world in their cabin near Jodi’s hometown. They and the babies were in a bubble, helped by the grandparents: “We had no worries but the babies and ourselves. It was a quiet introduction to this new lifestyle. We did not want Jodi to feel that we were running away from her and we also wanted her to see us as fathers. That time gave us nice closure to our surrogacy journey.”

The men joyously describe their new roles as daddies as an amazing ‘life flip’ and are happy to be surrounded by family and friends who are lining up to lend a hand. Of course, they credit their life transformation to the woman who made it all possible, as well as her husband and extended family.

“Jodi never complained about the different hoops she had to jump to get to southern California or the time she spent away from her family and job. Her husband was the glue that kept us together. He was right there with us while we were in the NICU and deserves a lot of credit for his support. We developed a little family between all of us.”

Congratulations to the Bell-Cruz family: Marc, Noah, Austin and Avery, and the continuation of their family love story.
CSP surrogate mothers often refer their friends and family members to become surrogate mothers at our agency. But several of our current surrogate mothers were referred to CSP in a much more personal way. Their mothers were surrogate mothers in the early days of CSP.

It is not usual to find that generosity and compassion are passed down through the generations. Parents are their children’s first role models, so it stands to reason that having a mother who was a surrogate would make a lasting impression.

Bonnie Downing, Kristen Pentz and Christine Ruiz are three CSP surrogates whose mothers were surrogates for CSP in the 1980s and early 1990’s. Bonnie Downing is a 36-year-old mother of three children and a four-time surrogate who is part of the first CSP mother daughter surrogate duo. Kristen Pentz is a 33-year-old mom of three sons and involved with her third surrogacy. Christine Ruiz is a 39 year old stay-at-home mother with three children and has given birth twice via surrogacy. Though each surrogate mother’s journey is uniquely her own, nonetheless, there are several characteristics that bind each of their stories.

Christine was eight years old the first time she heard about surrogacy. In 1983 her mother, Yvette, explained to Christine and her then six-year-old sister that she wanted to help a childless couple by having their baby. The entire experience was one of Christine’s most vivid childhood memories, including remembering all the details about getting Barbie dolls from the couple when she met them for the first time at a local restaurant.

Though Christine remembers the excitement, she also recalls that the family kept her mom’s surrogacy a secret compared to today’s openness about it. Her family did not share the news with anyone but her grandparents.

At 12, Kristen already was a preteen when she watched her mother experience surrogacy. She remembers thinking she wanted to follow in her mother’s footsteps and help a couple make their dream of parenthood come true. Whereas her mother’s couple actually stayed in their home during the pregnancy, Kristen has worked with local couples with whom she was able to have close contact and frequent interaction.
Bonnie, who was in elementary school at the time, also has lasting recollections of her mother Glenda Barr’s two journeys. “I remember how happy the families were when their babies were born and I wanted to give others that same feeling,” recalls Bonnie.

The Hilary Hanafin Connection
In addition to having indelible memories of a significant milestone in their lives, both Christine and Bonnie credit CSP chief psychologist Hilary Hanafin with having a positive influence on how they viewed surrogacy. In the late 1980s, Hilary was a doctoral student writing her thesis with CSP. Hilary was able to put two and two together about Christine and her mom when the women reconnected during Christine’s application process. Hilary realized she already had met Christine when she was an eight-year old girl. Ms. Hanafin also was the common thread that united Christine to Bonnie, who also had met the therapist through her mother. Says Bonnie: “When my husband and I decided to start the process, I contacted Hilary because she had been my mom’s counselor. There was not a question in my mind about working with another agency. It was a slam dunk decision to choose CSP.”

Advice from Surrogate Mother Pioneers
So what advice did their mothers, truly surrogate mother pioneers, give them? Kristen Pentz’s mother, Susan Ulry, relayed to her daughter how important it was to make her journey her own and not try to mimic the experiences of other women. Glenda Barr, Bonnie Downing’s mom, gave her daughter a simple piece of advice: contact Hilary Hanafin and CSP. Fortunately, all three women did.

From a medical perspective, surrogacy was less complicated for the first group of women who became CSP surrogates. So even though Christine thought she was prepared emotionally and logistically after watching her mother’s journey, she was pleasantly surprised to learn how much the medical technology had advanced from her mother’s day. It was gratifying to be able to learn how embryos develop and what she needed to know to ensure that her intended parents’ journeys were as successful as possible.

New Traditions Arise from the Old
Supporting surrogate mothers through discussion and creating sisterhood has been a part of the CSP experience since its inception. Communication methods have changed, however. The first group of CSP surrogates – only about six at the time – met at the psychologist’s house in southern California to talk about their feelings. Today CSP surrogate mothers gather from all over the country at various regional locations to bond with each other. Plus they also can take advantage of modern technological tools to communicate remotely, including the use of social media like Facebook.

The surrogate’s family support also has been an important feature of a successful journey. Bonnie, Christine and Kristen had built-in support from their mothers, with Bonnie’s mother taking some extra special steps. All four of Bonnie’s surrogate babies have been lucky to receive their own monogrammed cross-stitch creation Glenda Barr made for them, connecting two generations of generous women who have a passion for helping others create a family.

