

## Happy Ending

**C**heryl Clifford lay on the table, squeezing her husband Steve's hand as her doctor looked at the ultrasound screen, his eyes widening.

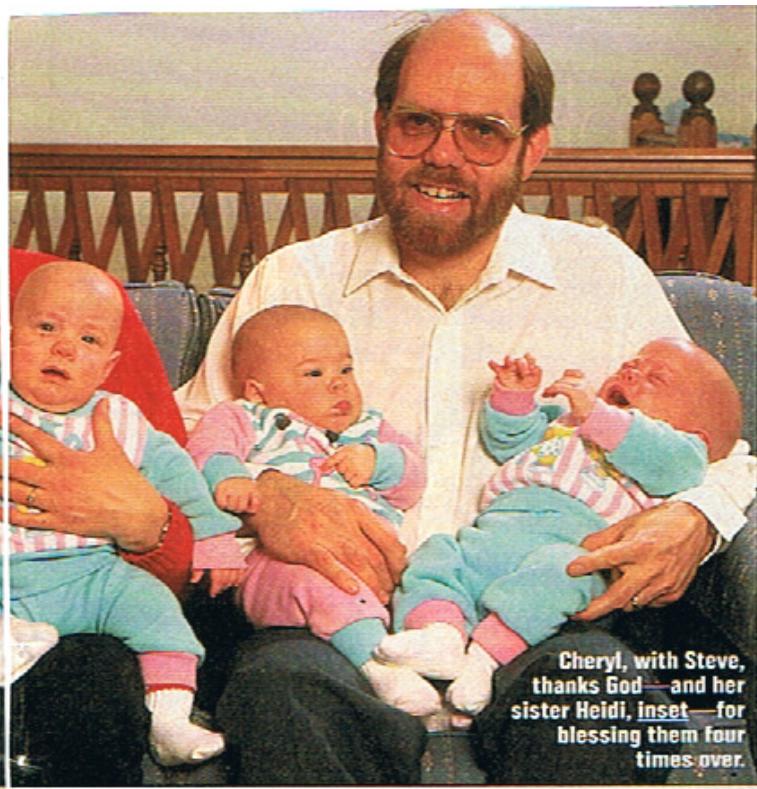
"What is it?" Cheryl gasped, and Richard Moretuzzo, M.D., began counting softly: "There's one, two, three . . . four babies!"

"Four!" Cheryl cried in disbelief. "Wait till Heidi hears this!"

The little lives growing inside Cheryl were a dream come true—but a dream that couldn't have become a reality without her sister Heidi Kuchta.

Ever since she was a young girl, Cheryl had dreamed of being a mother. Growing up in Connecticut with four younger siblings, she had plenty of practice.

In fact, her baby sister Heidi, 20 years her junior, had called her



Cheryl, with Steve, thanks God—and her sister Heidi, inset—for blessing them four times over.

# Heidi's precious gifts



Cheryl and Steve Clifford had almost given up hope of having a family. Then Cheryl's sister Heidi made their dreams come true . . .

"Mommy" until she was three. They remained close even after Cheryl moved to Jackson Township, Ohio, and became a minister.

Cheryl was 42 when she met Steve Clifford, also a minister. "Love like this was worth waiting for," Cheryl told Heidi.

But can starting a family wait this long? Cheryl worried. "It's not too late," Steve reassured her. So they decided to try.

When their attempts to conceive failed, the couple consulted fertility specialists. Then

they met with Dr. Moretuzzo, a fertility expert at Akron City Hospital.

Cheryl's eggs were no longer viable, he explained. "But we could try in vitro fertilization," he said. "And chances of success are greater when the egg donor is a family member."

Cheryl's eyes locked with Steve's and she felt a rush of hope. "Heidi!" they said together.

But could they ask such a

favor? Egg donation involved hormone injections and surgery. And once the eggs had been fertilized and implanted in Cheryl's uterus, there was only a 30 percent chance they would grow. But Heidi's our last hope, Cheryl knew.

The next day, her heart pounded as she called her 27-year-old sister in New Hartford, Connecticut. "I have a favor to ask," she said, explaining the problem. "We need donor eggs, and—"

Heidi felt her heart jump. They want to use my eggs? she marveled. I feel so honored! But before she could say yes Cheryl cautioned, "Don't answer yet. Take time to think about it."

This could be my way of saying thanks for all the things Cheryl has done for me, Heidi thought that night.

The next day, Heidi picked up the phone. "I want to help," she told Cheryl. Oh, Heidi! Cheryl thought, her heart filled with gratitude.

A few weeks later, the sisters started giving themselves daily hormone injections to coordinate their cycles. Then Heidi began medication to stimulate her eggs' growth. Finally, an ultrasound showed Heidi's eggs were ready, and she boarded a plane to Ohio. Please make this work, she prayed.

"It's so good to see you," Cheryl

said, hugging Heidi at the airport. And as she went into surgery Cheryl and Steve squeezed her hand and whispered, "We're so grateful to you."

Nine eggs were retrieved from Heidi's ovaries and fertilized with Steve's sperm. Two days later, doctors implanted four embryos in Cheryl's womb.

"Whatever happens, I'll never forget this," Cheryl said, kissing Heidi goodbye.

Two weeks later, a nurse announced, "You're pregnant!" When an ultrasound revealed four tiny heartbeats, Cheryl was ecstatic. "We did it!"

she cried to Heidi over the phone.

For the next few months, the sisters chatted excitedly over the phone, while Cheryl and Steve shopped for cribs and strollers.

In her twentieth week, Cheryl was put on bed rest. "The doctor says it's best for the babies," she explained to Heidi. At 33 weeks they were healthy enough to be born.

As Steve held Cheryl's hand, Ruth, 2 pounds, 13 ounces; Paul, 3 pounds, 10 ounces; Robert, 3 pounds; and Heidi, 3 pounds, 6 ounces, were delivered by Caesarean.

Today, the quads are happy, healthy 14-month-olds. "I'm so grateful to Heidi for these gifts," says Cheryl.

"Aunt" Heidi visits as often as she can. "I love my nieces and nephews," she says. "And I love that I could do this for my sister."

—Pat Wadsley

## WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Even though Heidi Kuchta is the biological mother of her sister Cheryl's quadruplets, her role is that of a special aunt. And the closeness she feels for her nieces and nephews will no doubt make them feel doubly loved, experts say.

"For sisters, this situation usually creates a very special emotional bond," says Frederick

Licciardi, M.D., a reproductive endocrinologist at New York University Medical Center.

And for the children involved, this sister-to-sister egg donation creates an even stronger feeling of family. "Someday the children will realize that their parents really went out of their way to have them," Dr. Licciardi adds.

