



Host Mom
 “I tell people, ‘I’m not giving up the baby, I’m just the oven,’” says Williamson (inset, and right, with her intended parent, Shannon Rayner, center, and Rayner’s daughter Graysen Nicole, whose middle name is in honor of Williamson).

Inside the Lives of Surrogate Moms

IN BOISE, IDAHO, 1 IN 15 BABIES IS BORN VIA SURROGACY—MORE THAN ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE COUNTRY. FOUR WOMEN EXPLAIN WHY THEY CHOSE TO BECOME GESTATIONAL CARRIERS **By GILLIAN TELLING**

Kim Kardashian turned to a surrogate for two of her four children; so did Sarah Jessica Parker for her 10-year-old twins; and Andy Cohen for 9-month-old Benjamin. Many surrogacy stories seem to revolve around the rich and famous, but increasingly, everyday American families struggling with fertility issues, single parents and same-sex couples are having children of their own via a surrogate. In 2018 the number of babies born via gestational carriers in the U.S. tripled compared to five years ago. Still, the process remains controversial. Laws vary widely by state—paying gestational carriers is banned in New York and Michigan. But Idaho has no such restrictions, and an estimated 1 in 15 babies born in Boise are a result of surrogacy, the highest rate per capita in the country. A new documentary called *Made in Boise* (now streaming on PBS) takes a closer look at the issue and explores the lives of four American surrogates—all of whom spoke to *People*. “I saw how not being able to have a baby is really heartbreaking,” says the film’s director, Beth Aala. “For the majority of families that choose this route, it’s a last resort.”

‘I realized, I have to do this for her’

NICOLE WILLIAMSON, 40, FOUNDER, A HOST OF POSSIBILITIES SURROGACY AGENCY

Nicole Williamson, a married mom of two, and her husband had already decided they didn’t want more kids. Still, she loved being pregnant, and it had always been easy for her—so she signed up to be a surrogate. “I thought, ‘These people are having this horrible time and I can have babies easily, so I’ll help them.’” During her second time as a gestational carrier, she felt disappointed by the process. “I didn’t get enough support from the agency and had to do a lot of coordinating with the intended parents on my own,” says Williamson.

The experience prompted her to open her own agency, A Host of Possibilities, in 2013; she now matches families with surrogates worldwide (“70 percent of our clients are now from Europe or Asia,” she says), with a focus on building family-like connections between the parents and their carrier. “It’s a lot like matchmaking,” she says. “I won’t take anyone who just wants a business transaction. I think it’s important for families and surrogates to have a good relationship, during and after. I love being Auntie Nicole to four babies.” Williamson says the application procedure for surrogates is complex—and thorough. “First and foremost, these women have

to really want to help somebody have a family,” she says. “They can’t just be in it for the money.” Surrogates are compensated \$28,000 to \$38,000 in Boise, and she says they must be financially stable and not on any government assistance; she also requires them to have already delivered one full-term baby and undergo mental and physical evaluations. She provides surrogates with their own legal counsel to guide them through the process. According to Williamson, surrogates say it’s all worth it. “There’s

a crazy feeling I can’t describe the moment you see the parents hold their baby for the first time,” she says. “Like, ‘I helped them. We did it together.’”

After endometriosis, fibroids and an eventual hysterectomy, Shannon Rayner—one of Williamson’s clients—was searching for someone to carry her only viable embryo.

“I realized, I have to do this for her,” says Williamson, who gave birth in 2016 to Rayner’s daughter Graysen Nicole, now 3. Adds a grateful Rayner, who now considers Williamson one of her best friends: “Nicole creates families for a living. When you only have one shot to have a baby, and someone is willing to sacrifice themselves for you, that gift is immeasurable.”

‘She said she felt like she needed to do this for me...that there was a reason’
 —SHANNON RAYNER

JENNY JIMENEZ/INSET: CRYSTAL KILBACK

A SURROGACY SNAPSHOT

MORE THAN
100

Number of surrogacy births at St. Luke's hospital in Boise in 2018

\$75,000 TO \$90,000

Typical cost for intended parents for a surrogate in Boise, which includes medical costs and agency fees

\$30,000 TO \$50,000

Typical amount a first-time surrogate is paid to be a gestational carrier in Idaho

44

Cutoff age for potential surrogates

\$50,000

Fine for entering into a surrogacy agreement in Michigan, where it is illegal. Paid agreements are also banned in Louisiana and New York

'I'm choosing to help people'

