

# aiStyle

Cincinnati Jewish Life

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO CINCINNATI'S JEWISH COMMUNITY ISSUE NO. 3

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**A Supplement to The American Israelite**

# It's Her Baby

## Madeline Gordon

BY IDELLE DATLOF

*"Do not go where the path may lead."*



**H**ow many of us have listened intently to a rabbi's sermon and been deeply moved, only to forget the determination to act by the time we reach the parking lot? But there are those special moments when the timing is perfect and the words connect with a deep set of personal needs and dreams. Combined with a firm resolve and an indomitable will, amazing things can happen. This was the case for Madeline Gordon and her Gift of Life Foundation.

In the fall of 1994, Madeline Gordon was listening to Rabbi Lewis Kamrass' sermon during a High Holiday service and was thinking about her upcoming 50th birthday. She heard him challenge the congregation to "find a passion in your lives, something you can grab onto and hold; something beyond family, beyond friends." She was really paying attention. Ready to engage in something new, something meaningful at this milestone in her life, she set out to shape an idea into a plan.

Gordon had spent many years trying to conceive a child. She had endured the seesaw of modern infertility treatments. "It was a nightmare, it was an emotional rollercoaster, because one's hopes are brought up so quickly and then are dashed down," she said. Although the treatments failed, she endured. The doctors were optimistic about new techniques and suggested new drugs and more procedures.

For more than 15 years, she was devoted to the goal of becoming pregnant. "It becomes a cyclical thing, there is hope. It hurts," she said.

Her efforts began with the early days of doing basal body temperature charts to the newest miracle of In-Vitro Fertilization. She

traveled coast-to-coast in search of the doctor who would have the knowledge to make a pregnancy possible. Briefly, there was an early pregnancy that implanted outside the womb and had to be removed surgically. The quest was exhausting and the chance of success diminished as each month passed. Finally, after many years, she and her husband, Jerry Gordon, realized it was time to stop. Gordon would search for a new, fulfilling direction for her energies, a place to channel her creative spirit.

Gordon grew up in New Orleans and earned her undergraduate degree in English at Tulane University. She came to Cincinnati in 1968 and pursued some graduate studies at Xavier University. She was immediately charmed by her new northern home.

"When I came to Cincinnati as a young woman, I saw a community here that was involved and giving," she said. "If there was something about philanthropy that impressed me as a younger person, it was coming here and seeing the involvement of people I met and those with whom I became friendly. I found Cincinnati a very warm and welcoming city. The community was receptive to someone who was new. From the moment I came here, Cincinnati became my home, and I embraced it."

Gordon had given up her successful career in real estate partly to accommodate the time demands for her fertility treatments. Eventually, when she accepted that she would never become a mother and reconciled the loss of a childhood dream, she began to think about other Cincinnati couples facing the challenge of infertility. Many of these couples, unlike her, did not have the financial resources to pursue IVF, the last resort for treating infertility.

As Gordon thought of her own disappointment, she remembered the rabbi's words and began to imagine providing a way for other couples to have a chance at IVF, to possibly turn failure into success. In 1995, The Madeline Gordon Gift of Life Foundation was born, and Gordon found herself immersed in the excitement and work of making a new dream a reality.

"Gift of Life stems from what happened to me and because I was in a position to help other people," Gordon said. "There's a biblical passage that says when we're given a lot, a lot is expected. Take that thought and combine it with living in a community of people that does so much for others. Our Jewish community is such a fine example of those who give back to their own, of those who haven't forgotten from where they came."

Gordon is motivated not only by her personal experience, but also by her Jewish identity. She made the initial donation, obtained 501(c)(3) status so that future donations would be tax-

deductible, and established a connection with the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati, a health care association comprised of seven area medical centers. Her initial support came from the eight female friends who gathered to celebrate Gordon's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday: After they heard the story of her struggle, she invited them to contribute to the project.

