

How a kind 26-year-old American, a team of doctors and a couple's refusal to give up created this modern family.

“Meet our surrogate twins”

ALISA LATTO LOOKS down at her three-month-old twin boys, snuggled together on their play mat, and her eyes well with tears. “I am just in awe,” she says. “I look at them all the time and I can't quite believe they are mine.”

These may sound like the gushings of any new mother, but Alisa's story is anything but typical. It took three years, a team of more than 50 people and about \$150,000 for Thomas Levi and Taj Ian to enter the world. Their birth took Alisa and her husband, Alastair Moody, halfway around the world, to the frontier of medical technology and the very limits of their emotions.

“As hard as twins are ... nothing is as hard as the journey we had to take to get them,” Alisa says.

Not long after Alisa met Alastair in Melbourne seven years ago, she knew she wanted children with him. She also knew she had a rare genetic disorder of the connective tissue, known as Marfan Syndrome, but was not too perturbed. Her mother also had the condition and had borne three children – and both of Alisa's brothers were sufferers, too.

Yet when Alisa consulted a geneticist about her child-bearing prospects, the specialist was shocked that Alisa and her brothers had not been monitored for the past 20 years. Marfan Syndrome weakens the walls of the major arteries, particularly the aorta. It turned out that all three children and Alisa's mother were at risk of their aortas rupturing.

Younger brother Ben had to undergo open-heart surgery, causing him to lose movement in ►

STORY BY INGRID PYNE



Nothing was as hard as the journey Alisa and her husband had to take to get the twins, she says, pictured with her precious bundles Taj (left) and Thomas.



his hand. Alisa, her older brother, Ian, and their mother, were monitored by doctors, but five months later, Ian's aorta tore, resulting in two strokes that left him with epilepsy and a loss of mobility.

"Ian had finished his law degree and was going to go far in life," Alisa says. "But, suddenly, he was struggling to do up his shoelaces." He died in March last year.

Feeling like "walking time bombs", Alisa and her mother opted for open-heart surgery in an attempt to repair their damaged aortas. Alisa had hers in Perth in December 2007. She was just 33.

"I woke up from that surgery and wished I hadn't survived," she says. "It felt like there was the biggest building ever weighing down on my chest. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't scream. I still have nightmares about it."

Her personal life was also crumbling. After five years together, Alisa and Alastair broke up shortly before she went under the knife. "I couldn't deal with it at the time," Alastair says. "After three open-heart surgeries and, later, her brother's death, it was so unfair that so much was happening to Alisa." There was, the couple says, too much pressure, too much grief, too much trauma.

Still, the operation proved a defining moment in Alisa's life. "Going into that surgery, I got very clear about what was important to me," she says. "I knew that if I died, the one thing I would have been sad about is I had never had a child."

Alisa and Alastair reunited shortly after the surgery. Yet the next step, getting pregnant, was the one they couldn't take. Alisa knew that carrying a child would put too much pressure on her heart.

"I couldn't bear the thought of having a child and ending up disabled," she says. Adoption also was not an option because Alisa's condition rendered her ineligible.

To have children, the couple knew they needed to borrow another woman's womb.

Finding a surrogate

Surrogacy, where one woman carries a baby for another, is used when a medical condition makes it impossible or dangerous to get pregnant and give birth, such as



A joyous Alastair and Alisa, with surrogate mum Brandi, excitedly anticipate the birth of their twins. Inset: The emotional new parents.



after a hysterectomy, repeated IVF failure, cancer treatment, or because of a severe heart condition such as Alisa's.

"Surrogacy is not just the last resort for some couples," says Dr Mark Bowman, medical director of Australia's leading surrogacy clinic, Sydney IVF. "It's the only way for them to have a child that is medically theirs."

Still, the number of children born to surrogates in Australia is miniscule. Only eight surrogate children were born here and in New Zealand in 2008, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, compared with 360,943 total births in the two countries that same year. This dearth of surrogate children is due, in part, to the small number of cases in which surrogacy is appropriate.

"IT'S PLACING THE CREATION OF LIFE UNDER A CONTRACT."

Yet it is also due to Australia's ad hoc and inconsistent surrogacy laws, which force many childless couples to seek out surrogate mothers

overseas. Until recently, surrogacy was illegal in some states.

Dr Brigid McKenna, a policy officer at the Catholic Church's Life, Marriage and Family Centre, says that, as a mother, she has enormous sympathy for couples in Alisa and Alastair's position. Yet she questions the ethics of asking another woman to put herself and her body through a pregnancy for money.

