

Passing on the Gift of Parenthood

Erica and A.J. Schlaefer tried for years to become parents. After they opted for adoption they started a nonprofit organization to help other couples become parents

By Amy Cavalier

This is the story of Erica Walther Schlaefer and her husband A.J. Schlaefer's journey to become parents and how they touched other people's lives in the process.

Erica has shared her and A.J.'s struggles with infertility and decision to adopt with hundreds of people across the country through her blog Parenthood for Me. And in 2009, the Irondequoit couple founded a national nonprofit organization of the same name aimed at providing emotional and financial support, and educational tools to those adopting and pursuing assistive reproductive technology to try to conceive.

"What's maddening to me is that parenthood comes down to the size of your bank account for so many people," said Erica. "There's so many children out there that need families."

Married in 2003, Erica and A.J. tried to start a family. Unsuccessful, the couple visited a fertility specialist who informed them that their dream to have a child would not come so easy. Both Erica and A.J. had reproductive issues that would make it difficult for them to conceive naturally. After four years and over \$20,000 on assisted reproductive technology, the emotional and financial struggle became too much, Erica said, and they decided adopt.

Erica and A.J. welcomed their son from South Korea in June of 2008 and they are expecting a second son through international adoption. Parenthood is a dream come true, Erica said in her blog in late April during National Infertility Awareness week.

"We couldn't be happier with our little family, and it is very exciting to have a brother for our son," she wrote on April 29. "However, the very long and arduous journey to parenthood has left an imprint on my soul forever. Infertility, the disease of infertility, changes one's life."

Erica began her blog, Parenthood for Me, in October 2008.

"I knew by putting it out there, another man or woman would read it," she said. "I guess if we're going through this, we might as well have something good come out of it."

Soon, the blog began to reach people across the United States. People Erica didn't even know began reading the blog and coming forward to share their own stories about In vitro fertilization, infertility and adoption. There are 7.3 million Americans that suffer from infertility, Erica said, and one in four couples will have some problem with conception.

Although infertility was recently defined as a disease by the World Health Organization, Erica said, it's debated by insurance companies as to whether infertility is more of a life enhancing procedure that's not neces-

sary or if it's a medical procedure that's a necessity of life.

"Procreating is such a natural part of being human," Erica wrote in her blog. "When you are forced to come to terms with the fact that it may never happen, you are giving up a large piece of yourself. It's a blow so unexpected it takes your breath away."

In 2009, A.J. and Erica founded the nonprofit Parenthood for Me with the intention of providing education, emotional and financial assistance to other couples wanting to become families, either through reproductive therapy or adoption.

"I wanted a place under one umbrella where people could go who were desperate for parenthood...whether they wanted adoption, surrogacy, in vitro fertilization," she said. "We don't claim to be an expert in any one of

these areas, but we can point you in the right direction to the experts, to an infertility clinic in your area, because there's a lot of research to be done and it's very overwhelming."

For more information about Parenthood for Me, visit www.parenthoodforme.org/

International adoption cost the couple about \$25,000. It can range upwards of \$40,000. A federal tax credit covered about \$12,000, but Erica and A.J. still had to come up with all the money up front without taking out any loans. For many couples dealing with infertility, the cost of fertility treatments and adoption can be out of reach.

Parenthood for Me is raising money to provide grants to those

adopting and pursuing assistive reproductive technology to try to conceive. The nonprofit awarded its first set of grants in the summer of 2010. Out of the 90 applicants on the first grant round, Parenthood for Me gave a total of \$12,000 to four couples, two who were pursuing assistive reproductive technology and two pursuing adoption. The couples were from New York, California, Florida and North Carolina.

Over 110 people attended the second annual Parenthood for Me Gala held in April. The organization recognized Dr. Eberhard Muechler with the 2011 Commitment to Excellence Award for his 43-year commitment to building families. Muechler was the first doctor to perform in vitro fertilization in Rochester at the University of Rochester Medical Center, according to Erica's blog.

Other fundraising events have included Bowling for Babies and Artwork for Building Families, an ongoing fundraising effort that includes the sale of stationary note cards, posters and bookmarks. Parenthood for Me

will award its second grants in July. Erica said she is amazed by the support she's received from her blog followers, people she's never had the chance

to meet, who have helped her grow Parenthood for Me.

"Its amazing, we've got so many grant applications from all over the country," said Erica. "It makes you want to do more. I can't tell you how many heartwarming, wonderful things that have happened since we started."

Jerry Furciniti of Fairport, 34,

Continued on next page



Erica and A.J. Schlaefer in a recent photo. The couple decided to adopt after fertility treatments failed to yield results. They now help couples across the nation through their nonprofit Parenthood for Me.



