

MEET THE WOMEN WHO HAVE WOMBBS FOR RENT

Commercial surrogacy is banned in Australia.



Taking a cue from Hollywood stars and pop icons, a number of non-celebrity couples are turning to gestational surrogacy to have their dream baby

When Sarah Jessica Parker needed one, she chose bisexual rocker-chick Michelle Ross. Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban managed to keep theirs a secret for three weeks after their second daughter, Faith Margaret, arrived late last year. Ricky Martin has said he doesn't know how he'll talk to his twin sons about theirs. And Elton John used one to get his special Christmas gift, a son named Zachary. We're talking about the surrogate mothers who've helped these stars become parents. While these women remain shrouded in secrecy because of their A-list clients, gestational surrogacy is now a trend that non-celebrity couples are turning to – with largely twentysomething mums giving up nine months to deliver someone else's baby.

Taboo practice

Today's most common surrogacy process involves a woman (often called a "gestational carrier") being implanted with an embryo via in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), using egg and sperm supplied by the intended parents/donors. Commercial surrogacy, when the carrier is paid, is currently banned in Australia, and even illegal for Australians seeking treatment overseas. Since the Surrogacy Act came into effect in March 2011, parents now face two years jail, a \$110,000 fine or both for using commercial surrogacy based on the belief that it commodifies women and children.

In the US, however, it's a totally different story. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of gestational surrogate births doubled from 738 babies to nearly 1400

a year. US reproductive lawyer Melissa Brisman credits celebrities for this growth. "When someone like Nicole Kidman uses surrogacy, that story goes around the world," she says. Brisman had twin boys using a surrogate when she was 26, and a daughter when she was 31. Her uterus was not strong enough to hold a baby, so she and her husband found a gestational carrier. "I was lucky and got an educated woman who had carried twins before," she says. When it came to securing court orders for birth certificates, drawing up birth plan contracts to cover everything – from Down syndrome screening to who holds the baby first when it's born – her legal background gave her an advantage. Brisman realised, with her firsthand experience, she could help others and started a legal counselling and screening/matching service, Reproductive Possibilities.

Financial incentive

Brenda is 32, works as a veterinary receptionist in Pennsylvania, USA, and is a surrogate client of Reproductive Possibilities. She's expecting triplets, and when they're born, she'll have given birth to nine children, including three of her own. "I had just turned 29 when I delivered my first surrogates – twins. My husband and I thought about it for a long time, and while the extra money was nice, we didn't do it just because of that." Along with being a non-smoker, having a prior problem-free, non-surrogacy pregnancy, not requesting to carry a celebrity's baby (apparently it's not uncommon in first-round applications) and having non-financial motives are important qualifying factors for Brisman's agency. Brenda explains anyone who was doing it for those reasons "won't make it through –

it's too much work just for that". The average payment for surrogates in the US is between \$12,000 and \$25,000 per pregnancy (not including the lengthy IVF prep time), which works out to be about \$42 to \$89 a day for a 40-week pregnancy. Both the carrier and the egg-donor mother need to get their reproductive cycles in sync using birth control, which takes a month. The women take fertility drugs to prepare, and after the egg is harvested, fertilised and implanted, the carrier ups the dosage to encourage the embryo to take to her uterus. It can take months – and a lot of hormones.

Working together

So, why would you do this for someone you don't know? For Brenda, she likes the feeling. "Once I get past the morning sickness, I enjoy being pregnant," she says. ▷

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"I get to eat what I want, feel them moving, and then give them to Mum and Dad and they can have the sleepless nights." Enjoying the maternal instinct is one thing, but enjoying labour is a tough one to understand. "It's pain for a reason," Brenda says. "You know you'll get over it, and there's a beautiful baby that's going to be born to parents who will love it."

However, before anyone's getting pregnant, the carrier and intended parents have to ensure they like each other – months of fertility treatment and a full-term pregnancy is a long time. Stephanie, 28, is a sales associate at a hardware store in Connecticut and has had two surrogate pregnancies, one with twins. As a single parent, she was interested in surrogacy as a way to spend more time at home to look after her baby. "The first time around I had meetings with two other couples before I decided. I wanted to carry for someone who was on the same wavelength as me."

Stephanie gave birth to her third surrogate child in November 2010, and she remains close with both families she delivered for. She receives phone calls and birthday-party invites – and she's been given an "Aunty Steph" title until the children are old enough to learn how they were born. She's been accepted as a new addition to her surrogate families: "I've never felt like I was losing a child. I've always felt like I was gaining a family."

Family may be the result of her surrogacy, but for Stephanie it's also the reason she won't go through the process again. "My mum wants me to settle down and start dating again. More importantly, she wants me to start having more grandchildren for *her*." **Bec Couche** □

Celebrity surrogacies



Ricky Martin's twins Valentino and Matteo were born to a surrogate in 2008.



Elton John with his little boy, Zachary.



Sarah Jessica Parker and her twins Marion and Tabitha.

IS IT WORTH IT?

Nadine Hamilton, relationships psychologist from Life Resolutions, underlines a few points to keep in mind:

"When surrogacy is undertaken as a result of the inability of prospective parents to conceive and carry their own baby, it is a selfless act – it is not something that every woman would be prepared to proceed with. There are obviously a lot of psychological, physical and legal consequences to be considered. Bringing a baby into the

world is a major life-changing event for most people. Both parties need to agree upon what would happen should there be any abnormalities in the baby, or loss of the baby via miscarriage or stillbirth. Furthermore, they should have an agreement as to whether or not they would like to keep in contact after the baby has been relinquished."

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