

THE QUADS AT 6 MONTHS • PREGNANCY • SPORTS

THE PLAIN DEALER

OHIO'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER 35¢ NEWSSTANDS & MACHINES

CLEVELAND, SATURDAY, MAY 25, 1996

THE PLAIN DEALER • SATURDAY, MAY 25, 1996

The Plain Dealer Summary

FAMILY

HOUSEFUL OF BABIES

Six months ago, Cheryl Clifford made headlines when she gave birth to quadruplets. Perpetual motion, perpetual sound, perpetual babies is now the story of the Cliffords, a quiet, church-

centered couple who became parents late in life thanks to breakthroughs in fertility technology. **1-E**

Sharing a houseful of babies



SCOTT SHAW / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Volunteers have helped Cheryl and Steve Clifford watch their new quadruplets: Ruth, Paul, Heidi and Robert. "If we tried to do everything ourselves, the children wouldn't be well cared for," says Cheryl.

Caring for North Canton quads requires lots of helping hands

By DEBBI SNOOK

PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

It's the sound that makes a parent shiver, makes nonparents want to flee the room. Not one baby, but two babies are crying, here on the carpeted floor of Cheryl and Steve Clifford's home.

"See? This is what it's like from 5 in the morning until you go to bed at night," says Cheryl's mother, Gertrude Kuchta, who now lives with the couple and their children.

Actually, it gets worse. Six months ago, Cheryl made headlines when she gave birth to quadruplets. So, if only two are crying now, another two might join in at any time.

Perpetual motion, perpetual sound, perpetual babies is now the story of the Cliffords, a quiet, church-centered couple who became parents late in life thanks to breakthroughs in fertility technology and the generous, intimate gift of reproductive eggs from Cheryl's sister.

They are learning to be a newfangled family.

The act of rotating infants Ruth, Paul, Heidi and Robert through the arms of Cheryl, her husband Steve and Cheryl's mother — and whatever volunteers are gracious enough to walk through the door — is continuous in their Jackson Township home, north of Canton.

Stressed?

"Blessed," insists Steve.

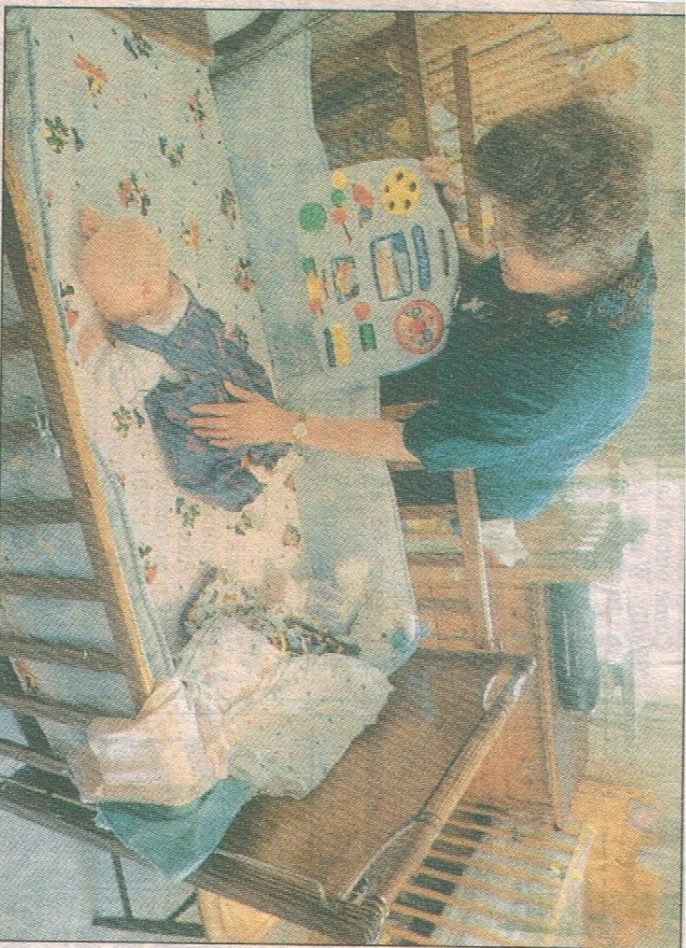
Cheryl and Gertrude pause as if to let his word linger in the air. Then the cycle begins again: the next baby gets a bottle, another gets the swing. A third explores a blanket on the floor and a fourth sleeps in a seat.

"We just leave them where they fall asleep," shrugs Gertrude.

In one short, remarkable process, the Clifford household has created and embraced four new heartbeats. So far, the adult rhythms are keeping pace. It's rigorous.