Thank you to all six women, each part of the rich legacy of the surrogacy sisterhood at the Center for Surrogate Parenting.
Hello, my name is David and I just want to share my feelings on why I feel my wife Katrina should be considered mother of the year!

She is the most selfless, patient, caring and brave person I know. She is a mother of three under the age of 11, stepmother to a teenager and in the process of becoming a three-time surrogate mother. We should give her a champion’s belt!

To give you a little insight, when we first talked about her becoming a surrogate mother, I will admit I had my concerns. Like the fact that I would have to care for her and do all the things for her as if the baby was mine and it wouldn’t be. I would be the one dealing with the hormonal aspect of things; the cravings, the mood swings, additional care for our children when she isn’t well and her overall well being, etc. However, this was a much bigger sacrifice on her part and I really couldn’t complain or fathom at first.

Also, getting pregnant and delivering was relatively easy for her, and as you know, it’s not like that for everyone. With that being said, our family is complete but we wanted to help people, who for whatever reason couldn’t have children, experience the joys of parenthood and having a family of their own. The fact that Katrina enjoyed being pregnant only made our decision of her becoming a surrogate easier.

We went through a company called the Center for Surrogate Parenting (CSP). The people there are exceptional! We were taken care of every step of the way.

They explained to us the process of gestational surrogacy, in which the child would be the result of another woman’s egg and sperm given by her husband or a male donor—eliminating any biological connection to Katrina and myself.

The first part of our journey began with the screening process. This is where we had to meet with a psychologist and pass a psychological interview, where we were questioned to make sure there was no tension or unease between us regarding this process.
as well as getting to know the type of people we were in order to best match us up with a prospective couple.

The next part of the process was finding the right couple / family. We were given a few couples’ profiles to read and view the photos of each of these couples and their families that they wanted to share. Although it is extremely difficult, we would have to choose a couple, and once that is done, there is a meeting that is set up between us and if all goes well, the process really gets going.

Breaking the news to our kids was not as bad as I thought it would be, as they were genuinely excited about what their mother was doing for someone else. I was so proud of them!

At this point, we were now well on our way to helping another couple start their family and were very excited! So excited in-fact that we couldn’t wait to tell everyone about what we were doing. Most people are very supportive and say such nice things to us; however, there are those people who just don’t understand, and sometimes say some hurtful things.

There were many times that guys would say to me “how could you let your wife carry another man’s baby?” In my opinion, the question was so ridiculous, that the only response I would give them would be “first of all, I do not control my wife; she is her own person and I will support her no matter what”.

Now comes the fun part for Katrina (not really). She now has to start giving herself hormone shots twice a day: one in the abdomen and one in the buttocks (ouch!). These shots increase the chances of the pregnancy “taking” once the embryos are implanted.

Approximately two and a half to three months later, embryos are transferred to Katrina’s uterus, and at this point with a successful transfer, she is pregnant.

Now, if everything goes as planned, she will be delivering the baby in about nine months. However, there are risks involved and things don’t always go according to plan. There could be twins if multiple embryos are transferred and they both “take,” which could place the surrogate mother in danger. In fact, during Katrina’s last pregnancy, she developed pre eclampsia, a potentially life-threatening condition marked by a spike in blood pressure and, if left untreated, could lead to seizure, stroke, or organ failure. Thankfully, she came through it with no permanent effects from the pre eclampsia.

However, after delivering a beautiful baby boy, she went home little over a day later and we thought all was well. We were wrong... Katrina developed migraine headaches and literally had to crawl on her hands and knees if she wanted to go anywhere other than the bed.

As you could imagine, this was alarming to us and after trying to tough it out to see if her head would start feeling better, it didn’t. I took her to the emergency room and they determined that she was leaking spinal fluid from where her epidural was; and in order to fix it, they essentially had to draw some of her own blood and give her another epidural to inject the blood near the leak in her spine. This procedure is called a “blood patch”, and as odd as it sounds, it worked; she was feeling better in about half an hour and back to normal in a little over a day.

Still to this day, we keep in touch with the parents we assist, and they send us e-mails and pictures of the children as they are growing up, which brings us great joy. It also gives us, as parents, a teaching moment for our children.

The only thing that pains me to the core is that after all of her pregnancies, it has taken a toll on her body and she now hates the
way she looks. After each child, as many women know, there is extra work put in to get your “pre baby” look back. Not having the help of an infant to breastfeed, Katrina has worked doubly hard to drop every ounce gained for each child. Each pregnancy is totally different as we are as humans, so with one she could gain 30 pounds, with another 60. I tell her all the time that she is beautiful and the stretch marks are actually beauty marks to remind her of the beautiful children she has brought into this world. However, it really doesn’t help, as she thinks that I’m just saying it because I am her husband and I am just trying to make her feel better. The truth of the matter is that I really do think that she is beautiful and wouldn’t change anything about the way she looks!

With that being said though, I can understand how she would feel this way, and if I could afford it, I wouldn’t hesitate paying a doctor whatever it took in order to make her feel better about the way her body looks to her.

Even with the physical and emotional toll this takes on her, Katrina has decided to do one more surrogacy and I couldn’t be more proud of her! This is why I write to you a story of a strong courageous woman doing selfless acts of love for complete strangers! If only the world had MORE KATRINAS!!!

Would you like to contribute to the next issue of this newsletter? Please send ideas and suggestions to terri@creatingfamilies.com