

Living

The Greatest Gift

Program helps dreams come true for childless couples

By Cindy Starr
Post staff reporter

She adores Winnie the Pooh and Mother Goose. She has mastered the mouse but occasionally buckles her shoes on the wrong feet. She has beautiful eyes that sometimes look hazel like her mom's and sometimes appear as brown as her dad's. In short, 2 1/2-year-old Kathryn Lynn Mulhollen is just what the Gordon Gift of Life Foundation ordered: a happy and much-loved little girl.

Katie, the only child of Tina and John Mulhollen of Loveland, was conceived in vitro with the help of Gift of Life, a non-profit foundation established at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine in 1995 by Madeleine Gordon and Jerome Gordon, who were unable to have children themselves but wanted to help give other couples a chance.

"There's no way that we can put into words the feeling of what they've done for us," Mrs. Mulhollen said. "We thank God for the foundation. If it wasn't for them we wouldn't have Katie."

The Mulhollens were the first couple to participate in the program, and Katie was the foundation's first success story. Of the 12 couples who have participated thus far, six became partners in pregnancy. Three couples have

become parents and two – including the program's first African-American couple – are expecting babies in July. The sixth woman suffered a miscarriage but is planning another attempt with the foundation's help.

All of the pregnancies have involved single children.

Meanwhile, the Gift of Life Foundation, believed to be the only charitable organization of its kind in the United States, is striving to move into a higher gear. It is actively seeking more couples wishing to conceive and more donors willing to help them do so.

"Madeleine has tried desperately to get donations to help other couples," said Mrs. Mulhollen, who works part-time as a customer service representative. "If everyone in this city would donate a dollar, the number of couples that could be helped would be phenomenal."

Ms. Gordon is seeking small donations but dreams of landing a corporate sponsor. "That's what I would call a home run," she said. "If

Gift of Life Foundation

The Madeleine Gordon and Jerome Gordon Gift of Life Foundation will pay 50 percent of a natural in-vitro fertilization cycle for childless couples. To qualify, couples must have failed all other methods of infertility treatment and must be unable to afford in-vitro fertilization. Women in the prime childbearing age (18-35) are preferred.

Couples who think they might qualify can call the Center for Reproductive Health at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center at 584-0955. Donations, which are tax-deductible, can be sent to the Gordon Gift of Life Foundation, P.O. Box 6945, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45206.

we had one Cinergy, one Procter, something like that, we could help so many more people."

Infertility is not usually the first cause that comes to mind when people think of societal needs. But the emotional suffering of those struggling to have a child is profound.

"The majority have gone through life, done the right things, waited to start their family," said Dr. Michael A. Thomas, director of the in-vitro fertilization program at UC's Medical Center. "They wait and then they can't get pregnant, through no fault of their own. It's hard when something as simple as starting a family can be so difficult."

Although fertility treatments typically are not covered by insurance, Thomas said that infertility is a medical problem with "far-reaching consequences that are physical as well as emotional."

In-vitro procedures, which may or may not be successful, are costly. A procedure and medication cost about \$7,500, and couples have been known to pay as much as \$100,000 during repeated, long-term efforts to have a child. The Gift of Life Foundation will pay 50 percent of a natural in-vitro fertilization cycle.

For couples who don't have children, Mrs. Mulhollen said, "This can be the

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Gift

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most important thing in their lives."

John Mulhollen, a vice president of a small company, was fearful of jeopardizing the couple's financial future for something "that may not have worked."

Ms. Gordon, a former high school English teacher, experienced the heartache of infertility firsthand. "I found it an emotional roller coaster."

Ms. Gordon's hopes ended with a tubular pregnancy.

"After that tubular pregnancy with my husband Jerry I couldn't get pregnant again," she said.

Launching the foundation provided a resolution, she said.

Ms. Gordon began the foundation as a 50th birthday gift. She gathered 80 friends who, "instead of giving me gowns and luncheons and dinner parties," made donations that helped launch the foundation.

As Ms. Gordon approaches her 55th birthday, which falls in July, she takes heart in knowing that since the foundation's beginning, it has helped beget an average of one child a year. She also revels in the friendships she has made. Angie Slife, writing from Piqua, Ohio, about "our little miracle, Kayla," told Ms. Gordon: "Your help has made us happier than I could ever put into words. I have tears in my eyes right now just thinking about it."

And little Katie Mulhollen enjoys showing off her purple Tinky Winky Teletubby backpack, a birthday gift from her "Aunt Mady."

Gift of Life program aims to curb costs

Dr. Michael A. Thomas, a University of Cincinnati fertility expert, believes insurance companies and corporations that underwrite premiums would view fertility procedures more favorably if the number of multiple births were to come under control.

"The chances of a pregnancy going full term and producing healthy babies is higher if you don't have three, four or five kids and have to be on bed rest," said Thomas, director of the in-vitro fertilization program at UC's Medical Center. "Having twins is almost the same as having triplets nowadays, but when you have four, five or six, it's not good."

For patients with four or more babies, the neonatal intensive care bill averages some \$350,000 per baby, said Thomas, who is studying the issue as a member of an ongoing committee comprising infertility specialists from the University of Cincinnati, Christ Hospital and Bethesda Hospital and neonatologists from Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Thomas hopes the Gordon Gift of Life program, which uses a low-tech, natural approach to in-vitro fertilization, can help demonstrate that infertility treatments need not lead to millions of dollars in insurance payouts. The Gift of Life program is notable in

that all of its pregnancies have involved "singletons."

At UC, Thomas said, multiples are not considered a success.

Women in the Gift of Life program take oral medication but receive no shots. They typically produce one to four eggs, which are harvested from the ovary and fertilized in a Petri dish. After embryos develop, a small number, from one to three, are transferred to the womb.

"Nowadays you can get good pregnancy rates if you put in two embryos," Thomas said. "Once you go above three your chances of success plateau."

But physicians have been known to put in up to eight embryos, Thomas said, and he has reviewed the chart of a Nashville patient who had 13 implanted. "She didn't get pregnant, thank goodness," Thomas said.

If multiple embryos attach to the uterine wall and develop into fetuses, couples can undergo "selective reduction" and have some of the fetuses aborted.

But many couples consider that option immoral.

"Our goal is not to put patients in a position where they have to make that decision," Thomas said.

—Cindy Starr



Dr. Michael Thomas with Madeleine Gordon of the Gordon Gift of Life Foundation.