

## Hope & Grace: The wonders of science lead to the miracle of birth

Judy Bastien

*jbastien@theadvertiser.com*

Beth McCleery knew something was wrong fairly soon after getting married. She and her husband, Eric, a software trainer, had begun trying to conceive right away after their 2004 wedding. But by the end of 2005, they were still waiting. Not an inordinately long time for relatively young, relative newlyweds. It was more an instinct than anything else that told Beth McCleery that there was a reason they were still waiting.

"I just had a feeling. I had a feeling that something wasn't right. We both wanted children immediately, as soon as we could after we got married. When that wasn't happening, I panicked," she said. The couple's hopes and dreams finally came true through patience, tenacity, science and the generosity of a local physician. On April 7, they became the parents of Grace-Ann Elizabeth. "She's a doll," said her mother, a fifth-grade teacher. "She's ours. She's perfect."

Two years ago, when the Jennings couple realized a pregnancy was not in their future, they sought the help of fertility specialist Dr. John Storment of the Fertility and Women's Health Center. The problem was a blockage in Beth McCleery's fallopian tubes. At first, they tried some simpler measures to become pregnant. Nothing was working. "There were things that should have worked. There were unexplained reasons we weren't getting pregnant," Eric McCleery said.

The next step was in vitro fertilization, but the couple didn't feel they could afford it. "We knew it would cost \$15,000," Eric McCleery said. "We said we'd hold off and maybe God would give us a baby, some way. We were thinking about adoption."

But then they learned about the Gift of Hope, a free in vitro fertilization at Women's and Children's Hospital that Storment's office donates each year to one local couple. They wrote a letter, applying for consideration for the Gift of Hope, which is now in its fourth year. "We started the program as a way to help couples undergo in vitro fertilization if they're not able to (conceive)," said Amalie Storment, the program's creator and the driving force behind it. She is also Dr. John Storment's wife. Couples must meet certain criteria, including making less than \$80,000 a year and submitting a letter explaining why they need the procedure. "Most of the time, they're very heartbreaking letters," Amelie Storment said. "There are couples spending years to conceive and have spent countless amounts of money to have a baby."

A committee chose the McCleerys in May 2007. But it would take another two years before they would hold their baby. Eric McCleery's sperm count had initially been above average. "But, when we tried to do the in vitro, there was nothing," Beth McCleery said.

Doctors found that he had a small, benign tumor that was affecting his hormone levels and suppressing sperm production. After a time on medication, his sperm count was up, but there was still a problem. There was a blockage that was preventing the sperm from exiting from his body. Next came surgery at Baylor College of Medicine to extract the sperm. It was a long, slow process, but they never lost hope.

"I never let it cross my mind that it wouldn't work," Beth McCleery said. "Whenever I began thinking about it, I would put it out of my mind and began thinking about all of the positive things that would come out of it."

Finally, in June 2008, the in vitro process began, with hormone injections to increase her egg production. When they matured, they were extracted and united with her husband's sperm in July 2008. In spite of the recent attention given to Nadya Suleman, the so-called Octomom who gave birth to eight babies through in vitro fertilization, most fertility doctors today will transfer a minimal number of embryos, said Dr. John Storment. The number recommended depends in part on the age of the mother.

"We have a 50 percent pregnancy rate with the under-35 group without transferring a lot," Storment said, adding that in most cases, he will transfer only two embryos. Beth McCleery received two embryos, but only one "took." Grace-Ann was due to be born April 5, but her mother showed no signs of going into labor. Grace-Ann was getting big -- almost too big. On April 7, labor was induced, but she wound up being born at 9 pounds 6 ounces, by Caesarean section.

It was a long time from beginning to end for the couple, an odyssey that was at times discouraging, at times hopeful, at times scary. But it is only the outcome that counts for Grace-Ann's mother. "It didn't matter to me how she got here."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.