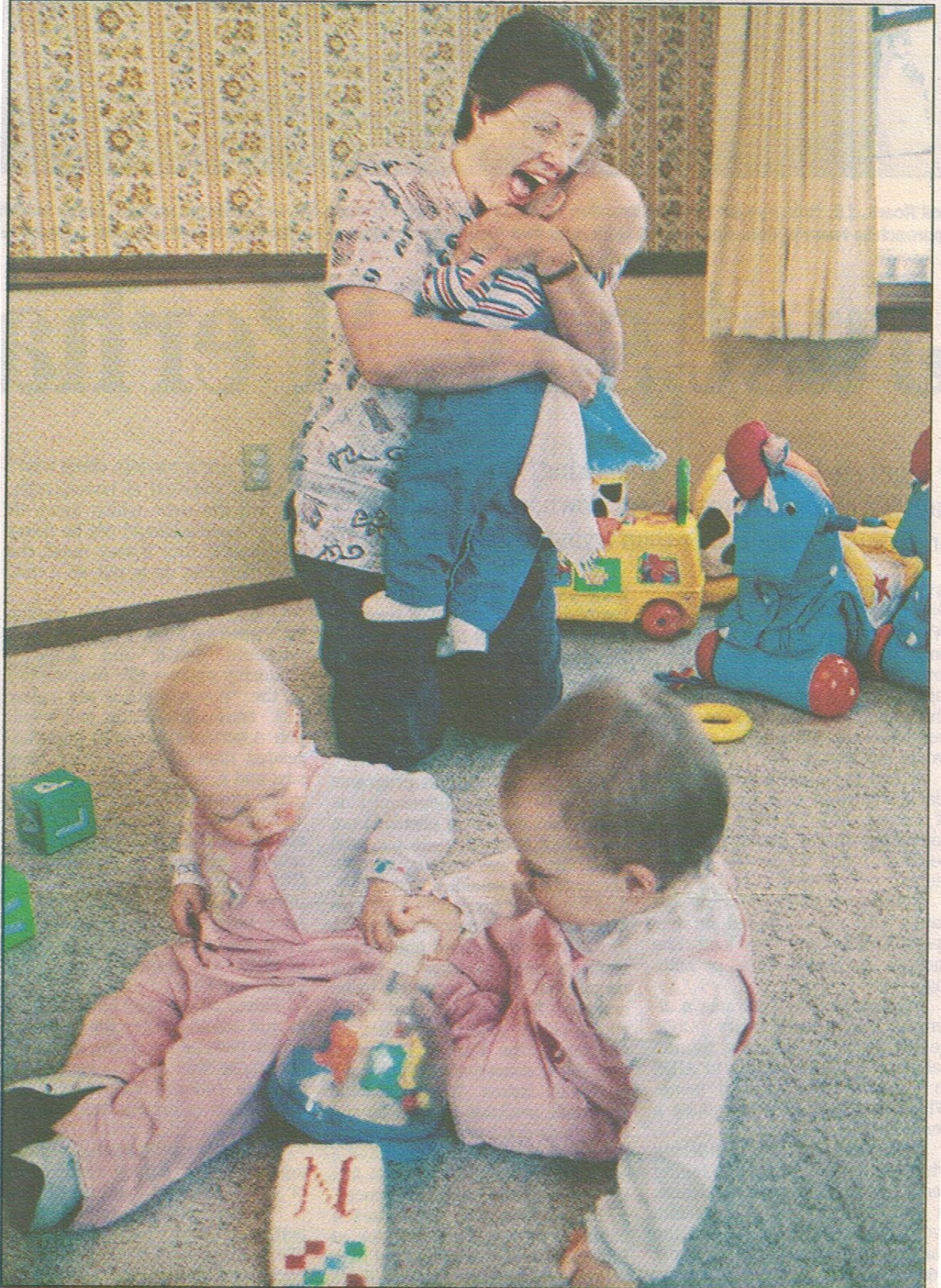




HELLO, BABIES...

