

the gift of life

Doctor, wife give women chance to have a baby by providing free invitro fertilization services

Story by KRIS WARTELLE

Each story of hope and frustration can move Dr. John and Amelie Storment to tears.

There's the young newlywed whose husband is fighting in Afghanistan and wants to see him one day holding their child. And the professional woman whose guilt is overwhelming because she thinks, thanks to her career, she waited too long to start trying to have a family. Each story is accompanied by the fear of being alone and having no child to carry on family traditions, share stories and complete the family unit.

Night after night, as they read through the applications for their Gift of Hope program, the Storments fight back emotions in the quest to choose one lucky and deserving couple who will receive the Gift of Hope. In this case, the gift is a free cycle of invitro fertilization and the hope is that couples who cannot conceive normally will be able to realize the dream of having a child and starting a family.

"You read some of the stories and they are just heart wrenching," says Amelie, whose husband is fertility doctor John Storment. "There is so much guilt and shame for these women who cannot conceive," she says. "Their families write letters on their behalf and sometimes we just sit here and read them and can't help crying."

Dr. Storment is a reproductive endocrinologist with the Fertility & Women's Health Center of Louisiana. With his help, hundreds of babies have been born to >>



couples who could not have children on their own. In 2005, Amelie says a national organization approached John with a similar program aimed at helping infertile couples who could not afford the expensive IVF treatments. Amelie says she discussed it with her husband and they thought there were just as many deserving couples right here in Acadiana who could use the service. So, the Storments started the Gift of Hope program and set about identifying couples they could help. John donates his services and, with the help of Women's and Children's Hospital and Sheridan Healthcare, provides an entire cycle of fertility drugs, injections, and the embryo transfer operation free of charge. A committee sifts through applications and referrals from other doctors and awards the service — estimated at \$10,000 to \$15,000 per cycle — to a deserving couple for whom this may truly be the last hope for a baby.

The first baby born as a result of the program was Hope Elizabeth Hughes, in April of 2007. Her mother named her Hope but that was just a coincidence. Amelie says many times the patients become just like family and she keeps close tabs on her new mothers and families.

"They really do become part of our family," she says. "When one young woman we treated started to miscarry she called me first wondering what to do. I told her to get to a hospital immediately. We all keep in touch and when we do have a couple that is pregnant, I keep up with how the pregnancy is going."

Laura Hughes is one of those success stories. She and her husband, Terry, had been trying to have a baby for more than five years, to no avail.

"We had no answer as to why we couldn't get pregnant," Laura says. "We had played with the idea of doing IVF but it's really expensive and insurance doesn't cover it. We had decided it was almost time to give up when we heard

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fertility doctor



about the program on television."

Laura says she and Terry wrote a letter and applied, but she never thought they would be chosen.

"They called me at work to tell me we had been chosen, and we were so excited," she says.

Over several months, Laura went through the complicated and lengthy process of taking injections and medications and enduring the transfer procedures. She says Amelie was with her every step of the way, and both she and Dr. Storment treated her like family. One morning in 2006, she got the news that she was indeed pregnant.

"I remember Dr. Storment took a picture of my reaction that day when he told me," she says. "I was just amazed. I had my daughter, Hope, in April 2007. It was such a relief and I couldn't believe we had done it. I'm so appreciative and aware of what a gift she is. I gave up my job and I don't miss anything with my daughter. When she was born it completely changed everything in my life."

As a special thank you, Laura and two other Gift of Hope mothers decided to honor the Storments with a portrait of the three babies who

have been born as a result of their program. On a very special day in October, they presented Amelie and John with a framed portrait of Hope, now 4, Grace-Ann, 2½, and Jagger, 2.

"We wanted to give him a reminder of how much we appreciate what he has done," Laura says. "We wanted him to see all three little miracles together."

"I was overwhelmed," John says, "It is just about the best feeling you can imagine. Every patient that has a baby as a result of the program calls it a miracle. And really all I'm doing is giving away a service. It's heartbreaking when the only thing standing in the way of your dream is money."

John says often the stories are so compelling that he and the committee finds it difficult to choose just one recipient. Many times he has given away two treatments because there is more than one deserving couple.

"I don't choose the winners, the committee does," John says. "But I look at the letters and sometimes I just can't see it going to only one couple."

Laura says that's exactly what John and Amelie are all about; very giving people always thinking of others and always giving back. Through their Gift of Hope program, they help make the miracle of child birth possible for some who would otherwise never know the joy of parenthood. A gift that is truly priceless. >>