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Ohio Quadruplets Can Trace Roots To a Special New Hartford Aunt

By JANET REYNOLDS

NEW HARTFORD—Heidi Kuchta of New Hartford and her sister and brother-in-law Cheryl and Steven Clifford of Canton, Ohio, say they believe in miracles. Indeed, they say they got proof four times over last week when Cheryl, an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, gave birth to quadruplets who had been conceived by in-vitro fertilization with eggs donated by her sister Heidi.

From her home in Ohio, Mrs. Clifford, who had been trying to get pregnant for four years before trying the in-

vitro route, said: "This is a wonderful gift God has given us. We are very blessed. We want to raise them to His honor and glory."

Mother Is 48

Given the likelihood of delivering quads, much less via in-vitro fertilization, where the success rate for conceiving even one child is less than 25 percent, it's not surprising that Mrs. Clifford, who is 48, would be looking heavenward. Quadruplet births occur naturally once every 500,000 births. Of the multiple births that occur via the in-vitro method, in which eggs are fertilized outside the mother's body and then placed into the uterus, about 90 percent are twins.

The Clifford babies—two girls and two boys—were born Oct. 11 by Caesarean section. They were eight weeks premature but this week were breathing on their own and doing well.

Ms. Kuchta was all but speechless a few days after the quads' birth. "It's overwhelming," the New Hartford native said. "It hasn't hit me yet because I haven't seen them yet." She planned to visit them this week. Her mother has already relocated to Ohio to help care for the babies.

A Simple Decision

It's a story whose poignancy is only heightened by Ms. Kuchta's own saga. She has had surgery twice for endometriosis, a sometimes very painful condition in which endometrial tissue grows in unwanted spots in the reproductive system. She also has weak kidneys. In other words, it is very possible that this 28-year-old single woman will never be able to bear children of her own.

Knowing that made the decision to donate eggs a simple one, according to Ms. Kuchta. "Due to the fact that I

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might not be able to have children, this is my way of helping someone else out," she said. "I didn't hesitate, it being my sister. If it had been a stranger, I wouldn't have done it."

The procedure itself gives a sense of the kind of determination and dedication required by Ms. Kuchta. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford, who didn't marry until she was 42, were just about ready to give up trying to have their own child. After

designed to place the two women's ovulation cycles in sync and to help Ms. Kuchta produce more eggs and eggs that were larger. It was just like being pregnant, she said, complete with mood swings and a 12-pound weight gain. "I looked like the beginning of pregnancy," she said.

In the meantime, Ms. Kuchta traveled each day to the University of Connecticut Medical Center in Farmington, where she had an ultrasound to determine the size of her eggs. When they were deemed the right size, she flew to Akron, Ohio, where eight eggs were surgically removed. All were fertilized with her brother-in-law's sperm. Four were placed inside Mrs. Clifford. "They hoped one would take," said Ms. Kuchta, adding that the other four eggs were frozen in case the procedure needed to be done again. One short month later it was clear that the frozen eggs wouldn't be needed. In a telephone interview from her home this week, Mrs. Clifford, a native of New Hartford, recalled the day when she and her husband first saw the four separate sacs on the ultrasound screen. "It just amazed me," she said. "You can see the screen. We could see more than one sac. Then the

doctor said, 'O.K., here we go—one, two, three, four.' It was rather quick, rather sudden."

Despite Mrs. Clifford's age and the fact that she was carrying quadruplets, the pregnancy proceeded fairly smoothly. She was confined to bed for the last trimester, but that is fairly standard for multiple births. "There was very little in terms of complications," she said. "It's pretty rare for quads to go that long without pre-term labor and [for the mother] to be able to stay at home."

The procedures began in February with hormonal injections for both Ms. Kuchta and Mrs. Clifford. They were



years of infertility tests and drugs, the only option left untried was in-vitro fertilization.

And Heidi, the youngest of the three Kuchta sisters, was the only possible donor choice. As the baby in a family of five siblings, she was the only one young enough to be considered. The other Kuchta sister is 42, and the donor cutoff age is 30.

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Above, Heidi Kuchta outside her office Monday in Canton. Left, Ms. Kuchta in Canton, Ohio, in late summer with her sister Cheryl Clifford. Gary Gunderson

Still, the babies were born about two weeks earlier than doctors had hoped. Although multiple babies rarely make it to their actual due date without being born, each week they remain in utero increases their chances for survival. With an actual due date of Dec. 6, making it to Oct. 25 would have made the Clifford quadruplets only six weeks premature.

Mrs. Clifford knows why their arrival had to come earlier than planned. "My body just quit," she said, adding that her stomach was so squashed by all those babies that she could no longer eat. "It said, 'Nope, it's time.'"

Altogether, Mrs. Clifford was carrying about 13 pounds of babies. Ruth Marie was the smallest at 2 pounds, 13

ounces. Paul was the heftiest at 3 pounds, 10 ounces. In between are Robert at 3 pounds and Heidi Lynn at 3 pounds, 6 ounces. They ranged between 15 and 16 1/2 inches long.

Ms. Kuchta, who works assembling electrical parts for a Canton company called Lightstat, is particularly pleased about little Heidi Lynn., who is named for both Heidi and for Cheryl, whose middle name is Lynn. It's a mix that seems just perfect to Ms. Kuchta who, in these days of made-for-TV movies and contested adoptions, seems clear-headed on the role she'll play in these youngsters' lives. "Biologically they're mine," she said, "but they're their kids. I will be a close aunt. I know they will be raised in a good environment."