

The stork whisperer

By: Lisa Bertagnoli June 23, 2008

Television producer Joy Zucker-Tiemann married at age 39 and expected her baby-making would be like her career: good results after a little effort and some lucky timing.

"I had every expectation that we'd get pregnant right away," says Ms. Zucker-Tiemann, now 43. When she miscarried three times, "it hit me like a prison door," she says.

She and her husband struggled over what to do next for two years until her brother suggested she call Mindy Berkson, a college friend. Ms. Berkson had started an infertility-related business; perhaps she could help.

Thirteen months later, Ms. Zucker-Tiemann is five months pregnant. Ms. Berkson helped her accept the fact that she'd have to use an egg donor, then helped her find one.



Mindy Berkson helps couples figure out how to become parents. With her are husband Dennis and daughter Courtney; also sons Jason, in green, and Brian, who were conceived via fertility treatments. Photo: Lisa Predko

"I wouldn't be here without her," says Ms. Zucker-Tiemann, who lives in Poolesville, Md. "I not only found the best advocate in Mindy, I found the equivalent of 10 advocates."

Ms. Berkson, who has been through infertility treatments herself, is something of a fertility coach. She's the founder, owner and sole employee of Lotus Blossom Consulting LLC, a Chicago-based firm that helps infertile couples — as well as gay couples and single people — clear the considerable hurdles of assisted reproduction, which costs tens of thousands of dollars or more. She assists clients in deciding which steps are right for them after other avenues have failed. She helps them find egg donors and

surrogates, refers them to lawyers who will draw up the necessary contracts, and puts them in touch with insurance agents and financial planners who can help them figure out how to pay for it all.

All the while, Ms. Berkson hand-holds, encourages and cheerleads. "I am with people throughout the process," she says. And indeed, Ms. Zucker-Tiemann has invited Ms. Berkson to be in the delivery room with her.

"The path to parenthood" is a phrase Ms. Berkson, 44, uses frequently as she sits in a shared conference room at her Loop office. By the time most clients arrive at her doorstep, they are emotionally and sometimes financially drained. But she talks to them in terms of when, not if, they'll become parents, instilling optimism and gently opening their eyes to the idea of a child who's not genetically related to both parents.

Her office, a windowed room with a big chair, desk and a few books and framed photos, contains no baby pictures, thank-you notes or other mementos: "They would only remind (clients) of what they don't have," she explains. "I am all about hope."

Only a few consultants like Ms. Berkson exist; those in the field know of no one like her in the Midwest.

"When I heard about her business, I was head over heels," says Elizabeth Westover, a Chicago-based attorney who focuses on reproductive legal issues. Ms. Berkson is a resource for clients who have "a thousand questions but no idea of how they want to proceed," she says.

Ms. Berkson sees approximately 120 clients a year, charging a flat fee ranging from \$3,000 to \$12,000 each. That's in addition to the charges from agencies they use, which range from about \$12,000 for a single in vitro fertilization treatment to \$80,000 for a gestational surrogate. Ms. Berkson won't disclose revenue, but she says the business is profitable. "I'm sending three kids to college," she says.

Ms. Berkson says she saves clients money. One example is finding an egg donor: The meter starts running when a couple selects a donor, even if that donor turns out to be a bad fit. Through her network, Ms. Berkson can help couples identify the right egg donor faster. She also can help them choose their best course more quickly, be it IVF, a surrogate or adoption, so they don't waste money chasing inappropriate choices.

DRAWING ON EXPERTS

Ms. Berkson maintains relationships with about 40 egg-donor and surrogacy agencies around the country. Around town, she has a network of lawyers, financial advisers, insurance agents — even pharmacies and advocacy groups for gays and lesbians.

Judy Carpenter, an associate at Graceful Conception Inc., a Lake Forest-based egg-donor agency, says several times, Ms. Berkson has negotiated reduced fees for clients in special circumstances.

With Ms. Zucker-Tiemann, the TV producer, Ms. Berkson's first three attempts to find them an egg donor failed. A fourth looked great on paper — until Ms. Berkson discovered the donor had a history of mental illness, which the agency had not disclosed.

