



# COMMUNITY

## Surrogate mom

# Woman gives ultimate gift to sister

By Stephanie Hounsell  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

It was around the same time that sisters Joanne Agnew and Sylvia Berrey, just a year apart in age, decided to start their own families. They fully expected to soon be sharing the joys and challenges of motherhood, raising children close in age.

After just two months, Joanne found out she was pregnant. Sylvia and her husband, Wallace, kept trying. And trying.

Five years later, Miltonian Joanne and her husband, Kevin, had given birth to two children with a third on the way, while Sylvia and Wallace remained childless.

Medication and visits to a fertility clinic proved futile.

Heartbroken and in danger of giving up, they decided to adopt and were soon blessed with a little girl from China they named Lily.

Life was good. But they didn't want Lily to be an only child. Adoption wasn't an option a second time round. It was too expensive and rules had changed, making the process even more difficult.

It pained Joanne to see her sister and brother-in-law suffer. That's when the idea struck her. She could have a baby for her sister — become a surrogate mother.

After thoroughly doing her research, she was sure it was what she wanted to do and called Sylvia last summer to let her know what she'd decided.

Fast forward to two weeks ago.

Joanne and Sylvia are sitting on two couches in Joanne's Milton home, a tiny baby dressed in blue sitting between them. Little William was born August 6 at eight pounds, seven ounces. Joanne is both his biological mother and his aunt. And soon, Joanne is going to have to do probably the most difficult thing she's ever had to do — say goodbye.

In a few days, Sylvia and Wallace will be taking William home to Nova Scotia, where they'll start their lives as a four-person family. And Joanne will do her best to cope, knowing she won't be a mother to the child to whom she gave birth.

"It was harder emotionally than I thought it would be going in," she admitted.

She said she was an emotional wreck during the pregnancy, seeking the help of a counsellor. He told her she was likely grieving in advance, knowing what was to come.

Joanne said she felt peaceful right after William's birth — knowing she'd done the right thing — but felt the sadness creep back in shortly after.

"Now I am faced with having to say goodbye to him," she said, tearing up, "and it's going to be very difficult. I feel like I'm grieving. I'm grieving the loss. I had a baby, and now I'm not going to have a baby."

But, she added, she doesn't regret having William. "As sad as I am, I don't regret doing it... I forever will have a special part in his life. I'll have a special bond with him forever."

Joanne said she's not sure if she wants to hear all about William's firsts. It might be just too hard. She'll have to take it as it comes, she said, day by day.

The idea of becoming a surrogate mother for her sister was one Joanne said she toyed with over the years, but didn't want to pursue until she was sure she was finished hav-



GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

This past year has been a journey for sisters Sylvia Berrey (right) and Joanne Agnew, who had baby William for her sister.

ing children of her own. When that time came, the idea presented itself again.

"Once I started thinking about it, it was like a ball hurtling out of control," she said.

And Kevin didn't object.

"I have a very kind and wonderful husband. He was on board from the very beginning," Joanne said.

Kevin said he's proud of his wife for doing such a selfless thing. "I think it's a wonderful thing she's done. I'm very proud."

Sylvia remembers when Joanne first told her the news. "She just called me on the phone and said 'You need to sit down.'"

She had mixed emotions, Sylvia explained, with pure joy mingled with concern over her sister — for emotional reasons as well as physical; after all, having a baby at the age of 38 brings with it higher risks than for a younger woman.

Since Sylvia didn't have any eggs and Wallace wasn't a sperm donor candidate, Joanne used her own eggs and a donor. The first attempt failed, while the second succeeded.

The pregnancy and delivery were relatively easy, Joanne said thankfully. "This was probably the easiest (out of the four). I only gained 17 pounds. It was like someone was looking out for me, being very kind."

She kept her sister abreast of every doctor appointment

and every milestone.

Although Sylvia was ecstatic she would have a baby, it wasn't easy seeing her sister pregnant.

"Some aspects were hard, because that should have been me having the baby," she said, adding, "Seeing pregnant people isn't easy for someone who can't get pregnant."

Knowing there would be emotional issues, Joanne and Sylvia decided they needed to be completely honest with each other throughout the process, speaking up when something was bothering them.

That honesty has been extended to each of their children. Lily is now four, while Kevin and Joanne have nine-year-old Ben, seven-year-old Ethan and Ella, 5.

Both were upfront to their kids about what was happening, and Sylvia said she'll do the same for William, not hiding from him the special role "auntie Jo" played in his birth.

As for Wallace, he's thrilled about his new son and can't say enough about Joanne and what she's done. "It's amazing how someone could do this for another person," he said, calling her their miracle.

Although this past year has been a journey, it's one Joanne said she's glad she took. "I just think everyone deserves a baby if they want one," she said simply.

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