

A Surrogate's Story

Two Moms, A Secret Pact – And A Baby Boy

April 3, 2006

Joanna and Peter, a couple from Belgium, discovered they couldn't conceive the baby they dreamed of. Thousands of miles away, two-time Minnesota mom April Petersen decided that she was ready to carry another child, even if it wasn't her own. How little Paul came into the world – and what happens next.

April Petersen, 25, homemaker with two kids, 7 and 2, in Albert Lea, Minn.: I was their surrogate. Of everyone in the world, they put their child in my hands for nine months. Now I feel a deep loss – not only for the child, but for very good close friends. I haven't really stopped crying since I said goodbye and they took the baby.

Joanna, 34, chemist with one son in Belgium: We had to keep this a secret, even from some of our close friends. Here in Belgium surrogacy is still a taboo subject. At times the pregnancy was surreal. We e-mailed and talked frequently, and didn't meet in person until days before the baby was born. But when I held Paul for the first time, he felt like my son right away. He has big ears like his daddy.

April: In the fall of 2004 I stumbled across a surrogacy Web site. I was intrigued by the birth stories, especially the happy endings. "I could do that!" I thought. I loved being pregnant with Loryssa, 7 and Kylee, 2, but knew that my husband and I couldn't handle a third child right now. After chatting a while with a surrogate in Minneapolis, she told me, "If you're serious about this, I have this perfect couple looking for a surrogate."

Joanna: Because of high blood pressure, carrying a child could be life-threatening, and Peter and I wanted our own child; we didn't want to adopt. We couldn't find a surrogate in Belgium. In some countries in Europe, it's even illegal.

Peter, 39, Joanna's husband, an engineer: Working with an American so far away was our only choice, so we took it. We had to push things to the limit.

Joanna: We had our first son, Frank, 3, with another surrogate from Minnesota, and had one frozen embryo left. She couldn't do it again, because of insurance problems, but we trust her. She suggested April. So we talked and e-mailed for a month. She's only 25 but seems more mature. It was important to us she had a partner and emotional support – especially when the time came to hand over the baby.

April: I understood her need for discretion. It just seemed like we clicked. One time her husband told me on the phone that he used to go to children's soccer games and would

see fathers with their sons, and how happy they were. He hoped someday that could be him. I nearly broke down in tears because it was so sweet.

Joanna: We've stayed in touch with our first surrogate. It's a relationship that just happens and grows by itself. You are friends for life.

Ansil Wiggins, 29, April's husband, manager at a movie rental store: When April told me she wanted to this, I understood how important it was to her. She's a hardcore mama and values our own children so much.

Sue SRP, 48, April's mother, a computer technician: "Whoa!" That was my reaction. April was always the adventurous one; I called her my wild child. I thought she would be using her own egg and that it would be too hard to part with the baby. Then I learned she would only be the carrier.

April: Before we signed the contracts, I took an HIV test, STD tests, gave my family-health history and medical records. Ansil and I answered about 200 personality questions and talked with a psychologist to make sure we didn't plan to keep the baby. I agreed not to smoke, drink or do drugs or high-impact sports and to limit myself to 12 oz. of coffee or soda A DAY.

Joanna: I had full confidence in April. But I did worry that she would suffer when she handed over the baby. One thing we decided was that April wouldn't breast-feed the child.

April: Joanna and Peter paid \$15,000 in monthly payments, but money was not my motivation. It was a consideration but not my main motivation.

Joanna: You have to be a special person to be a surrogate. You offer nine months of your life. There are dangers.

Peter: You definitely do it for more than just the money.

April: To prepare my body for Joanna and Peter's embryo, I took Lupron to prevent ovulation, estrogen to thicken my uterine lining and progesterone to raise levels of that for the pregnancy. In February 2005, Ansil and I flew to Toronto [where treatment costs are lower] to do the transfer with the frozen embryo. But my uterine lining wasn't thick enough. I cried in the cab all the way back to the hotel.

Joanna: Peter and I waited up late [because of the time difference] for the news. I cried when I we heard she wasn't ready. He hadn't expected that.

April: Six weeks later I was ready to try again. But it didn't take. I wanted to throw myself on the floor and have a fit.

Joanna: I got the call at work and broke into tears. With no frozen embryos left, we had to produce a whole new batch. I got hormone injections to stimulate my ovaries, and April took hormones to shut hers down. I ended up producing 17 or 18 eggs, and the doctor fertilized them with Peter's sperm in vitro.