"I was literally hysterical," Ms. Zucker-Tiemann says. Her husband and close friends by then were wondering why she didn't just adopt. Ms. Berkson said, "I need you to hear me: We will get you there,"

Ms. Zucker-Tiemann recalls. Ms. Berkson promised to select the next egg donor herself and to sever ties with the clinic that represented the mentally ill donor.

She continues to expand her ties, capitalizing on cutting-edge thinking in reproductive science. When Laurence Jacobs, a Chicago reproductive endocrinologist she consults with, told her that 40% of his clients would stand a better chance of getting pregnant if they lost weight, Ms. Berkson called Jim Karas, a Chicago-based personal trainer.

The two have since launched an informal partnership called Fit to Conceive, a personalized diet-and-exercise plan for would-be mothers. Mr. Karas' staff has just begun working with Ms. Berkson's clients. "The adherence rate, as we call it in the industry, is very high," he says. "Having a child is a big motivation."

Infertility, which affects about 10% of couples of reproductive age, is estimated to be a \$2-billion-to \$3-billion-a-year business in the United States.

It's a burgeoning international business, too. Many Europeans, hampered by restrictive laws in their own countries, travel to the United States for baby-making. Ten percent of Ms. Berkson's clients are from overseas, and Illinois is a popular destination. Along with California, it has some of the most liberal reproductive laws in the country.



Well-known personal trainer Jim Karas helps get Mindy Berkson's clients fit for pregnancy. Photo: Lisa Predko

For instance, if a gestational surrogate is used, Illinois automatically considers the baby to belong to the intended parents, without making them go through a formal adoption process. The state also allows both members of a same-sex couple to have their names on the birth certificate, as long as one member is genetically related to the baby.

Still, intended parents can encounter tangles. Two of her clients, a British same-sex couple, are expecting twins in October via a surrogate. But when the babies are born, the couple's U.K. insurance will not cover them.

Since they'll have to buy private insurance, Ms. Berkson has arranged for an agent to meet them at the hospital to negotiate the fee. "With the caveat that we're not done with this yet, she's been invaluable," the father-to-be says of Ms. Berkson.

A confluence of events led Ms. Berkson, a Highland Park native, to launch Lotus Blossom (the name refers to an Eastern symbol for fertility) in 2005. She holds a degree in economics from the University of Michigan and, after college, worked for a venture-capital firm. She worked in fertility clinics after the birth of her twin boys, now 11; that experience helped her make contacts she uses today.

The business beckoned Ms. Berkson after the birth of her sons, conceived after more than three years of infertility treatments.

"There was no advocate for me," she says. The agencies represent their donors and surrogates, not the intended parents. "I felt I was alone."

Ms. Berkson's daughter Courtney, now 15, was conceived easily, but Ms. Berkson was unable to get pregnant a second time. Such "secondary infertility," as it is called, remains an unexplained medical condition, she says.

After 16 inseminations and four IVF cycles ("That is so not normal," Ms. Berkson says), she became pregnant with twins. Ms. Berkson was ordered on bed rest after 11 weeks and sent to the hospital after 25 weeks. It was an anxious, terrifying time, she says.

"I had to give birth to healthy babies," she says. Brian and Jason, now 11, were born six weeks premature.

'SHE HAS WALKED THE WALK'

Ms. Berkson counsels clients as she wishes she had been counseled: "I balance hope with caution," she says. She also knows from experience "that every decision means three more decisions."

For instance, she insists that clients decide right away what will be done with the extra embryos created during the IVF cycles, and she counsels them to have a Plan B even before they've embarked on Plan A.

"She has walked the walk her clients have," says Gloria Ceccarelli, a friend who lives in Ms. Berkson's Northfield neighborhood.

Ms. Berkson whirls through long days, rising at 6 a.m. to work out in her home gym and get the kids to school. She spends her workday contacting clients and agencies. After a break for dinner with her family, it's more e-mailing, phoning, researching. "I need a housekeeper," she jokes.

"I'm very proud of her," says Dennis Berkson, her husband of 18 years and a criminal defense attorney. "She invented a business."



www.lotusblossomconsulting.com

Lotus Blossom Consulting, LLC
180 N. LaSalle Street Suite 1925
Chicago, IL 60601
847-881-2685