

# THE GIFT of LIFE

One woman's passion for pregnancy and lifelong interest in surrogacy have led her to give another couple the most precious gift of all.

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**R**ELATIONSHIPS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE AT THE best of times, but try being a surrogate, a woman who carries a baby for others, to really complicate your life.

In Australia, the act of surrogacy is unpaid and the only apparent reward is the pleasure of giving the gift of a child to people who can't otherwise have one. But, according to Anna McKie, a 37-year-old school teacher from Banksia Park, her surrogacy journey has provided many other unexpected gifts along the way, for her and her family.

Anna was 14 when she first had the thought of carrying a child for others. Her friends were discussing pregnancy and what it does to the body; all but Anna were worried by the prospect. Anna told them she would take one for the team and have all their babies for them.

Anna was 34 and already had her own family, Emily, now 6, and Ewan, 4, when her youthful plan began to take shape, becoming an egg donor over the next few years to three separate couples who were otherwise unable to have their own children. After Ewan was born at home, Anna started thinking about becoming a surrogate.

She found Ewan's home birth so empowering that she wanted to do it all again but without having to raise another child. She joined the online surrogacy community and connected with both intended parents and other prospective surrogates to find out more.

Anna is now in the second trimester of her first surrogacy pregnancy, the biological child of the intended parents, Matt Davies and Brendan Campbell of Peterhead, using an egg donated by their long-time friend, Jen Hyde.

But, as you'd expect, this is not the beginning of the story. Surrogacy in Australia is something like a courtship. Anna, Matt and Brendan spent six months "surrogacy-dating" as Anna refers to it, having met through the surrogacy community, until Anna felt ready to offer to bear a child for them.

The general rule of thumb in the surrogacy community is for the "surrogacy team" to invest enough time in each other's company to ensure that each member of the "team" shares the same values and that they are well-equipped to resolve any conflicts during





**Below:** Anna McKie, who has wanted to be a surrogate for many years, spent months building a friendship with Brendan and Matt. **Previous pages:** Fathers-to-be Brendan Campbell and Matt Davies regularly care for Anna and Glen's children to lighten the busy family's workload during Anna's pregnancy.

the course of the pregnancy. For Anna, it was important that the intended parents of the child she would bear were people her husband and children liked and trusted, as her pregnancy journey meant they would be very much part of her family life.

Equally, Matt and Brendan needed Anna to be a good fit for them, someone they could call a friend, as they want their child to know their birth mother and for her to be part of its life. Unlike overseas surrogacy, where a large parcel of money can be involved, surrogacy in Australia is a relationship-building exercise, and for Anna, Matt and Brendan, it will be a lifetime one.

"Anna strongly believes that surrogacy is an investment in time," Matt explains.

"We can't pay her for what she is doing for us but we can go around there and cook her a meal, fold up laundry or take the kids out. It's things you would do for a friend and Anna says she now feels that she is having a baby for friends which is lovely for us to hear as that's ultimately where we all want to be."

It wasn't so long ago that Anna was pregnant with their own second child and husband Glen could well remember the impact of that pregnancy on their family life. But he knew how important this was to Anna and he agreed, so long as she did her research and didn't rush into it.

"I know I can be so fixated and excited about this project and I really want to make it work but Glen sometimes needs to remind me of our priorities; our own family," explains Anna.

Managing surrogacy is an emotional journey for all parties and when conflicts inevitably arise, there is a need for practical common sense. Glen is that person.

"He is very even-handed," says Matt. "He can see a situation from both sides, which I think can be very difficult for him as you



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would naturally want to side with your partner."

Addressing issues along the way, big ones such as revealing the gender of the baby or just not being available for a medical appointment on a particular day, requires give and take, as in any relationship.

"Sometimes it feels like I have three husbands. It's a very intimate thing to have a baby together, we're just not having sex!" says Anna.

Anna's children are so accepting of their unique situation that six-year-old Emily has started going up to pregnant women and asking them if they are going to keep their babies. The children enjoy a good relationship with Matt and Brendan, who regularly take them to the park for an outing or help them with their bedtime routines to ease the load on Anna and her husband. It took a while before Glen felt comfortable with his children spending time with the two strangers who had entered their lives. Matt and Brendan both admired and respected him for his protectiveness of his family.

"I was really uncomfortable in the beginning because they were kids we'd never met, adults we'd never met. Children tend to jump all over you and I was worried about how Anna and Glen were feeling when I'd only known Ewan for half an hour before he sat on my lap to read a story," says Matt.

Now, those anxieties have gone. Matt and Brendan are an important part of the McKie family life. And, for the fathers-to-be, there is the added bonus of learning the art of parenthood. According to Ewan there's a bit to learn.

"Last time we were together, Ewan asked me if I knew any songs other than 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star'," Matt says, with a laugh.

Now that Anna is pregnant, Matt and Brendan have to get used to having little control over the process. But surrogacy is all about trust.

"Getting to know Anna well over the past couple of years has put my mind at ease," says Brendan.

"I think seeing the way she parents her own children, and the fact that she has wanted to be a surrogate for a long time, I know how much it means to Anna to be a surrogate."

As they all look forward to the birth, Anna reflects on the journey so far. Providing the gift of a baby is one thing, but she didn't expect the process to teach her so much about tending to all the relationships in her life.

"It has made me make sure that I invest time in my relationship with Glen to ensure that it's strong and he is valued while I'm off building this other relationship with two other men," Anna says.

And for her children, she hopes her actions are modelling behaviour that encourages them to be kind and help others.

"This is perhaps an extreme case of offering help, but I like to think it has taught our children empathy and to be accepting of families that may not look exactly like theirs," she says.

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