

q seminar: **CREATING FAMILIES**

CREATING FAMILIES VIA SURROGACY - A GIVE & TAKE

Cass Lake's generosity in carrying a child for gay couple Juan & Christian inspired them to donate their sperm and left-over embryos to others in need.

For Juan, now 36 years old, the man of his dreams had always been someone keen to bring up a family. It was a topic raised in his first week dating Christian. They quickly came to realise both shared the same dream - two children - one biologically connected to each. Now settled in Sydney, their journey to reach this goal has taken them around the world several times.

Juan & Christian had a boy born via a difficult surrogacy process in Mexico in 2015. They had tried for two children, but only Juan's sperm had produced embryos that (after many tries) led to a healthy baby boy, Anxo.

Back in Sydney after their Mexico experience, they heard about the Australian Surrogacy Community- a large Facebook group where altruistic surrogates and intended parents can 'self-match'. The couple joined, thinking one day to locate an Australian surrogate to perhaps carry that second child.

Posting an irresistible image of themselves and Anxo, the close-knit surrogate community was soon abuzz with discussion. Within two weeks Cass, a mother of three from the mid North NSW Coast had offered to carry their longed for second child. Given most looking at domestic surrogacy take years to find a surrogate, if they do at all, such good fortune was extra-ordinary.

"We weren't really ready" Juan admits, but it was too good an offer to turn down. What followed was a visit to the tiny village of Tinonee outside Taree to meet Cass and her family. She and her three children, now 10, 8 and 6 years made a short video for their new gay friends. Her eldest boy did the commentary, declaring they couldn't wait to help Juan and Christian. The boys would chat with Cass via Messenger for hours at a time as well as plentiful Skype calls.

But there was a catch - there was only so long Cass was prepared to put her life on hold to carry. She wanted the embryo transfer to occur in March 2017, with the hope that if it worked, she would deliver by Christmas.

By late January 2017, while Juan & Christian, their surrogate and her partner had completed the legal and psychological counselling, their plans to re-engage Anxo's South African egg donor had come unstuck. The Australian government was refusing to grant her a visa to travel.

Fortunately, late the year prior, they had met another Sydney gay couple and their egg donor Amber at a kids' party. They had got to chatting and Amber had ultimately suggested that if needed, she would donate her own eggs. In early February they made contact again. Amber remained willing. However the logistics were complex.

They had already committed to a Brisbane IVF clinic (as only this clinic accepted South African egg donors), but Juan & Christian were in Sydney, Amber in Melbourne and Cass four hours up the coast. Their IVF team needed to synchronise their donor and surrogate menstrual cycles. Luck was on their side and they successfully created nine embryos.



Cass first embryo transfer took, but the next 20 weeks proved really tough, with constant nausea and vomiting. With Juan & Christian both working, they could only drive up to Tinonee on weekends. The hamlet had no access to take-away restaurants, so they couldn't even arrange for meal deliveries for Cass's family. Instead Juan cooked and froze as many meals as they could fit in a huge esky and drove north, to take the meal preparation off Cass' hands for a few weeks.

On 5 December, Cass had an extended 24 hour labour in Manning River Hospital and lost three litres of blood in the process. As Juan held their newborn son, Cass was rushed into theatre to stem the blood loss. While keen to complete another surrogacy journey, Cass' doctors have advised that another birth would be just too risky for her own health.

What advice would Juan & Christian give gay singles and couples considering Australian surrogacy?

"You need to really put yourself out there, be appreciative of every single effort made by members of the surrogacy community, be genuine, don't take people's kindness for granted - give back."

What Juan & Christian could give was sperm and embryos. So they joined another online group Sperm Donation Australia, selecting five couples in need of sperm – one in Tasmania, two in Sydney, one in each of Brisbane and Melbourne.

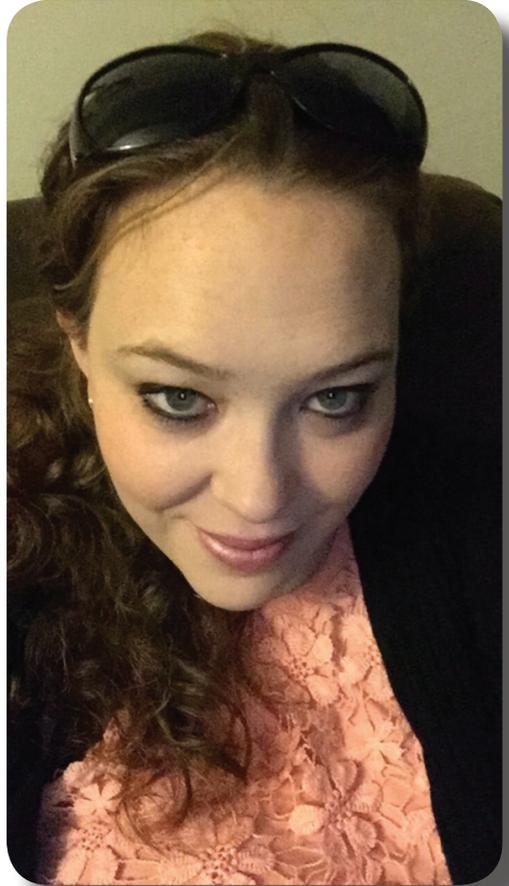
As for embryos, they have eight still in Brisbane and were keen to donate them. Their donor put them in touch with a Melbourne heterosexual couple to whom they are donating four of these.

While embryo donation remains a process heavy with red-tape and further counselling in the Australian context, Juan & Christian remain determined to help.

Juan & his partner are just one of 34 Australian parents and surrogates who will share their extra-ordinary journeys at Families Through Surrogacy's February seminar series across six Australian capital cities between 10 -16 February 2018.

These aim to assist those considering surrogacy with crucial decisions around countries, agencies, IVF decisions and surrogate-parent relationships.

Full details at <http://www.familiesthrusurrogacy.com/febseminar/>



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