

Creating FAMILY

It's often been said of late that love is love and, we might add, family is family. To be sure, trends in the makeup of American families have been changing for decades. In the following pages, you'll find several stories of modern families in the Madison area who are making their own rules.

By Emily McCluhan
Photographed by Hillary Schave





From left, Erik, Theo and Kelli Massey along with Erin, Blake, Elyse and Alex Elliott

Happily Ever After Infertility Journeys

When Erin Elliott and Kelli Massey met in college, they didn't know that a few years later they'd become each other's support system, shoulder to cry on and even consider each other family as they both tried to create families of their own.

"Both Erin and I thought that's what happens when you get married. You get pregnant, you make babies. But it didn't happen," Massey says.

Ultimately both families conceived through in vitro fertilization, but as Elliott and Massey learned, there are many layers to every IVF story.

Elliott and her husband Erik knew they wanted to have kids a few months into marriage when Erin's niece was born, about six years ago.

"We started trying and did that for about a year, but no luck. I started seeing my doctor and getting all the tests done which all came back fine. Just unexplained infertility," Elliott says with frustration.

She decided to reach out to Wisconsin Fertility Institute on the recommendation of a friend and eventually did two rounds of Intrauterine Insemination (IUI). It starts with medication and shots to stimulate the egg follicles, then sperm is injected directly into the uterus. Although IUI has a low success rate, it's less expensive and less invasive than IVF. When IUI didn't work, Elliott's doctor recommended IVF.

As Elliott started down the IVF road, Massey was also trying to conceive and not having success.

She made an appointment at Wisconsin Fertility but

then got pregnant and miscarried. Soon she began her own path through IUIs and eventually to IVF.

What both gals come back to is that many people don't know how intense the IVF process is until you are in it.

"What most people don't realize is that when you talk about 'doing fertility,' medication and IUI are at one end of the spectrum and IVF is way over on the other end," Elliott says. The biggest hurdle, she says, is the financial one.

When faced with the nearly \$20,000 price tag, both women say that because the process is already in motion, you just figure the finances out.

Besides the financial commitment, there are the ups and downs, the grief and the joy. Elliott and Massey look at each other amazed that they've forgotten some of the steps or gloss over these events that completely changed their lives.

There's prepping your body for egg retrieval with medication and hormone shots into the stomach. Then the retrieval itself. Then, the anticipation and waiting on phone calls from the clinic to tell you how many eggs were fertilized. Then, the weeks of preparing for the egg transfer, including injections of an oily progesterone.

terone concoction directly into the butt muscle with a huge needle. And waiting for your body chemicals to be just right to accept the transfer. Then the transfer itself which is hopefully the point of conception. Then the waiting.

As each woman went through all of these steps (some of them more than once), they became as close as sisters.

Elliott initially had eight fertilized embryos after the egg retrieval, but her first three transfers failed.

“That first one was probably the most devastating because we had gone to this step and it was a huge deal. And there’s no reason this isn’t working,” she recalls. After further testing, she found out that only three of the remaining five embryos were viable.

“I had done progesterone shots in my butt so many times and was just done. So, my doctor suggested we transfer two embryos at once. And yeah...it worked! Twins!” she says, still surprised.

As Massey and her husband Alex moved from IUI to IVF, Elliott created a binder for her friend covering



and I were basically married through all of this because we would just call each other and ask questions or cry.”

But they acknowledge the growth they’ve seen in both of their husbands and agree that all of them are better parents because of this process.

“There were two years where I had very little control over my life. You’re at the mercy of when your body is ready. So, when the clinic calls, you go. You learn to let go of that control before baby even happens,” Massey says.

They both joke that the biggest difference now that they have babies is they can make plans and travel.

Will they try for more babies?

“We don’t have any embryos left, so if we can’t get pregnant naturally, we’d have to start over with the retrieval. That definitely stresses me out, but I think we’ll start trying again soon,” Massey says.

Elliott has one embryo left and also wants to try to get pregnant naturally but struggles with the idea of having that potential human sitting out there in storage.

“Before it was just an embryo, but now there’s a tie to it because I have children from those embryos,” she says. “I also have to pay a \$400 per year storage fee.”

Elliott and Massey tick off the options for Elliott’s embryo: transfer it and see if it works, donate it to science, donate it to a family that needs it.

For these two women who knew they wanted babies, it became a matter of hope and pushing until they got the outcome they wanted.

Elliott says that along the way, they knew they controlled the end of their IVF story.

“We may not get to control all the steps in the process, but we get to control the end.” 🌸



all 15 steps of the IVF process with a fun gift at each milestone. And after Massey’s first transfer ended in a miscarriage, Elliott showed up for her second transfer, pregnant with twins, dressed in a clown costume.

“During my first transfer, Kelli joked about having an IVF clown because the doctors always say you must stay relaxed and laugh,” says Elliott. “So yeah, I was there when Theo was conceived, in a clown costume!”

Elliott and Massey agree that having a strong support system, whether it’s friends, family, Facebook groups or meetings at a fertility clinic, is one of the most important factors for getting through IVF.