Jerry Furciniti, his wife Laura, and son Evan. The couple began the adoption process with their first son 2009. The son, Evan, arrived from South Korea on Christmas Eve that same year. Jerry serves on the board of directors of Parenthood for Me.

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serves on Parenthood for Me's board of directors. He and his wife Laura began the adoption process with their first son Evan in 2009 and Evan arrived from South Korea on Christmas Eve that same year. Jerry and Laura struggled with infertility for four years before they decided to adopt. It felt like a weight had been lifted off their shoulders, he said.

"After going through years of treatments and the peaks and valleys of hope and despair, it really wears on you and you start evaluating where you are in life," he said. "Is your point to become pregnant or to be parents? For us, we really wanted to be parents. It wasn't necessarily important for us to be pregnant. We knew we wanted children in our lives and we felt this was the best way to build our family."

Evan will be 3 years old in July. This summer, the couple is expecting their second son, Dillon, also from South Korea. Knowing how hard it was emotionally and financially to adopt, Jerry said, he was eager to help other couples in the same position.

"The key theme of the organization is that the main prerequisite for having a family is a loving home, not tens of thousands in the bank account," he said. "Knowing what we've been through and being able to help someone else go through it is so powerful."

Parenthood for Me seeks more than funding. The organization's goal is to

break down the stigmas surrounding infertility and adoption. Infertility issues and complications with pregnancies are not acknowledged enough in

From the Blog

Having a family should not be based on financial capabilities. The grief and emotional burden of not being able to conceive a child is exacerbated by the strain and stress of finding money to become parents. It is a reality for those of us in this predicament, but I want to ease some of that stress. I cannot help everybody, but I want to offer hope that there is somewhere to turn to realize someone's dreams of parenthood. Excerpt from Erica Walther Schlaefler's blog, parenthoodforme.blogspot.com.

society, Erica said.

"There's no societal rules about the funeral or how to mourn a baby you've lost," she said. "Those are things we don't talk about enough, and I think if we did there would be a lot more empathy. There's a lot more to it."

Having children is a normal next step for couples after they get married, and often loved ones and friends begin asking questions about having a baby soon after the couple returns from the honeymoon, she wrote in her blog.

"When a couple cannot conceive a child and are constantly being bombarded with questions about having a baby, it makes the situation all the more unbearable," she wrote. "When friends and family members start their own families, there is a huge void and one often feels extremely alone and out of the loop. As a woman I feel like I will never be able to catch up in the circle of conversations that revolve around becoming a mom."

Infertility is not something you just get over, Erica said. It's been a long, emotional road, Erica said, but she wouldn't have had it any other way.

"I wouldn't change a thing, because the child we have as our son, if I had been able to get pregnant, I wouldn't have him," she said. "People say that our child is so lucky to have us, but we're lucky to have him. Believe me."

Dr. Rosalind Hayes is president of Rochester Fertility Care:

"It Takes a Lot of Motivation to End Up in My Office"

The president of Rochester Fertility Care, Dr. Rosalind Hayes, said infertility is a life crisis involving high levels of anxiety and distress for couples wanting to start or grow a family.

"It takes a lot of motivation to end up in my office," she said. "These are people who are missing work, who have done a lot of research, talked to other doctors and talked to other people."



Hayes

Hayes said couples who haven't been able to get pregnant for over a year, a woman who never gets a period, or any woman 35 and older who don't conceive within six months are signs that one or both of the partners could be facing fertility issues.

For females, the common cause of infertility is ovulation problems; either the woman doesn't ovulate at all or she ovulates sporadically or with poor hormonal quality. Another problem is the quality of ovulation declines with age.

In the case of men, Hayes said, about one-half of fertility issues are associated with what is called male factor, which is a general term for anything that could be wrong with the sperm, such as the sperm count, the shape of the sperm, or absence of sperm.

"We've seen all different male factor conditions, and certainly sometimes men are their own worst enemy," she said. "Sometimes they cause toxic situations from drinking, smoking or steroid abuse."

A series of tests are run to help determine the cause of the reproduction complications, Hayes said. Treatments can include ovulation induction, insemination, surgery that can help reduce pelvic scar tissue, or in vitro fertilization (IVF), a process by which egg cells are fertilized by sperm outside the body. In vitro fertilization costs about \$7,500 per treatment and it can sometimes take several attempts to result in a successful pregnancy, said Hayes.

Couples consider adoption for many reasons.

"Some people can say they never have to have their own child and they want to adopt," she said. "Some may decide the medical treatments aren't desirable for them, and some may choose that if they find there's a low probability of success given their set of circumstances."

Hayes said what Erica Walther-Schlaefler has done with Parenthood for Me is amazing.

"I think there's education and awareness that is very valuable, and I think the financial contributions that Erica makes to people are truly helpful and greatly appreciated."