

Local woman helps with in-vitro funding

Gift of Life program gives hope to infertile couples

By John Johnston
Enquirer staff writer

On the day Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, a Hamilton couple has an additional reason to rejoice.

Christi and Tim Lewis brought their first-born child home from the hospital last week. Hannah Grace Lewis, born Dec. 14, is the gift they hoped and prayed for and feared might not occur.

The Lewises say the gift is from God, who worked through doctors and a Cincinnati woman whose benevolence is rooted in her own inability to bear children.

Her name is Madeleine "Mady" Gordon, and through a foundation she started nine years ago, she's helped bring 19 babies into the world. A 20th is due in April.

The Madeleine Gordon Gift of Life Foundation is the only one of its kind in the country, says Dr. Michael A. Thomas, a Cincinnati infertility specialist and partner in the project. For some couples with infertility problems, the foundation is often their last chance for the child they dream of.

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For information

The Madeleine Gordon Gift of Life Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed in 1995, assists married couples from Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky who have been unable to conceive and might not be able to afford in-vitro fertilization.

Requirements include no previous in-vitro fertilization attempts; medical records demonstrating a need for the technique; and combined annual family income of less than \$60,000.

Couples wishing to be considered for the program can write the foundation at P.O. Box 6945, Cincinnati, 45206. Donations can be made to the same address.

Information: www.gordongiftoflife.com.

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Christi Lewis holds her 3-day-old daughter as husband, Tim, and Madeleine Gordon of Gift of Life Foundation, which helps infertile couples, look on. "Look at her," Gordon said. "Isn't she perfect?"

Gift: Foundation offers help to local couples

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This Christmas Day, Gordon and the Lewises each have stories to tell. Where those stories intersect, a baby is born.

Several methods didn't work

Even before she married Tim in August 2000, Christi, 28, worried that she might have trouble getting pregnant. At age 20, she'd had surgery to correct endometriosis, a common gynecological condition in which the tissue that lines the uterus grows in other areas of the body. An estimated 30 percent to 50 percent of women with the disease have difficulties conceiving.

The couple began trying to have a baby in June 2001. Unsuccessful after more than a year, they saw an infertility specialist. Christi's concerns were tempered by Tim, who is 29 and teaches math to fifth-graders at Fairfield Intermediate School.

"God will take care of it," he told her.

She needed a second surgery to treat the endometriosis, then she began a regimen of increasingly potent fertility drugs. When those proved fruitless, Tim, too, grew concerned. The couple turned to artificial insemination, in which Tim's sperm was placed into Christi's uterus.

"We just knew the first time we tried, it would work," Christi says. But after several months, their hopes dwindled.

"We felt like the Lord had left us," Tim says, "and wasn't listening to our prayers."

Fellow members of Stratford Heights Church of God in Middletown tried to console them, pointing out that sometimes an unanswered prayer isn't God saying, "No." It's God saying, "Not yet."

The couple was spending as much as \$600 a month - "a lot of money for us," Christi says - on ar-

tificial insemination. Then their doctor said it was time to consider a more aggressive – and much more expensive – option: in-vitro fertilization, in which Christi's eggs would be fertilized with Tim's sperm in a lab, and embryos transferred into her uterus.

The couple knew they couldn't afford it. The cost typically ranges from \$9,000 to \$12,000.

At home one day in spring 2003, Christi pulled from a filing cabinet something her mother had seen on TV and given her months earlier: the address for the Madeleine Gordon Gift of Life Foundation.

A program is born

If ever a woman wanted to give birth and mother a child, it was Mady Gordon.

"I always took for granted that I would be a mother," she says in her Adams Landing condominium. "I wanted a lot of children. I'd been a teacher. I'd spent so much of my life surrounded by children."

She is 59 now and lives alone. For 15 years, she and her husband, Jerry, tried to have a baby. They have since divorced.

When they were unable to conceive, they sought help from local specialists. Still unsuccessful, they used their financial means to seek out the nation's finest infertility experts. Mady Gordon traveled to both coasts to see doctors versed in state-of-the-art techniques.

She dutifully followed their orders to inject fertility drugs at prescribed times. Once, while on her way to see her specialist at Yale University, she slipped into a restroom in New York City's Grand Central Station. She found herself in the company of drug addicts tying rubber cords around their arms and shooting up.

They saw her needle. "What are you on?" they asked.

Her tenacity seemed to pay off in the mid-1980s when she finally became pregnant.

But three months along, and bleeding internally, she went into surgery. She awoke to learn that she'd had an ectopic pregnancy: Her fertilized egg had implanted in her fallopian tube rather than in the womb. She'd lost the child.

She never got pregnant again. Her infertility remained a mystery.

"It was very difficult, and it remains very difficult," Gordon says, her gentle voice as mellifluous as a

lullaby. "If I were to say to you, 'It was a long time ago, it's in the past,' I wouldn't be being honest."

She was approaching age 50 when she heard a rabbi's sermon encouraging people to find something in life, besides family and friends, to be passionate about.

She thought of the couples she'd met on her unsuccessful quest. Some had mortgaged their homes or sold their wedding rings in order to undergo in-vitro fertilization.

"I couldn't imagine living a life and saying, 'If I'd had the money, maybe I could have had a child,'" Gordon says.

In 1995, with more than 80 female friends present at her 50th birthday party, she announced the formation of the Gordon Gift of Life Foundation. The Gordons provided seed money, and sought other donations. Mady Gordon enlisted the help of Thomas, who directs the infertility program at the University of Cincinnati and Christ Hospital's Center for Reproductive Health.

The program operates this way: A team of medical professionals selects a couple based on medical information and financial need. The foundation pays one-third of the cost of in-vitro fertilization; the couple pays one-third. And the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati writes off one-third.

But Mady Gordon is the program's heart and soul. She personally answers the letters of couples who apply. She lends her financial support. She actively raises money; this holiday season, she mailed 1,600 cards seeking donations.

Success – and tears

Several months after applying to the foundation, the Lewises learned that they'd been accepted. But there was still no guarantee of a child.

Nationally, in-vitro fertilizations result in pregnancies 37 percent of the time, Dr. Thomas says. For Gift of Life Foundation patients, the rate is 55 percent. The difference, he says, stems from the fact that the foundation, which operates with limited funds, can choose younger patients with a better chance of success.

Before the process could begin, Christi had surgery in January of this year to treat a cyst on her ovary. In March, she began receiving daily shots, sometimes two a day. Her eggs were retrieved March 28, and the embryo transfer occurred March 31.

April 12, two days before a scheduled doctor's visit, she awoke well before dawn. While Tim slept, she took a home pregnancy test.

Positive.

She woke Tim, and tears flowed.

A gift that gives back

The first child born with the help of the Gordon Gift of Life Foundation arrived in 1997. Since then, there have been 18 more.

Mady Gordon has met them all. Twice a year, she gathers with the children and their parents for a party.

"These couples have the most enduring sense of appreciation that I have ever witnessed," Gordon says. She's been invited to dinners and birthday parties – even trick-or-treating.

"I never really thought that I'd be getting something back," she says. "And now I can say to you that I can't measure what I've received in return."

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