“The worst thing to do is just dump all of your struggles on your husband,” says Massey. “We joke that Erin

Family is Family

Two adoption stories



Jim, Maia, Leighton and Kim Hart

Families come in all shapes and sizes and can grow in all sorts of ways. For these couples, the desire to share their love with children was met through adoption.

Kim and Jim Hart had a long—and sometimes perilous—journey to creating the family they knew they wanted. After six years and three rounds of unsuccessful IVF, including two life-threatening tubal pregnancies, they decided to take a breath.

“I began to realize I don’t have to carry a child to love a child. It’s not about being the bus,” Kim Hart says.

They knew they wanted to adopt but weren’t sure where to start, so the couple talked to friends and went to meetings to learn about international adoption. Kim Hart notes that Guatemala stood out because at

that time babies went to foster care instead of orphanages after birth, which gives them a one-on-one adult connection from the start.

After a lot of paperwork, multiple trips to Guatemala and patiently waiting, the Harts brought Leighton home from a small town in southern Guatemala and returned from Guatemala City with Maia a few years later.

They quickly realized that whether they had a baby naturally, or through adoption, they faced the same new-parent challenges.

“You still learn as you go along,” Jim Hart says.

His wife nods and adds that she got really good at middle-of-the-night feedings. They both learned when they brought Maia home that parenting is also a lot of trial and error. What works for one child doesn't always work for the other.

Now that Leighton is 15 and Maia is 10, the family is going to Guatemala this June to visit the kids' birthplaces.

"I really just want to show them how beautiful their home country is and embrace where they come from. It's a place where I feel like they'll fit in," Kim Hart says.



Jim, Kim, Leighton and Maia Hart

Between activities like hiking a volcano and cliff jumping, Leighton and Maia will get to see the cities where they were born. The Harts decided not to hire lawyers to find the birth mothers and foster families, knowing they wanted to focus on their own family time while exposing the kids to their home country.

Hart remembers how excited and anxious their extended family and friends were as they went through the adoption journey. She says they were all accepting of the process and reflects on how she and Jim were both raised, with the idea that family is family.

"It's not based on blood. It's life experiences and sharing and giving and being there for each other," she says. "All of that stuff forms your family and builds your tribe."

The Karls Family

Roxanne and Joe Karls grew up with big families so it was a given that they would have a large family of their own. But when Roxanne got pregnant with their first son, her doctor called him a miracle baby and fertility tests later showed that she couldn't produce more eggs. The Karls knew they needed to move to adoption if they wanted to grow their family, so they found a private agency and adopted their daughter Alida at birth from Texas. Soon after, Roxanne met a friend who had fostered children.

"I had heard about foster care, but I had no idea it was so big right here in our own area," Roxanne Karls says. "We knew we wanted a big family and it was exciting to know we could help other kids."

After connecting with Dane County Foster Care in 2014 and getting approved as foster parents, the Karls were quickly asked to take in siblings, 6-year-old Troy and 8-year-old Olivia, for a weekend. There was no family lined up after the weekend and the Karls didn't want the kids to spend another night in a shelter. So they offered to take them in as a short-term placement. Four years later, Troy and Olivia made the Karls a family of six when they were officially adopted in early 2019. Dane County foster care of-

ficials caution that fostering a child isn't an automatic path to adoption. It just happened to work out for the Karls clan.

"Reunification with the biological family is always the goal," Karls says. "But that makes the process an emotional rollercoaster."

The Karls built a relationship with Troy and Olivia's biological mom and dad, even celebrating Christmas with the kids' mother. When their birth mother got pregnant and was allowed to keep the baby, Troy and Olivia started preparing to go home. But their mom overdosed and died, and the one-year old baby went to live with another family member.

"We can often be very quick to judge. Looking back now, it's very sad. I know they love their kids, they just

couldn't be the parents they wanted to be," Karls says. "But building that relationship with the parents is so important, because we knew that if the kids went home, we could visit. You invest so much as a foster, so that makes it a little easier."

During the first year of the ups and downs with Troy and Olivia, the Karls got a call for an emergency placement for an infant, JJ, in 2015. They fell in love with him and started the same emotional rollercoaster. Both JJ's parents were in and out of jail and JJ's short-term placement turned into an adoption in October 2018.

But the Karls weren't complete until Troy and Olivia's half-sister, Harlyn, joined them in September of 2018 when her family placement didn't go as planned. The Karls were able to adopt Harlyn in May 2019.

Now as a family of eight, the Karls are juggling



From left: Alida, Joe, Olivia, Troy, Eldon, JJ, Harlyn and Roxanne Karls

therapy sessions, managing meal times and configuring rooms for optimal space. But their support network is what gets them through it.

"Finding those other foster families that have gone through it was so helpful," Karls says. "Just having the support for the ups and downs when mom or dad come back in the picture, or to get ideas on how to handle a certain type of behavior."

The rollercoaster isn't ending but the Karls crew is complete. After Harlyn's adoption, they threw a party with friends and family, cake and special T-shirts, and photo timelines of each of the kids' journeys. And even though the Karls know they may foster more children in the future, their big-family dream is complete. 🌸





Sylvia Seeliger and Appa