"Our opposition to surrogacy is not based on a judgement about particular couples and their ability to love and care

for a child," she says. "But we think we need to step back from particular cases and look at what surrogacy means for us as a community. We cannot avoid the fact that surrogacy involves adults placing the creation of new life under a contract."

Dr McKenna says that by allowing surrogacy, governments open the door for vulnerable women to be exploited as surrogate mothers. "This is one scenario where slippage is inevitable," she says. "And the people who will suffer most are the surrogate mothers and the children."

Back in 2008, an Australian friend offered to carry a child for Alisa and Alastair, using Alisa's eggs and Alastair's sperm. The couple soon discovered, however, that while the child would be genetically theirs, their friend would be regarded as the child's mother under Australian law. Alisa and Alastair would have to wait up to five years before they could adopt the child and give it their name – at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars.

"It's the birth mother's name on the child's birth certificate, so every time you try to enrol your child in a new school or get a new passport issued, you have to produce a birth certificate that has a ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIAN KINGMA. STYLING BY MARIJKE KINGMA. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY BRADWYN JONES. COURTESY ALISA LATTO.

different mother's name on it and it's very difficult," Dr Bowman says. "It shouldn't be ambiguous. I would welcome changes to the laws that make the transfer of custody easier and creates certainty for all parties."

There are signs that politicians are trying to do just that, after one of their own got caught up in the surrogacy legal quagmire. In 2006, Labor Senator Stephen Conroy and his wife, Paula Benson, who was unable to have children after suffering ovarian cancer, had a baby daughter using a surrogate mother and a separate egg donor. The Melbourne couple had to undergo the process in Sydney because surrogacy was outlawed in Victoria.

Senator Conroy then had to go to court to be recognised as the genetic father. Publicity surrounding the case prompted the then federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock to call on states to bring uniformity to their widely different laws covering surrogacy.

Although the NSW government recently passed laws making it easier for parents of surrogate children to gain full legal recognition, the pace of change on the national stage remains sluggish. A Standing Committee of Attorneys-General (SCAG) has been trying to set up a national model for the regulation of surrogacy since early 2008, but so far has devised just 15 "draft principles", which it refuses to make public.

"Our laws should focus on ensuring all children have equal rights and protections under the law, but our experiences show that reforms are needed to address inconsistencies and incompatibility as medical technology has advanced," Senator Conroy, who is a Catholic, tells *The Weekly*. "I have met many people, like my wife and I, who have been unable to have children for a variety of reasons. Altruistic surrogacy is a challenging path without the stress, trauma and extra cost of interstate travel."

As politicians debated the need for reform, Alisa and Alastair's childlessness had begun to feel like a bereavement. Everywhere they went, there were baby bumps and talk of children.

"Ever since I met Al, I knew that having children was very important to him," says Alisa. "I felt very responsible because I was the one with the genetic problem, so it felt like it was my fault. It put pressure on our relationship." >

COURTESY BRANDI BREWSTER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSON ALJANO.

The surrogate

Surrogate mum Brandi Brewster may be blonde, petite and a package of California energy, but at 26, she also possesses a selflessness and maturity beyond her age. It's not just motherhood that has done this to her, but her unique experience of it.

Brandi has already given birth to six children, but only the first two – daughters Abbi, three, and Elli, two, are her own with partner Adam, 34. The next two were twin boys she carried as a surrogate for a couple in Hong Kong. The last two were the twin boys she carried for Alastair and Alisa.

Brandi knows the minute she tells people about her surrogacy experience that she will be bombarded with questions. "People ask, why do it? Don't you worry you will become attached to the babies? They tell you they could never do it. I understand it isn't for everyone."

Yet Brandi, a former catering company manager, felt surrogacy was a gift she could give a couple who was unable to become pregnant. "I love being a mother and I loved helping Alisa and Al complete their family. [But] when you're pregnant, you understand they are not yours," she says.

Brandi decided to become a surrogate after the birth of her first daughter, but by the time she had signed up with the Coastal Surrogacy agency, she was unexpectedly pregnant with Elli. "So I went through my pregnancy thinking, 'How would it be feeling the kicks [of another woman's baby]? How would I feel?'"

She believed she could separate the two experiences. Soon after Elli's birth, she was matched with a couple from Hong



"You understand they're not yours," says surrogate Brandi Brewster.

Kong. It was a complicated pregnancy, but even so, after learning of Alisa and Alastair's story, Brandi wanted to go through it again.

