

Souris Woman a Surrogate Mother for Maritime Couple

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Glen Kirby

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Grow up, get married and have kids. It's a dream that becomes real every day for people in Souris, Brandon and communities around the world.

Infertility can rob people of that dream.

In Canada, the most recent statistics suggest that 16% of Canadian couples are considered infertile, which doubled from twenty years earlier (Canadian Community Health Survey - 2012). An increasing number are turning to surrogate mothers to bear a child for them.

Westman resident Ashley Synyshyn will give birth in November for an infertile couple in Moncton, NB.

"I thought about it for a number of years," says Ashley. "My family was complete and I had known people who had dealt with infertility."

Born and raised in Souris, Ashley (née Collier) is a health care worker in Brandon with three young children of her own and a powerful urge to help others. Last November, she agreed to be a surrogate mother for Courtenay and Joel Hamilton, a maritime couple that contacted her through a national registry and surrogate referral program.

"It's like online dating," laughs Courtenay. "I got profiles of potential surrogates and emailed eight or nine possible ones." After three months of back-and-forth emails in the fall of 2015, Courtenay and Joel asked Ashley on November 8, 2015, to be their surrogate.

"It's completely altruistic," says Andrew, a Brandon lawyer and Ashley's husband. "We are baby-sitters. We are doing this because we have kids and we feel blessed and we've been able to connect with people who haven't been able to."

Courtenay was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2014, just three weeks after marrying Joel. Her treatments left her unable to conceive.

"There were a lot of tears," says Courtenay. "We had always talked about kids."

The two had investigated adoption but weren't prepared to wait 10 years to be matched with a child. By accident, Courtenay came across a link to a website for surrogacy and connected with the Synyshyns.

Joel donated sperm, Ashley supplied the womb and a woman from Toronto donated the eggs - all arranged through the surrogacy referral service.

"We owed," says Ashley. "We knew we were really lucky and could help others."

While approximately 5,000 children a year are adopted in Canada, the number of surrogate births is much lower. The Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society reports that fertility clinics across the country carried out 440 in-vitro fertilization cycles on surrogates in 2014.

"I'm not pregnant but I am," says Courtenay, flipping her long hair. "The closet in the baby's room HAD TO BE BUILT, RIGHT NOW!"

"She is acting like a mother who wants to have everything ready," says Joel. Courtenay laughs, "He abides like I am a crazy, pregnant woman."

On the Labour Day weekend, the Hamiltons travelled to Manitoba to meet again with the Synyshyns and spend time together before the baby comes in November. They toured the hospital in Brandon where Ashley plans to deliver and spent time with their new extended family and friends.

"I get a lot of questions about how Ashley is doing," says Courtenay.

[Read Part Two of this Southwest Post report](#) which explores the costs - financial and emotional - connected with surrogacy.

Local Mother Shares Emotional Journey of Surrogacy (Pt 2)

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Glen Kirby

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"People are concerned about me bonding with the baby and how I'll be when I give it up," says Ashley Synyshyn, a former Souris resident now living in Brandon who will give birth in November for an infertile couple in Moncton, NB.

"I don't think of it as my baby," says the soon-to-be surrogate mother. "I've bonded with it as if my sister was pregnant. It's not my baby."

Ashley, husband Andrew, and the baby's intended parents Courtenay and Joel Hamilton are all dealing with the emotional ride of surrogate parenting since coming together last year through a national registry and surrogate referral program. You can read [Part 1 of their story here](#).

"We're going about our lives like we are not pregnant," says Andrew. With three young children, he and Ashley decided their family was big enough and became involved in the surrogacy program in 2015 to help others.

Their eldest child, old enough to understand that her mother is carrying a child for another family, is totally at ease with the situation and "has never asked why we would do this because she knows why. It's nice to help people," Ashley writes in an online blog documenting her surrogacy.

Meantime, the Hamiltons must experience their first pregnancy from 3,500 kilometres away.

"We don't get the privilege to watch baby Squishy grow and kick unless it's in a picture or video," says Joel. "It's hard. It's something we would both like to be able to see every day."

"Coming into this, we knew that we would be experiencing pregnancy is a completely different way than most," says Courtenay, a cancer survivor unable to conceive. "Ashley has been amazing with keeping us up to date with appointments, kick counts and everything else pregnancy-related. It's definitely not the ideal situation but it's our situation and it works for us."

The Hamiltons also have to deal with the financial cost. By law, surrogate mothers are not allowed to charge the intended parents. The Assisted Human Reproduction Act passed in 2004 makes it illegal to pay directly for eggs, sperm or pregnancy.

The law does allow the Hamiltons to reimburse Ashley for expenses related to the pregnancy. Online surrogacy agencies recommend intended parents set aside at least \$60,000 although final costs could be surpass \$100,000.

"This has not been an inexpensive journey for us," says Courtenay. "Our goal going into this was to make sure that Ashley and our egg donor were never out of pocket. We have paid for in-vitro fertilization mediation for both women, loss wages, time-off work, flights and travel to and from the initial screening and to the transfer in Toronto, lawyers for all three parties and anything else that has or will come up...maternity clothing, heartburn and nausea medication."

Despite the cost and the vast distances separating the families, this surrogacy has drawn people together in a unique relationship built upon giving and hope.

"Both our families have been very supportive," says Joel. "This will be the first grandchild on both sides so it's pretty special."

"Ashley's amazing friend, without even meeting us, set up a GoFundMe page for us and baby Squishy," says Courtenay. "We're constantly surprised and overwhelmed by the love and support we continue to receive!"