"I work hard to present a very positive image and a good example of who and what we are, because unfortunately there are many preconceived ideas about Jewish people." Gordon continues, "I'd like to do my small part to disprove those disparaging theories."

Gordon describes herself as having a very strong Jewish identity. She is a Wise Temple member and is a former member of their board.

Gordon's inspiration—combined with the marvels of medicine—has truly come to life: There are now 23 children whose lives are evidence of one person's determination to turn failure into success. There are 23 sets of parents and uncountable grandparents, aunts and uncles whose smiles and joy are immeasurable.

IVF is a process where the egg and sperm are joined outside the body in a lab dish and re-implanted in the mother. Louise Brown in England was the first "test-tube" baby, born in 1978. Her birth shocked the world and, back then, was considered a medical miracle. Now, less than thirty years later, IVF is a well-accepted medical procedure. It is estimated that, to date, three million babies have been born through IVF worldwide since Brown. For many couples who have exhausted all surgical and prescriptive means to correcting an infertility problem, IVF is all that remains. It is expensive and, in Ohio, covered by only 20 percent of insurance policies. (There are seven states that mandate insurance coverage of IVF for their residents.) If you can't afford it, there is nowhere to turn.

Today, the Gift of Life program is run out of Christ Hospital, with a joint Christ Hospital/University of Cincinnati team of doctors providing the medical care. In addition to 23 live births, including some twins, five more are "on the way." All the babies are healthy and thriving. Criteria for acceptance are strict, and couples are selected after a rigorous screening process. Candidates must have the following:

- No previous IVF cycles
- Medical records demonstrating need for IVF
- Combined family income less than \$60,000
- No other children together
- Good health
- Residence within 10-15 miles of the I-275 loop around the Greater Cincinnati area

Couples are required to pay one third of the costs. Gift of Life pays another third, and Christ hospital covers the balance. Each IVF cycle costs about \$10,000, and each couple is limited to two cycles.

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Michael Thomas, M.D., co-director of the program, speaks of Gordon with warmth, appreciation and great enthusiasm: "Her unrecognized efforts have created a network of very happy people." He outlined program as "a great service for women in the tri-state, the only one in the United States and probably the only one on the world." As he describes the positive outcomes of the program — Gift of Life's statistics for successful pregnancies are higher than average — his pride and satisfaction are mitigated only by his wish to expand the program. There are at least 15 couples on the organization's waiting list, and with publicity, the list is likely to keep on growing.

As Dr. Thomas describes Gordon's devotion, he repeats, "It's her baby," perhaps unaware of how on target he is.

Gordon describes with evident pleasure and some amusement all the birthday parties, baptisms and such that she has attended, certain that she has consumed more cupcakes and birthday cake than she could have ever imagined. She reflects on the surprises discovered on this journey. "I thought, 'You can't have this, someone else can, so make it possible!' I never thought that I would be getting something in return. People think I've given far more than I have received. Yes, I do give a lot of time. I have an extended family. I've been called to the hospital to

see sonograms, not because I ask for this, only when requested." Gordon smiles and adds the following disclaimer: "Nor have any babies been named for me."

"I try to take a child or two to something like 'Nutcracker.' It's opened up a whole world to me. It's helped make my world. I've been through some difficult times and this has been a happy place for me, very happy," she said.

Gordon wishes to see Gift of Life thrive as much as the babies have. "It's a portable operation; I would like to see it franchised to other cities," she comments. "We are a proven model." While Gift of Life has attracted applicants from the entire Cincinnati community, Gordon notes, "I would like there to be a Jewish baby. To date, we haven't had a Jewish couple apply to the Foundation for help."

Gordon, now divorced, lives downtown. The Gift of Life Foundation is Gordon's legacy to the Cincinnati community. Upon her death, the Foundation will receive a sizable bequest to assure its continuity. She has already begun to consider who will assume leadership at that time. But for now, Gordon's full attention is turned to the task of adding new faces to the photo gallery of healthy newborns.

