

**IF YOU COULDN'T  
HAVE KIDS,  
WOULD YOU  
DONATE YOUR  
EGGS TO  
SOMEONE ELSE?**



PHOTOGRAPHS AMIT LENNON

Amelia Abby, 32, was heartbroken to learn she and her husband were unable to have children. Then she decided on a major sacrifice...

**I FOUND OUT MY HUSBAND,**

Kevin, was infertile within 10 minutes of meeting him. We were paired together at a salsa class and couldn't stop chatting as we made our way around the dance floor. I was 24 and he was 42. I told him I was a nurse and he told me he had cystic fibrosis (CF) – a chronic condition in which the lungs and digestive system become clogged with thick mucus, making it difficult to breathe. As we danced he revealed that, just like 98% of male CF

sufferers, he is unable to have children, but that he had made his peace with never being a father a long time ago.

We started dating and at first it didn't bother me. I have endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, as well as other gynaecological issues that mean I am unable to sustain a pregnancy anyway. But gradually, and as our relationship developed, the realisation that we would never have children of our own started to eat away at me. Every newborn child or pregnant belly I saw felt like a taunt. If someone brought their new baby into work, I'd have to leave the room, fighting back tears.

It was only when Kevin became seriously ill with complications from his CF in 2012 that I finally found some closure. As he battled for his life, doctors sat me down and told me gently that he wouldn't be coming home. I was in pieces. I was struggling just to put one foot in front of the other, and I realised that

having a baby would have made things even harder. The average life expectancy for a CF sufferer is just 31 – even considering bringing a child into a world where Kevin probably wouldn't be around to see them grow up started to feel unbearably cruel.

Thankfully, Kevin did come out of hospital and I was finally able to come to terms with the fact that children would never be a part of our lives. Around that time, I saw a Facebook advert for an egg donation agency called Altrui. I was intrigued. I knew plenty of people who were going through the gruelling IVF process. It seemed like every day I would hear women say, 'I'm never going to be OK not being a mum.' I knew that brutal pain. I knew how raw and dark and how profound it is. So on that day I decided that I would help in any way that I could.

Given my own gynaecological issues, I wasn't sure I'd even be a viable candidate but, after many blood tests and screenings ▶

for everything from STIs to faulty genes, I was ecstatic to hear that my eggs were healthy. I expected Kevin to balk at the idea but he was really supportive.

In my lengthy personal profile for potential recipients I wrote about everything from my love of sushi to how passionate I am about my career as a surgical nurse, and sent it all off with a baby photo and a picture of me as an adult. A week later, I got a call from Altrui saying they had found the perfect recipients. I was excited and nervous, but felt a colossal sense of pressure that I was responsible for the happiness of two people I'd never met. Altrui also sent me a letter the donor couple had written for me. In it, they explained how thankful they were and why they had chosen me – they too had a love of dancing, they had got married on a beach like Kevin and I did, and she was



Amelia and Kevin have come to terms with the fact they will not have children of their own. Below: their beach wedding



## I FELT A COLOSSAL PRESSURE THAT I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HAPPINESS OF TWO PEOPLE I'D NEVER MET

petite with brown hair and brown eyes, like me. It made me all the more determined to make the process work.

Egg donation is available on the NHS in some areas, but waiting lists can be long, there are many restrictions in terms of age and circumstance and often demand exceeds supply. So many couples find donors like me through private fertility centres like Altrui.

It's fair to say the process was quite invasive, but I'd been prepped by the centre on what to expect. I was put on the Pill straight away in order to sync my menstrual cycle with the woman who was going to be receiving my eggs, and started injecting myself with follicle-stimulating hormones every day to encourage my ovaries to mature any eggs. After a couple of weeks – when internal scans showed I had 28 follicles (the fluid-filled sacs that carry the 'oocytes', or eggs) on my ovaries – I was put on a second hormone intended to mimic the menopause and stop my body releasing the eggs too early. I'm a nurse, so the needles didn't bother me, but the

hormones *really* took a toll on my body. I was an emotional wreck and would cry at the smallest things. I needed to urinate constantly and would have angry hot flushes. My stomach became swollen to almost obscene proportions, making me look about five months pregnant.

The day before the collection I was given a 'trigger' injection to re-start ovulation so the eggs were in the correct place for extraction. The cramps were excruciating, it was as if I could feel all 28 follicles (each about 2.5cm wide) jostling for space in my tummy. However, when it came to the actual extraction, I didn't feel much. I was under heavy sedation as they inserted a needle up into my ovaries to extract 15 healthy eggs, which would be fertilised with sperm that same afternoon to create as many embryos as possible.

When I came round, nurses presented me with a gift from my donor couple – a beautiful silver necklace with a tiny

message of thanks enclosed. I was groggy from the sedatives but that didn't stop me weeping. That was 18 months ago and I have since been told that 12 of the eggs they collected successfully fertilised. The couple have become pregnant once, but sadly she miscarried. They still have more embryos, so I remain positive.

I have been through one more egg donation cycle since then, during which they were able to obtain 14 fertilised eggs to be shared between two couples. There have been no pregnancies so far, but where there are embryos, there's hope.

People ask if it feels odd that I might one day have 'children' out there in the world. But it doesn't. I'm just providing the ingredients, the results are never going to be a part of me. If any children *are* born using my eggs, when they are 18 they will be given the option of finding out who I am, which is fine by me. I'll be flattered if, in two decades' time, someone with brown eyes and brown hair comes knocking at my door.

Most egg donors have finished building their own families and want to give something back with their remaining eggs. But I like the fact that I am unique. Unless you have ever been told you will never be pregnant and feel that little life growing inside you, you have no idea how it feels. I do. That's why I chose to help. I haven't been paid (it's illegal in the UK) but the process has been more rewarding than I ever could have imagined. In total I have donated 29 eggs, 24 of which have fertilised and become embryos. It feels amazing and has given me faith in myself and in my own body again. ■