Next week, Southwest Post reviews important legal considerations in surrogacy parenting.

Surrogacy Part 3: The Legal Side of Things

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Glen Kirby

<https://southwestpost.ca/2016/09/25/surrogacy-part-3-the-legal-side-of-things/>

Thinking of surrogacy? A specialist in family law strongly suggests that you hire a lawyer.

"Laws are different across Canada," says Robynne Kazina, a partner with Taylor McCaffrey and one of a select few lawyers in Canada specializing in surrogacy, adoption and fertility law. "A contract will clearly set out expectations for both sides."

This month, Southwest Post introduced you to Ashley Synyshyn, a former Souris resident and surrogate mother for a couple in New Brunswick. Read more about her journey in Parts [One](#) and [Two](#).

"One misconception is that surrogacy is illegal in Canada," says Kazina. "It is legal. You just can't pay the surrogate."

Another misbelief is that surrogate mothers often decide to keep their babies. "That rarely happens," says Kazina.

Unlike adoption law which gives the birth mother 21 days to change her mind after giving up her child, surrogacy is defined by the two sides in a contract drawn up to their specifications.

"People say, 'what if she wants to keep it?'" says Courtenay Hamilton, the intended parent of Ashley's child along with her husband Joel. "I'm not worried. If all hell breaks loose, there's a contract in place."

"Sometimes, people want more details in their contracts," says Kazina, adding that intended parents will often add clauses after consulting with her. "They'll say, oh, we never thought of that," including what happens in the event the baby - unborn or delivered - is handicapped.

"This is something that I think every parent worries about but can't control," says Courtenay. Joel adds, "We absolutely want to have a family that we can enjoy every day so, if baby Squishy was to have a mental or psychological issue, we would love them just as much as someone who was without issues."

Current family law in Manitoba can also be a legal quagmire in surrogacy cases. Even though Ashley is pregnant with an egg from a Toronto woman and sperm from Joel, the provincial birth registry will recognize Ashley and her husband as the mother and father when the baby is born in November.

It's up to the Hamiltons and their lawyer to change the birth record and transfer parental rights through the courts.

"We're not bad but we're not the best," says Kazina. "BC is the most progressive province when it comes to surrogacy law."

A revamped Family Law Act for Manitoba - Bill 33 - was introduced by the former NDP government in the summer of 2015 but did not pass before the Conservatives swept into power in 2016.

Legalities aside, Kazina finds constant reward in helping families grow. In a given month she is working on half a dozen surrogacy cases.

"It's an amazing thing," says Kazina. "Usually the surrogate and intended parents have a life-long relationship. I did one surrogacy last month where the intended parents gave the child a middle name from the surrogate."

That special bond is obvious when you see Ashley together with intended parents Courtenay and Joel Hamilton.

"Ashley is giving us something that we could never have achieved without her help," says Courtenay. "For that, we are forever grateful. Ideally, I want to say that Ashley will always be an important part of our baby's life and I plan on working as hard as needed to make sure that happens but, more realistically, only time will tell."

Former Souris Resident Says Surrogacy Experience "Picture-Perfect"

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Glen Kirby

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The photos taken in the delivery room show a couple, faces smeared with tears, holding their newborn for the first time. What you can't tell is the proud parents are from New Brunswick and the birth mother is a former Souris resident who offered to be their surrogate.

"This is the picture-perfect story of how surrogacy should be," says Ashley Synyshyn, who delivered a healthy baby girl on November 16 in Brandon. "It just went so well."

This is the final installment of a Southwest Post series on surrogacy. We invite you to read parts [one](#), [two](#) and [three](#).

Riley Hamilton was born almost a year to the day after Ashley agreed to bear a child for Courtenay and Joel Hamilton, newlyweds left infertile by cervical cancer. The three met through an online surrogacy registry and have developed a close relationship during the pregnancy.

"Ashley is one of my best friends at this point," says Courtenay, "and it's a relationship that we intend on keeping for the rest of Riley's life."

As the three parents relax with Riley nestled in Courtenay's lap, Ashley talks about her emotions during the delivery, upon seeing Riley for the first time and how she is dealing postpartum.

"I was watching them in the delivery room," she says. "I was excited for them, excited for my part to be over. When Riley was born, it was really calm and quiet." Smiling, she says, "It was a pretty cool experience."

"We were all there," says Joel. "All four of us (including Ashley's husband Andy) and two midwives. Ashley was completely un-medicated until the final hour. We all agree on it."

As part of the surrogacy, Ashley signed a contract turning her baby over to the Hamiltons but she admits to having doubts about how that pact would impact her after the birth.

"I couldn't be 100 per cent sure of how I would feel afterwards," says Ashley, with three children of her own. "Obviously, there's more of a connection because I gave birth to her but I had no urge to feed her." Laughing, she quickly adds, "I mean, I like her more than most other babies!"

The surrogacy has not only connected the parents but the extended families. Ashley introduced Riley to her own kids so they could better understand the unique relationship created through the surrogacy.

"Her family gave us this family," observes Courtenay.

Three days into this world, Riley attended the Santa Parade in Brandon with her parents. This weekend, she is returning home to the Maritimes where the Hamilton's parents and relatives will welcome their first grandchild.

"When we get home to New Brunswick, this baby will be torn from our arms and passed around," says Courtenay.

"It was hard not have expectations," says Joel, "but everything I wanted and planned has happened."