Jackson Township couple happy raising quadruplets



ROBIN WITEK/Beacon Journal

Cheryl Clifford plays with Paul, one of her quadruplets, as Ruth and Heidi play together on the floor. The Cliffords converted an entire room into a giant playpen for the quads, and rotate toys in every three days.

Parents' age not a problem

By KATHERINE SPITZ
Beacon Journal staff writer

At age 48, Cheryl Clifford of Jackson Township gave birth to quadruplets. Her husband, Steve, was 43 at the time.

The babies are now 14 months old. That means Cheryl will be in her early 50s when Ruth, Heidi, Paul and Robert potty-train, and 64 years old when they start driving.

And when the quads graduate from high school, Cheryl and Steve will be. . . .

No time to think about that — or to worry about menopause, retirement or Medicare.

On a typical day, the Cliffords and Cheryl's 76-year-old mother, Gertrude Kuchta, change 25 diapers.

They soothe four teething mouths, applaud newly learned words, and try to keep ahead of the moving blur of babies who toddle up for hugs, climb on one an-



ROBIN WITEK/Beacon Journal

14-month-old Ruth Clifford tries to climb into a wide angle lens in her playroom. She and her three siblings adhere to a strict daily routine. "There isn't time to spoil them," mother Cheryl Clifford said.

other, go bump on the floor, cry soulfully, giggle, sulk and vomit.

Heidi vomits a lot.

Ten years ago, Cheryl Kuchta and Steve Clifford, both ordained United Church of Christ ministers, were two long-single professionals

with luxurious amounts of free time.

Neither had any driving desire to marry. When Cheryl and Steve met at a denominational meeting,

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ROBIN WITEK/Beacon Journal

The Cliffords and their quadruplets gather in the playroom. Mother Cheryl, 49, holds Robert and Heidi, while father Robert, 44, hangs onto Paul and Ruth. The quads are 14 months old.

QUADS

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both agreed there was no spark, just fizzle.

"Nice gal, too old," Steve decided.

"Weird," Cheryl thought.

Seven months later, Steve asked her for a date.

"One of the reasons I asked her out was that I was absolutely certain that this would go nowhere," Steve said, as he gulped a quick lunch of microwaved hot dogs and presliced cheese.

Steve and Cheryl discovered they liked each other. Very much. Once they decided to marry, they had to flip through the pages of their date books before they both found a free weekend.

Their lives were busy and full — full enough, they decided, without children.

"When we initially got engaged, we had talked about kids and decided, nah, we won't pursue that route," said Cheryl, who married when she was 41. Steve was 35.

"I just figured, I could enjoy my marriage, but a family at that age? No."

When they changed their minds two years later, the Cliffords were unable to conceive. They consulted specialists, took tests, and finally decided to try egg donation, in which fertilized eggs would be implanted in Cheryl's uterus.

Cheryl's 28-year-old sister, Heidi Kuchta of Connecticut, agreed to be the donor; Steve would be the biological father.

"I told them they were crazy. . . ." said Gertrude Kuchta.

Dr. Richard Moretuzzo, a reproductive and infertility specialist at Summa Health System, implanted the four embryos.

"We had a 40 percent chance that something would work," said Steve, who now runs an accounting

and financial planning firm for ministers.

The Cliffords learned that their chance of having quadruplets was less than 2 percent.

Two weeks after the eggs were implanted, the Cliffords realized they had a go.

Two weeks after that, they realized it was a go, go, go and go.

Quadruplets born Oct. 11

The couple asked their congregation to pray for healthy babies. Cheryl had to stay in bed for 16 hours a day during the last 88 days of her seven-month pregnancy, but otherwise she had no major health problems.

Heidi Lynn, Paul Arthur, Robert Steven and Ruth Marie were born on Oct. 11, and came home from the hospital between 30 and 40 days later.

Gertrude Kuchta moved from Connecticut to help her daughter and son-in-law. A mother of five, she had her last child at age 46.

"What we had been given was more than we could handle, so we didn't even try," Steve said.

Cheryl and Steve handled the night feedings, with Kuchta pitching in only if there were major problems.