"I told my husband very gently. He said, 'Are you crazy? Were you not there for that last pregnancy?' I said, 'I know, but these people are fabulous', and I told him all about them and he said yes."

Brandi, Alisa and Al talked and texted and became close. "Because my last couple was

from Hong Kong, I was used to having a couple overseas," says Brandi. "The difference was we didn't have a lot in common. This

scenario was so much more wonderful – I really got my fulfilment this time."

Brandi was lucky her family, including her mother, siblings and Adam, were supportive of her and her own daughters knew the babies belonged to Alisa and Alastair.

"Towards the end of the pregnancy, I said, 'It's going to be soon', and my oldest said, 'Don't call Alisa and Alastair because I want to hold them before they take them'. They understood the babies were going to go."

Yet what of Brandi herself? She says when you carry the biological children of another couple, you love them, but develop a different relationship with them. To mark the twins' birth, Alisa and Alastair gave Brandi a diamond ring to symbolise their bond. The family hopes to travel to Australia to see them. "My husband said, 'Don't get too attached to them, they will go on with their lives'," says Brandi. "But receiving the ring confirmed everything I knew. We are friends for life."

– SHARON KRUM

"I UNDERSTAND IT'S NOT FOR EVERYONE."



Brandi, with Tom and Taj, sees surrogacy as a way of helping others.

They are not alone. Overseas studies show that couples with infertility problems are significantly more likely to separate. Michael Chapman, a senior fertility specialist with IVF Australia, says such relationships are severely tested by feelings of blame and failure, as well as by the arduous nature of IVF treatment, which he describes as a form of “torture”.

“In a surrogate scenario, couples have already been down a long, drawn-out, traumatic process,” he says. “And then they have to deal not only with the uncertainty of whether the surrogate will get pregnant, but also whether the surrogate will look after that child [during the pregnancy].”

Yet, by now, Alastair was committed to joining Alisa on the surrogacy journey. The couple turned their focus to the United States, where commercial surrogacy is both allowed and commonplace.

“Doctors in America have no problems with surrogacy,” says Alisa. “There are clinics that specialise in it; the approach is different ... They know it’s the intelligent thing to do if you have a health condition.”

Compare that with some Australian doctors who would not treat Alisa. One haematologist, who was asked to monitor Alisa’s anti-coagulant levels while her eggs were retrieved, refused to treat her, saying it would “compromise” her beliefs. However, she did find Alisa another doctor.

“I found that upsetting because I felt that I was being penalised for my condition,” says Alisa. “I found myself having to justify to them I wasn’t doing something weird, I was just trying to have a baby.”

Even in the US, however, Alisa and Alastair still had hurdles to jump.

The first was that Alisa was determined to avoid passing on the defective gene that causes Marfan Syndrome to any of her children. Knowing she had a 50 per cent chance of doing so, she turned to doctors in the hope that they would identify and isolate the genetic error.

Doctors likened their ability to find it to being able to spot one tiny spelling mistake in a novel with hundreds and hundreds of pages. After 14 months of trials, Australian doctors were unable to detect the error with their equipment.



The families say they have formed a lifelong bond. Inset: Brandi and Adam's daughters hold the twins.

Desperate, Alisa wrote to 18 laboratories around the world and one in New Orleans agreed to screen her DNA at no cost. Just weeks later, she got a call to say they had isolated the gene. Now her eggs could be screened and those with the genetic error would not be used in the surrogacy.

Thus began the expensive and exhausting cycle of hormone injections, egg retrievals and the transfer of frozen embryos to the US that would become all too familiar to Alisa and Alastair over the next 18 months. Three rounds of surrogacy all ended in failure – and heartbreak. After the third attempt, the couple were exhausted, broke and unsure whether they could try again.

Each attempt was costing them about \$20,500 and, according to statistics from America’s Society for

Assisted Reproductive Technology, had only about a 39 per cent success rate. On top of that, Alisa and Alastair knew they would need to pay about \$25,600-\$36,000 to a surrogate if she delivered their children, as well as thousands of dollars in travel and hospital costs, and agency and legal fees.

“We were pretty much ready to call it a day, but decided we would have one more try,” says Alisa. “We got all of our money together and our parents and friends put in enough to ensure we could have another shot at it. I told the agency that we wanted to try one more time, but with a surrogate that had been successful before.”

That is when Brandi, a 26-year-old Californian who had already given birth



to surrogate twins as well as two children of her own, entered their lives.