SAMMIE DIAZ, 29, LICENSED NAIL TECHNICIAN

Sammie Diaz, a single mom to son Walter, 5, had offered to carry a baby for free for one of her gay uncles, but he eventually decided not to have children. She became reinterested in surrogacy when a client at her nail salon, who'd been a surrogate, told her about the experience. "She was very open," says Diaz. She initially met her intended parents, David and Todd, a married couple in their early 40s from Seattle, via Skype in 2016. "They were reserved at first," says Diaz, "but I found out later it was because they'd had two surrogates prior to me who didn't work out." The three eventually clicked, and Diaz became pregnant in 2017 using a donor egg and David's sperm. "The most common question I'd get was, 'How are you going to give your baby away like that?'" Diaz says. "I had to explain, it has none of my DNA. It's not my baby, and this is a choice. It's my body, and I'm choosing to help people who can't do this on their own. Surrogacy is their last resort."

Diaz admits the money was good—but

'The end result is worth it, it truly is. You're going to help complete a family'

—SAMMIE DIAZ

she says financial gain shouldn't be the motivation to be a surrogate. "Pregnancy is pretty harsh on your body, so you have to go into it knowing you're taking a risk with your health," she says. "I had hip pain and migraines, but then I would picture David and Todd holding their baby, and it would get me through it." And she had zero regrets when she gave birth to a healthy boy, Milo, now 18 months. "It was just so incredible to see the three of them together," says Diaz. Her relationship with the happy dads remains close; they speak regularly over the phone, and she recently met Milo. ("He's the cutest!" she says.) "We always say 'I love you.' They're so grateful that sometimes I'm like, 'You guys, don't... I'm blushing!'" Diaz would

love to be a surrogate again and is currently hoping to be a match for another couple. "How many families don't get the opportunity to [have kids]?" she says. "It breaks my heart. If a woman is healthy and in the right place mentally, it's a life-changing experience."

'It helped me move on'

CHELSEA FREI, 37, FACILITIES MANAGER AT AN EDUCATIONAL CENTER

For Chelsea Frei, a married mom of four, a personal tragedy from 10 years ago ultimately inspired her to become a surrogate. "My first child, a daughter, was stillborn," says Frei. "Planning your lives around a baby and then not having that child... we went through such a stage of grief that I really felt I could relate to people who want kids so badly but are unable to."

Three years ago she met Ernesto, now 47, a gay man from Spain, via Skype. Ernesto had two viable embryos,

using donor eggs and his sperm and was looking for the right person to carry them. "I just got a really warm feeling from him," Frei says. "I'd interviewed with other people and didn't connect with them. He's very close with his family and really values that part of his life. He was very honest about how he was going to parent and what life would look like for his twins. I just felt confident that he had the heart and was ready for these babies." She says she had no qualms about carrying for a single man. "I know how much thought he'd put into having children," she says. "It wasn't a quick decision, and he'd been through so much to even get to me."

Still, she says friends were shocked

when she told them she was going to be a surrogate. "A lot of people were surprised it still exists, because of all the horror stories of [women being exploited] in the past." She also had to convince her husband,

'I never felt like I was carrying my own babies... I always knew they were Ernesto's'

—CHELSEA FREI

who was worried about her health but came to understand why she wanted to help. When Amaya and Alvaro, now 2, were born in 2017, Frei was overcome with emotion. "I cried and cried," she says. "It's just this feeling of giving someone this gift... there are no words to explain it." She says the experience has helped her further heal from the pain of losing a child. "To see the look on Ernesto's face, to see the babies healthy... it really helped me along my own path."

'At 42, I wasn't sure I could be a surrogate'

CINDY FLOYD, 45, NICU NURSE

"At St. Luke's Hospital I took care of a set of premature twins through IVF. They were here quite some time, so I became close to them," says Cindy. "I just remember the family saying, 'If it wasn't for our surrogate, we'd never have been parents.' That hit home for me. I have two kids, and my pregnancies went well, so I called the agency to see if I could even do it, because I was 42."

Floyd had a six-month window in which she could try and match with a family—which is how she met Julian, a single man in his early 40s from Spain who longed to be a dad. Floyd had no issues carrying for a gay man. "I live in a very rural town where that is not always accepted," she says, "but [everyone] only asked about the baby."

Julian's son, Lorca Floyd (in honor of Cindy), is now 2. "It was an amazing delivery," she says. "Passing the baby to Julian and seeing him glow was so awesome."

Baby Joy
"We became extremely close," Floyd says of Julian (below with Lorca at his birth). "It was really kind of hard when he left [to go home] because we were so attached."

FROM LEFT: BETH AALAK; CRYSTAL KULACK

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CRYSTAL KULACK; JENNI MORELLO; CRYSTAL KULACK

