

TWO
WOMEN,
TWO
BABIES,
ONE
FAMILY

It sounds like the premise for a sitcom: A woman and her partner decide to start a family and—lo and behold!—they both find themselves pregnant, and due just days apart. How exactly does a couple handle not one but two sets of hormonal surges, baby-clothes-buying binges, and bizarre food cravings? Here, an inside look into how this beautifully unconventional family came to be.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JULIANA SOHN**





Top: Kristen and Sarah in their kitchen in Sea Cliff, New York, on January 11, 2009. Opening pages: With Thomas and Kate on March 3, 2009.

Kristen Henderson and Sarah Ellis have been asked the question a thousand times (and they probably will be asked it a thousand times more). Their answer is always this: No, they didn't set out to get pregnant at the same time.

Back in early 2007, only Sarah, 37, *Real Simple's* marketing director, was trying to have a baby. And after a series of artificial inseminations, she succeeded. But after the pregnancy ended in miscarriage, she wasn't able to try again for a while for medical reasons. "It was really difficult," Sarah says. "After you miscarry, you're almost afraid to give it another go."

So her partner of four years, Kristen, 38, a guitarist in the rock band Antigone Rising, decided to start artificial insemination herself. Several cycles went by and Kristen still wasn't pregnant. So Sarah decided to try in vitro fertilization, a different process, using the same donor as Kristen. "We figured

we'd roll the dice," says Kristen. "One of us had to get pregnant, right?"

One week later, they got the news. Pregnant. Pregnant. "My first response was to be terrified," says Kristen. "We were due three days apart! I kept thinking, Who is going to be the not-pregnant one?" From that jaw-dropping moment, *Real Simple* followed the duo through their incredible shared pregnancies, documenting the experience in photographs and the words of the happy mothers-to-be and their loved ones.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT: June 2008

KRISTEN: We agreed not to tell anyone until the second trimester. That worked for about one week.

JEANNE HENDERSON, KRISTEN'S MOTHER: Here's how I found out: Kristen came over to my house unannounced with her dog and said, "Mom, I'm so tired,

can you watch the dog? I'm going to take a nap." This is so not Kristen. We are quite close and always know what the other is thinking. So I asked her if she was pregnant. She confessed that she was three weeks along and that Sarah was three weeks and three days along. But she didn't want anyone to know about Sarah yet. So I kept her little secret. I thought, This is awesome! This is also incomprehensible! Then I started remembering my own pregnancies, and how needy I had felt, and I thought, Oh, my God, how are they going to do this?

SARAH: I have a nonbiological child, Georgia, from a previous relationship. She's five and lives with my ex-partner. I wanted Georgia to be one of the first to know. I told her that Kristen had a baby in her belly and I had a baby in my belly, and they were siblings. And that if one was a girl, she would get all of Georgia's hand-me-downs. She was so excited.

BARBARA ELLIS, SARAH'S MOTHER: Sarah called me one day and told me that she was pregnant. We were happy because her miscarriage had been so devastating. And then she said, "Are you sitting down? Kristen's pregnant, too." That was a surprise. From the beginning, we called the babies "the twins."

SARAH: From the minute my mother found out, she hasn't stopped crying. Just tears of joy and excitement. She knew we'd face some rough patches, but my parents know what a strong support system Kristen and I have, and that we could handle this.

THE FIRST TRIMESTER: June to August 2008

SARAH: Kristen and I reacted to our pregnancies in different ways. She would read all about pregnancy and birth, and I wouldn't pay much attention. That said, I made sure we had our appointments and the hospital tour. And I organized the babies' bedroom—clothes in bins by the month, diapers in 0s and 1s and 2s. Can you tell I work at *Real Simple*? When we weren't getting ready, we were resting. It was actually a good time of year to be pregnant—we watched a lot of *The Biggest Loser*.

KRISTEN: I wanted to experience pregnancy naturally; she was practically scheduling a C-section right out of the gate. She was more stable. I cry-laughed at things that were barely funny on a daily basis.

SARAH: We were both green from morning sickness most of the first trimester, but oddly we never got

sick at the same time. We were convinced the babies were communicating with each other, because if I was a mess, she would be fine. And vice versa.

KRISTEN: We both had cravings at the same time, but they never lined up. Hers were bizarre. Like tomato sandwiches on Wonder Bread with mayonnaise and salt and pepper. She also wanted Chinese food or

Top: With two months to go, the couple shop for baby clothes at Giggle, in Greenvale, New York. Bottom: At home, toys await the new arrivals.



chocolate. I was obsessed with fruit. I would eat apples with cheese, while she would eat Ben & Jerry's with pizza, and she would say, "That was the most delicious thing."