Cheryl and her mother took over the day care, with neighbors and church volunteers signing up to provide extra help.

There have been a few grim moments. The whole family came down with the flu. Once, all four babies had diarrhea at the same time.

"I must admit, come evenings, I'm pretty worn out," Cheryl said. "But I think anyone would be."

In February, Cheryl returned to her job as Christian education director at the First United Church of Christ in Canton.

"Diapers are expensive," she said.

As she talked, the phone rang. It was her church calling with a question about the location of some envelopes.

Kuchta brought the portable phone to her daughter; Cheryl answered the question while her ba-

bies swarmed around her.

Group experience helps

Cheryl worked as an elementary school teacher before she entered the seminary. She said her experience in schools and at church taught her how to manage groups of children.

Now she has a group of four in a 24-hour-a-day classroom.

Cheryl said she doesn't know whether raising four babies is harder than raising just one because she has never had just one.

The Cliffords both believe their job would be harder if they were young parents.

"Steve will say, 'You know, if we had done this in our 20s, we would probably be so scared and so worried that everything was going to go wrong,'" Cheryl said.

"I think we have a . . ." she stopped talking as Heidi climbed on her lap.

"Man! she is soaking wet." Cheryl said cheerfully to her mother. "Whew!"

There is much talk about who needs what care, yet everything seems under control. It's as if the quadruplets are willing privates in a benevolent baby army.

Ruth, Paul, Robert and Heidi adhere to a routine: morning wake up about 7:30, breakfast, playtime, bath, bottle, catnap, lunch, catnap, snack, supper, and bottle before their 7:30 bedtime.

Their bedroom has four cribs — each one labeled with their names, to help the volunteers who care for them.

When Heidi, Ruth, Paul and Robert ride in the car, they sit in the same car seat in the same place each time.

Their high chairs are lined up along the kitchen wall, with each baby sitting in the same high chair for each meal. That way, the safety straps don't have to be readjusted.

Menus, like bedtime, are non-negotiable. If a baby does not like lunch, for instance, he or she will get it for afternoon snack. Cheryl and her mother meticulously record what and how much each baby ate at each meal, when they ate, and

who fed them.

"With one child, if they didn't want to eat at a particular time, you probably wouldn't feed them. When you've got four. . . ." Cheryl said, her voice trailing off.

"There isn't time to spoil them."

One gigantic playpen

The babies spend a lot of their time in what would normally be called the dining room.

The carpeted room, stripped of all furniture and sealed off by a baby gate, serves as a gigantic playpen, enabling the babies to move freely. The Cliffords rotate toys in and out of the room every three days.

The couple use their garage as a storeroom. One wall is lined with boxes, all labeled with the precise type of clothing, as well as the sex and age for which it is intended.

While donations of baby supplies and clothing have eased the initial financial pressure, the Cliffords are not immune from high cost of rearing children. They currently spend \$2,000 a year for diapers alone.

Cheryl said she misses her full-time career, but doesn't have time to think about any aging related changes, such as menopause.

"The babies will take precedence," she said. "I don't have time (for menopause). I'll just have to work through it — what other choice do I have?"

Her face is unlined and she looks well-rested. The babies recently started sleeping through the night, which means she does, too.

She said her legs and lower back bother her from all the hours she spends sitting on the floor in the playroom.

"If a 23-pound dog jumps on you, you know what kind of weight

that is against you," Cheryl explained as she sat with her back against the playroom wall.

"Here, I have 80 pounds crawling on me — more than 80 pounds."

"But that's not the joy of it," she said. "The joy of it is that they want hugs, or they stand on things."

Ruth, touching her nose, walked up to her mother.

"Does Mommy have a nose?" Cheryl cooed.

The Cliffords finally had T-shirts printed that say "Yes, they're quadruplets," and "Yes, I'm glad they're mine and not yours, too."

"I think we're enjoying them more now than we would have if we had been younger," Cheryl said. "We're enjoying them more and can cope with them better."

"People can say all they want," she said. "I wouldn't give these four up for anything. What a gift."