"Sometimes, when you get a break, you think, 'Do I need to go to the bathroom or do I need to eat?'" Cheryl says.

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SCOTT SHAW / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Cheryl quiets Ruth in the four-crib bedroom. "Sometimes, when you get a break, you think, 'Do I need to go to the bathroom, or do I need to eat?'"



SCOTT SHAW / PLAIN DEALER

Grandma Gertrude Kuchta: "You pick up one and you think it's your favorite. Then you pick up another and feel the same way."



SCOTT SHAW / PLAIN DEALER

Shoes, bottles and sometimes children get name tags in the Clifford household.

She and her mom made only one pact about personal time: Each gets 10 minutes a day for a shower. Cheryl says she can't bring herself to indulge longer.

"Once you turn off the fan, and you hear three of them crying, you just brush your teeth fast and run out."

At the end of the evening, with Steve home from work, they stagger bedtimes in an attempt to give the grown-ups a sleeping schedule. Cheryl retires at 10, Gertrude at 11 and Steve at midnight. That doesn't mean they stay awake until then.

"Steve, put the bottle back in the baby's mouth," Gertrude once said to rouse him.

Total success

Things used to be simpler. Cheryl and Steve were ordained ministers in the United Church of Christ of Canton when they met. She is director of education and he runs an accounting business that specializes in church finances. They married in their 40s and continued to throw themselves into their jobs.

But Steve, an only child who grew up without cousins, got lonely when his last relative died. Cheryl began to reconsider having children, and how she would enjoy them in later years.

They decided to become parents, Steve at 41, Cheryl at 48.

"I just didn't expect to have four," Cheryl says.

None of this would have happened if reproductive technology hadn't come such a long way, or if Cheryl's younger sister, Heidi, 28, hadn't agreed to help. Cheryl's reproductive eggs were too old to guarantee a healthy baby. Heidi's were good.

Both women took uncomfortable hormone injections for weeks, readying their bodies for their roles in the mothering process. Doctors surgically removed nine of Heidi's eggs from one of her ovaries and, in a petri dish, fertilized them with Steve's sperm. Four were surgically implanted into Cheryl's womb, on the hopes that one would take.

Nobody expected total success — four babies.

Blessed, Steve said back then.

Assisted pregnancies are relatively new and the mental health community is only beginning to study the emotional consequences of such an exchange. Will everyone feel comfortable with the decision later on? Will the mother's role belong to one, or two? How will each of them feel about that? How will the children feel about it? When should they know?

Cheryl, Steve and Heidi, who lives in Connecticut, each went through counseling to consider those questions. It only affirmed their resolve. Heidi, who saw her older sister as a guiding force through her difficult teen years,

wanted to help Cheryl. Afflicted with endometriosis, a disturbance in her reproductive system, Heidi, who is single, also knew she may never produce a child on her own.

No breast-feeding

Pink, robust and getting ready to crawl, Paul, Heidi, Ruth and Robert Clifford look completely different than when they were at their premature, hollow-cheeked birthweight of less than 4 pounds each, the smallest at 2 pounds, 10 ounces.

Born Oct. 12, the babies spent several weeks maturing in the hospital. After five months of growing at home, their other health problems have been few and short-lived. Cheryl says the only difficulty is getting food in their mouths fast enough.

And the adults?

They live by the book. The baby book, a lined, spiral-bound notebook in which they chart who got fed, how much, when, by whom and how it went over. "Squash. Loved it!" it says next to Paul's name. Corresponding to the book are four small cardboard boxes in the fridge that hold each baby's supply of bottles, personalized with masking tape labels. Twenty-three clean baby bibs are stacked on the kitchen counter.

"The first month was pretty brutal," says Cheryl. "By the time you finished feeding one, you had to start over again with another. You could catch a half-hour of sleep here and there."

They lost track of feedings. Paul would eat anytime a bottle came near him. Ruth could go without for long stretches. They started the book to keep track.

Cheryl decided against breast-feeding.

"I have brains," she says, knowing that she would have time to do little else.

Volunteers also helped. The

Cliffords put out the call to their church and five other churches in the area. At first, people were reluctant to handle babies so small. Then they trickled in. Grandmothers with time on their hands. Other mothers of multiples who could relate. A teen who baby-sat twins and thought quads "would be a real challenge." A widower who stayed until the clock struck 12 on New Year's Eve.

Sometimes Cheryl gets so busy, she doesn't have time to call volunteers back to schedule them. But when she hits church on Sunday, a stream of people instantly gather to help tote children and diaper bags. The Cliffords have become accustomed to handing their children to someone else.

"At first we had to learn to trust the nurses in the hospitals, since the babies were there so long," says Steve.