April: On my third trip to Toronto I hoped to finally meet Joanna and Peter, but they had to return home early. I prayed that one little embryo would find a comfy spot to stick around in for nine months. I drank soy milk and drank raspberry tea to thicken my uterine lining. As agreed, Ansil and I didn't have intercourse two weeks before and after the transplant, in case I ovulated.

Ansil: The sex part didn't really get on my nerves. It was part of the deal.

April: Six days later I had a feeling I was pregnant. I saw a really dark line on the pregnancy test and started jumping around screaming. I took a picture of the positive EPT test, posted it on a blog I have on the Internet and sent Joanna and Peter an e-mail. Ansil saw my grin and knew. He was like, "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

Joanna: We were ecstatic – just as excited as April was. Peter and I kissed and drank wine to celebrate the news.

April: I told my daughter Loryssa that I was having a baby but that it wasn't her brother or sister. She understood, but she told complete strangers that Mommy was having a baby – and giving it away! I cringed every time. Most of my family was supportive, except for my older sister Jill, w8. She thought I did it for the money. She let it all out at Thanksgiving dinner, and we haven't really talked since.

Joanna: In Belgium we told everyone but family and close friends that I was pregnant. We didn't want everyone talking about the surrogacy behind our backs. I started wearing a pillow under my clothing when I dropped our son off at school. The teachers never suspected a thing. One even told me I was carrying a boy, that she could tell from the look on my face.

Peter: I haven't told my coworkers anything. I keep a calendar on my desk with important dates relating to the pregnancy and travel plans marked in color-coded pens. But my coworkers don't know what they mean.

Joanna: I did the shopping in another town so people wouldn't recognize me without the pillow. At home I always wore it because you never knew when someone would stop by. A neighbor dropped by when I didn't have the pillow, so I acted like I wasn't home.

Ansil: The hardest part of being April's husband was not getting attached to the baby, especially since it's a boy. I am not going to lie, I want a boy. So I kept my distance. I didn't feel the baby move or massage April's back. I didn't want to get attached to something I couldn't hold on to.

April: He kind of treated me like I wasn't pregnant. But he did worry about falling on the ice or lifting heavy things. I think he felt the surrogacy interfered with our family.

Joanna: Though I wanted to know April's pregnancy was okay, I also felt jealous I couldn't experience it like she could. I ended up feeling angry, just in a bad mood. I didn't tell April, but I think she knew. Not seeing her during the pregnancy was better.

Peter: My biggest worry was the baby's health. I went crazy waiting for the six-week scan that confirmed April was pregnant. Then I was terrified that the baby would be born prematurely. I've been nervous all the time.

Joanna: The first time I met April face-to-face was at the Minneapolis airport, a week before Paul was born. We hugged. It felt natural, yet also a little stiff. In some ways we knew each other very well, but in other ways we didn't. I didn't feel the need to touch her belly.

April: I could understand that. It was the first time we had ever met.

Sue: I stayed at the hospital while she went into labor, looking after my granddaughter Kylee. By then I felt proud of her decision and wanted to support her any way I could.

Ansil: I was on my way to a job interview when April went into labor. I told my new boss my wife was having a baby, so he let me reschedule. I didn't tell him she was a surrogate.

Joanna: I was beside April throughout her three-hour delivery in February, holding her hand. Peter was traveling from Belgium. I really wished he was with me; I felt so alone. After the baby was born, the doctor put him on April's belly, and I cut the umbilical cord. I had tears in my eyes.

April: As the doctor took out my placenta I felt tremendous pain and started yelling, "Ow, ow, stop!" My uterus was still attached to the placenta and had turned inside out. I was losing blood. I got through the pain by focusing on Joanna holding little Paul.

Peter: There are only two things that matter: the mother's health and the baby's. I felt so worried for April. Now Joanna talks about a third baby, but there's no way I'd do this again. It's too stressful, too much to think about. After the baby was born, we had a week to get his travel documents. I couldn't wait until we went home and everything went back to normal.

April: When I was in labor, I feared that when the baby was born, I'd have an overwhelming urge to claim his as mine. But I never really felt that maternal pull. It was nice to snuggle him, but he fit so perfectly with Joanna and Peter. Once I held him and he fussed, so I gave him to Joanna and he stopped. It kind of hurt my feeling, the little stinker. But that's the way it should be – he knows who his mom is. For so long, that baby was my focus. I just need to figure out my life from now on.

