

# Same-sex couple carries same 'miracle' baby in what may be fertility world first

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Sonia Azad WFAA-TV, Dallas-Fort Worth

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Bliss Coutler, 36, and Ashleigh Coulter, 28, both carried their baby boy in what Texas doctors are calling a medical first.

Courtesy of the Coulters, WFAA

DALLAS – Two Texas mothers each carried their "miracle baby" because of a medical advance that allowed them to do what they thought was otherwise impossible.

Ashleigh Coulter, 28, and Bliss Coutler, 36, met six years ago and later were married. The couple who desired a baby knew that welcoming their own biological child would require a sperm donor, and some creativity.

"Obviously, us being two women, we were like, 'How can we make this happen?'" Ashleigh said. "We felt like there has to be a way."

It turned out there was a way for both women to carry their child.

Fertility specialists Dr. Kathy Doody and her husband, Dr. Kevin Doody, of the CARE Fertility in Bedford, Texas, were the first to try reciprocal effortless in vitro fertilization using radical technology, which gave the Coulters a shot at motherhood.

"We were just talking one night at home and I said, 'You know, I think we could use this for a same-sex couple,'" Dr. Kathy recalled. "And Kevin said: 'I think you're right. I think we could.'"

Here's how the process works. It starts like traditional IVF.

"Bliss went through the stimulation of her ovaries and the egg harvest," Kathy said.

Instead of placing the sperm and Bliss' eggs into incubators in a lab, which is called reciprocal IVF and has been carried out for same-sex couples for years, they go into the chamber of the INVOcell device immediately after egg retrieval. The device is placed into Bliss' body for five days where early embryo development begins.

"She got the embryo off to an early start," Kathy said. "The eggs fertilized in her body, and when they returned five days later, we removed the device and froze the embryos."

Because embryos don't have livers, kidneys or lungs, traditionally, electromechanical devices like incubators are used in labs to remove toxins and try to maintain a supportive environment for the embryo.

"It turns out, not surprisingly, that the woman's own body is a very good incubator," Kathy said, clarifying how INVOcell works. "We have livers, kidneys and lungs, so we're able to provide those same services to the embryo more naturally."

Next, it was Ashleigh's turn.

"Almost like passing the baton, like it's a relay race," Kathy said.

Doctors evaluated Ashleigh's uterus, gave her estrogen and then progesterone, waited for the right time and transferred her wife's embryos to her body. They got pregnant on the first try.

"She got to carry him for five days and was a big part of the fertilization, and then I carried him for nine months," Ashleigh said. "So that made it really special for the both of us – that we were both involved. She got to be a part of it, and I got to be a part of it."

The cost of effortless IVF using INVOcell is about half the cost of traditional IVF, which usually runs \$14,000 to \$16,000 with medication.

Reciprocal effortless IVF, the process Bliss and Ashleigh had, is about \$8,000 with medication, compared with traditional reciprocal IVF involving lab incubators that costs \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Kathy responded to critics who may believe the science is contrary to religious beliefs.

"Well, I would respectfully disagree," Kathy said. "I think that family, relationship, children is exactly everything that was meant to be in our world."

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Stetson is a happy, healthy 5-month-old baby. Bliss and Ashleigh are busy with motherhood.

"No one really knew it was possible, but it worked magnificently," Bliss said.

The couple have two additional frozen embryos from Bliss that they could use the same way unless Ashleigh wants to use her eggs next time, because only Bliss' genes transferred to Stetson.

"I think it opens up new avenues, new choices for same-sex couples," Kathy said.

Since Ashleigh's delivery, a second same-sex couple in North Texas chose reciprocal effortless IVF at CARE Fertility, got pregnant and delivered a healthy baby girl in September.

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