For this last roll of the dice, Alisa took the high-risk decision that, instead of sending a frozen embryo to the US, she would attempt her egg retrieval in California. In Australia, Alisa had to be hospitalised in the week leading up to the procedure because it required her to be taken off her heart medication. In California, unable to get US health insurance, Alisa could not afford the hospital bill and so administered all the hormone treatments herself.

“I took myself off all my anti-clotting heart drugs for 24 to 36 hours,” she says. “It’s very dangerous to come off that medication, as when you are injecting hormones you have a much greater risk of clotting. But I had no other option. All my doctors in Australia told me not to do it, that it was crazy and dangerous.”

The strategy paid off. Twelve days after Brandi was implanted with the embryos, she rang Alisa to say she’d taken a home pregnancy test. “She said, ‘It’s negative, but I think it wants to be a positive’,” Alisa says. “And then the next day she called and said, ‘It’s a positive today!’ ” >

“I FELT THAT I WAS BEING PENALISED FOR MY CONDITION.”

COURTESY BRANDI BREWSTER.



Proud parents Alisa and Alastair with their much-longed-for boys.

On May 19, when Brandi was 35 weeks pregnant, Alisa and Alastair checked into a hotel not far from Disneyland. All around them families were taking trips to the theme park and it seemed like a fitting beginning.

Seven days later, they got the call from Brandi telling them to get to the hospital.

Thomas was born weighing 2.8kg and, seven minutes later, Taj arrived weighing 2.5kg. "I was in so much shock because we had gotten to the hospital half an hour before and then, suddenly, they are passing you a baby," says Alisa. "It hit me two hours later that I was finally a mother. It was crazy, chaos. I was shell-shocked, actually."

Strong bonds for life

Most babies are much wanted, but there is a special quality to the relationship between a mother and the children she had all but convinced herself she would never have. When *The Weekly* caught up with Alisa's family, it was clear that the new mum's heart was bursting with love for her boys. A proud Alastair says he feels Alisa

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grows more and more into motherhood with each day. "There is such an amazing bond between Alisa and the boys," he says.

There is another tie that the couple swears will never be broken. Alisa and Alastair gave Brandi a diamond ring engraved with "Eternally Grateful" along with the date of the boys' birth.

"We bought a diamond band in Melbourne to match my wedding ring. We thought it would be symbolic, that we would always be bonded," says Alisa. "You see Brandi in labour and you know no one does this for money."

The question most often asked is why, then, did Brandi do it? "I'm one of those people who tries to convince all my friends to have babies," Brandi says. "I love being a mother and I loved helping Alisa and Al complete their family. My moment as

a surrogate is seeing the parents hold the babies for the first time. Seeing the joy on Alisa and Al's faces was priceless."

Nor, Brandi says, did she feel like an exploited mother forced to give up her children. "It really is a different mentality [carrying another couple's babies]," she says. "When the babies kicked, I didn't run to my husband and say, 'They're kicking!' I ran to the phone and told them in Australia."

The diamond ring represented the incredible nine-month journey that Alisa says left her and Brandi more like sisters than friends. Brandi shared every aspect of her pregnancy with Alisa and Alastair through texts and phone calls.

After the boys' birth, she pumped breast milk every three hours for the entire six weeks that the babies were in California, drove Alisa and Alastair to the passport office and airport, prepared food for them and even babysat occasionally.

"It was the most incredibly joyous experience of my life being there, getting to know Brandi and her family," says Alisa. "That's why I cried the whole flight home because it was this awful separation for us."

"In an ideal world, I would have liked to carry my own pregnancy, but my priority is to bring babies into the world safely and to be a mother who is healthy and strong."

"Now we have this amazing, extended American family that will always be part of us and part of the boys."

Although their boys are only three months old, Alisa and Alastair cannot wait to tell them about their extraordinary birth. "It will be one of our proudest moments," says Alisa, "to let them know how many people it took to bring them into the world – Brandi, her partner Adam, her family, Al and my family, all the doctors in Australia and the US. I will be very proud to tell them how much they were wanted."

So, after all the effort, the heartbreak and the cost, would the couple contemplate surrogacy again? "If the baby was handed to us at six months," jokes Alastair, who admits that he had not realised before that newborns were "nocturnal".

Alisa smiles. "I would only do it with Brandi. I wouldn't do it with anybody else and I think she feels the same way. And we've already got two beautiful children. How lucky are we? If this is all we have, that's still fantastic." ■

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