"And if we tried to do everything ourselves, the children wouldn't be well cared for," adds Cheryl.

The parents delight in the sense of community the babies have created and find strength in not demanding perfection of themselves.

"With one child we could cover all the bases," says Steve. "With four, there's no way. We know we need help. We're not worried when we miss something."

'I wish God would ...'

Steve says he's still sorting out his feelings about his new role as main breadwinner. During tax time, his accounting firm kept him in the office 10 to 12 hours a day.

"There are four little people I have to provide for, just as my parents provided for me," he says. "There's nothing bad about that, just more of a challenge." Emotionally, he says it might take the rest of his life to understand the role of a parent.

"My guess is that it's an ongoing process. You're needed in new ways. Your time frame is more limited. You talk about babies more than you used to. And, gosh, there are so many surprises, you're not surprised about being surprised."

"I think Steve is still in shock," says Gertrude. "I keep telling him that different things are going to happen. They are not all going to go to bed when he wants them to."

"My baby experience is thin," Steve admits. "But I'm a fast learner. You read books, you listen to other parents, you pray."

Just as she originally planned, Cheryl has gone back to work at the church on a part-time basis. Volunteers fill in while Cheryl organizes Sunday school classes and vacation Bible school, and recruits teachers. Recently, she also gave a sermon.

The topic? "I wish God would . . ." she says. "And if you think about that, you realize a lot. The point is that he can't do everything. He's given us a job and he expects us to do it with joy."

"She got the whole congregation involved in asking that question, and it became more of a discussion than a sermon," says Steve. "She's a great classroom teacher."

Cheryl sometimes feels split between motherhood and her outside profession. She would rather be with the children, but feels fulfilled differently in an adult work world. She sometimes thinks too much about the children while she is at work. At home, she gets frustrated "when you set out in the morning to do one small thing" and never get that chance.

"But the focus should be on the children," she says. "The future gets here fast."

Cheryl's and Steve's time together as a couple is also in short supply. When a volunteer sent them off to a night at a restaurant, they "were too tired to do anything else."

What they really wanted was for the volunteer to "put the babies to bed so we could get some sleep."

Grandmother is the rock

Gertrude is astonished at the instant load of four children, even though she had five of her own. She will complain one minute that "your arms feel like they're coming out of their sockets at the end of the day." The next she is overwhelmed by her own feelings for the children. "You pick up one and you think it's your favorite," she says. "Then you pick up another one and feel the same way."

The birth of the quads gave Gertrude, a widow, a chance to sell her house in Connecticut, dump a mortgage and re-enter a lively family scene. She is the veteran, the rock of the house. She's the one Cheryl goes to at 5 a.m. "when I'm so tired I'm afraid I might drop a child."

But Gertrude also set the rules when she got to Ohio.

"I told them I wouldn't cook," she says. "And I won't get up in the middle of the night except when more than two babies are awake."

It has worked. Still, she has lost 13 pounds.

"I took her aside the last time I was there," Heidi says by phone from Plainville, Conn. "I wanted to make sure she was getting enough sleep, that she was getting out."

"She said she was tired but that she was all right. But moms always say that. Yet I think it's going to keep her going. In Connecticut her friends were not active. She was sitting home and bored. And she's a feisty 75-year-old."

Heidi visited the Cliffords for two days in March.

"It felt like two weeks," she says. "I experienced all four of them screaming at the top of their lungs." She remembers being unable to console Robert.

"I said, 'Mom, what am I doing wrong?' And she said, 'Heidi, you obviously haven't had babies before. They just do this sometimes.' I really felt helpless. I didn't know."

Yet she says she got depressed when she had to leave the children, "not knowing when I'm going to see them again." Asked if she felt "momlike" around them, she says, "almost," describing the instant smiles she got from Robert and Paul on the way home from the airport.

"They just had big grins, like they knew who I was. It meant a lot to me."

But Heidi has put a hold on her plans to move to North Canton. She has got a new job and has moved in with her boyfriend, Rick Budnick. Five days a week she is with Ricky, Rick's 7½-year-old son. She recently showed Ricky a few tricks on his new skateboard "and almost broke my neck."

She may eventually move here, "but not in the immediate future."

And the children?

Ruth learns faster than the rest. Paul waits for Steve to come home before he will fall asleep. Robert is sensitive, "the serious one." And Heidi is full of energy.

Each child's uniqueness, says Steve, is what keeps the adults going.

"Heidi and Ruth were in the same crib one day and Heidi was crying," he says. "Ruth reached over and started stroking Heidi's head until she stopped crying."

"It was beautiful," says Cheryl.