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A new generation of kids asks, 'Where did I come from?'

By CAROL M. OSTROM

At 7, Nora and Emma don't understand all the science it took to create them.

What they do understand is that there are two very important women in their lives.

One is Mom: Carrie Carpenter, the white-haired, gentle woman who gave birth to the beautiful, blue-eyed fraternal twins when she was 47.

The other is the woman they call their Egg Mom: Lorraine Wilde, the tall, brainy college teacher who was once a strapped grad student convinced her smart, healthy genes had hit a dead end.

The two women never met at the fertility clinic where Carrie received Lorraine's eggs. There, in an industry that depends on donated egg and sperm, the watchword is "anonymous."

Through small, meaningful gifts and notes passed through the clinic, they corresponded. Anonymously. Finally, through a card with a phone number, blacked out carefully by the clinic but faintly discernible when held to the light just so, Carrie and Lorraine met.

Over the next five years, the two forged a friendship, intertwining their families.

Lorraine and her husband, Mike, who now have bright, bouncy 3-year-old twin boys, include the girls on their Christmas cards; Nora and Emma pinned the boys' photos on the family-picture wall at school.

Together for the boys' birthday, the kids hug and play while the moms catch up.

A few months after they first met, Carrie wrote again to Lorraine: "It is so important to me to know you and to have Nora & Emma know you."

Even so, Carrie acknowledged her fear. "Part of me feels like this is that dangerous territory when you fall madly in love and think, 'Is this real?' I guess what is so powerful is the fierce (and I don't think possessive) love we both have for Emma & Nora."

It's a relationship that often prompts questions from acquaintances. "I say, 'Several years ago, I donated some of my eggs; I have a relationship with the girls who were born from that,' " Lorraine says.

Together, Carrie and Lorraine are pioneers in openness. The alternative, secrecy, wasn't a good fit for either.

Carrie recalls a childhood friend who grew up with an older "brother" who was really her father. "The whole town knew, and she didn't." Carrie's own father, adopted twice in the 1920s, died without knowing his genetic origins.

"The girls have said, 'If we didn't know Lorraine, that would be our deep, dark secret,'" Carrie says. Instead, "They know there's always going to be that relationship."

In a clinic high in Seattle's 1101 Madison Tower, reproductive endocrinologists Lorna Marshall, Lee Hickok and Diane Woodford ride the crest of rapidly advancing technology: In the past few years, success rates have skyrocketed. Now, Hickok says, a patient at Pacific Northwest Fertility who receives two embryos created with donated eggs has a 75 to 80 percent chance of getting pregnant the first time around.

Newer procedures have nearly eliminated the need for donor sperm for male-female couples, the vast majority of those who visit this clinic. Now, for most, it's all about eggs.

In the past decade, egg-donor recruitment has risen sharply, along with donor payments. The Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology estimates that 9,000 donor-egg children were born in the United States in 2005, a number that has risen steadily over the years.

At Marshall and Hickok's shop, egg donors are paid $4,500, considerably below what's offered at some agencies elsewhere in the country, some of which routinely pay up to $10,000 for repeat donors. In the case of "exceptional" donors with particular ethnic, scholastic and physical characteristics, agencies have paid much, much more.

Key in this process is the availability of eggs, and the women who donate them.

Hickok and Marshall say it's essential to protect the rights of donors. These young women generally care deeply about helping other women, Marshall says, but most want to stay anonymous. "Once they give the eggs, they are done."

Maybe. Maybe not. The cautionary tale here features the children of sperm donors. Now old enough to have minds of their own, they have followed a grassroots path worn smooth over decades by adoptees, demanding to know their genetic origins. They have rights, too, these offspring insist. Armed with Internet connections and scraps of information, they are tracking down their donors.

But who are these sperm donors to their offspring? Are they like blood or bone-marrow donors, offering spare cells? Are they providers of genetic potential, like great-grandpa's legendary fast pitch? Are they "fathers"? Or something else, someone who doesn't yet have a name?

Parents may minimize the contribution of "just a donated cell," says Wendy Kramer, a Colorado mother who began Donor Sibling Registry in 2000 to help donor-conceived half-siblings connect with one another and their donors. "But to these kids, it's one half of their genetic ancestry. It's half of who they are. Just because you feel one way, it doesn't mean your kid is going to think the same way."

This past December, Katrina Clark, an 18-year-old college student, wrote about her search for her sperm-donor "father" in the Washington Post. "We offspring are recognizing a right stripped from us at birth -- the right to know who both our parents are. And we're ready to reclaim it."

In many cases, finding half-siblings is part of the deal.

When Vicki Moyer's son by donor insemination was 2, he asked: "Where's my dad?" After Moyer, who lives in Washington state, saw a show on Oprah, she signed up with Donor Sibling Registry. When her son was 9, he spent a week with his younger half-brother in Virginia.

"It was an amazing week," she recalls. Now, four years later, the two boys, similarly gifted and science-savvy, call and e-mail each other regularly.

Among their first questions to their respective mothers: "Do I have to say half-brother? Can I just say 'my brother'? "

Most offspring of donor eggs are still too young to be on the hunt. But no one expects them to be any different than the offspring of donor sperm, or, for that matter, adoptees.

At the very least, donor-conceived offspring and adoptees face common medical and genetics issues, notes Mark Demaray, a lawyer who specializes in adoption and assisted reproduction.

Carrying a baby for nine months and "donating a body part" are very different levels of involvement, Kristen and Jim Yagle acknowledge. But the Seattle couple expect that in years to come, the distinction will be lost on their children, one adopted and two born with help from an egg donor.

Leo was adopted four years ago. Later, the Yagles took "one last stab" at infertility treatment, using an egg donor. The result: Cooper and Carter, now 2 1/2.

Kristen and Jim are in touch with Leo's birth mother, who was a single 19-year-old from Utah when he was born. They have always felt Leo should have the option to know his birth mother, Kristen says. "We kind of look at it that there are more people to love him."