SARAH: One of the advantages of a dual pregnancy is that no one is skinny. After an awful lot of restaurant meals, we would order an enormous chocolate banana split and not think twice about it. You don't get self-conscious—it's shared pignood.

SPENCER ELLIS, SARAH'S BROTHER: They didn't hold back: snacks, then appetizers, then a full-course meal. One night they ate with us, then headed home for a second dinner—and they took something to eat on the ride home.

THE SECOND TRIMESTER: *September to November 2008*

SARAH: Our nights became very active—total marathons. We were up, down. Lights turned on, off. Someone's hot or cold. We both had restless legs from the pregnancy, so our legs looked like jumping beans. Plus, every time we tried to get close to each other, it felt like two beached whales trying to hug. Kristen also developed the habit of waking up at 4 A.M. and reading about how to give birth, then waking me up and freaking me out.

KRISTEN: Sarah gave up on sharing the full-size bed. She went to the couch. That couch is awful. But she insisted. She liked it. And we spent every night bang-

Kristen (here, eight months pregnant) practices with Sarah and a doula for the big day.

"ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF A DUAL PREGNANCY—NO ONE IS SKINNY."

ing into each other to go to the bathroom. Only one pregnant lady could be comfortable at a time.

SARAH: Physically, I carried much more of a basketball, a typical boy if you will, and Kristen carried more of a girl, much more round. We were told that often. But I think people just didn't know what to say. They just looked and thought, Could that be possible? Or is one just getting fat because the other is pregnant? We definitely got double takes. One morning, at the grocery store, I saw Kristen talking to a woman about babies. And then I walk up, and the woman goes, "Oh! You have another one." She didn't know what to do with the information.

KRISTEN: On the street, people probably thought we were friends who had just come from pregnancy class. When I was registering us at Buy Buy Baby, the woman who worked there was freaking out because she had never seen this before. She kept saying, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" That happened a lot.

SARAH: One of the best moments of our pregnancy happened when we took the grandmothers to our four-month sonogram. It was really special, because they were getting to see their grandchildren for the first time, and we were finding out the sexes. Two pregnancies makes everything doubly exciting, and this was no exception. We found out that I was having a girl, and Kristen was having a boy. We had always imagined it that way.

KRISTEN: At night, we started putting our bellies together so the babies could say hi and tap at each other. It was sweet.

SARAH: Kristen loved playing the "name game"—in which you try to come up with names for the babies. We kept thinking up silly names for the kids, like





Luke and Laura from *General Hospital*. I actually couldn't stand that game.

KRISTEN: Sarah and I talked a lot about our dreams. I woke up once and said to Sarah, "I had the craziest dream. I saw the baby and asked him his name. He said Michael." And Sarah said, "His name is not going to be Michael." So I just kept thinking, This poor baby came to me in a dream and told us what he wanted his name to be and we're not going to use it.

SARAH: People would ask me questions about "my baby." And I would say, "Which baby do you mean?" In their heads, the child I carried was my baby. But, honestly, that's not how I think about it. Of course, I love the idea that I'll get to look at my daughter and see passed-on traits, but that's just a small part of my relationship with her. And it won't make any difference with my son. Biology isn't everything.

THE THIRD TRIMESTER: December 2008 to February 2009

SARAH: When you're shopping for twins, it feels like you need to get it right, because after they're born, you're going to be too busy to go back to the store. I've thought about dressing them for their first big holiday, Easter. She'll have on her little pink dress and shoes, and he'll have on his tiny suspenders.

JEANNE HENDERSON: We shopped from Manhattan to Manhasset! I have no idea how we'll financially dig out of it. But it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

SARAH: Our mothers were all about the baby showers. We had one with Kristen's family, one with my family, and one with my mother's friends. It was like a four-alarm fire—registries, invitations. They had to have RSVPs immediately. The showers were

Kristen's and Sarah's extended families come together at the couple's house on March 3, 2009. Sarah's mom, Barbara Ellis, is at the far left. Kristen's mom, Jeanne Henderson, sits at the far right.



With Thomas on February 3, 2009, just 36 hours after the birth.

so much fun because we both got to go and experience all of it together.

KRISTEN: I was still performing when the showers happened. After one 80-minute show when I was 8½ months pregnant, I was on an adrenaline high for three days—until I took a nap and woke up and wasn't the same person anymore. The pregnancy shifted. I was completely exhausted in a way I can't describe.

SARAH: One day we went to the pharmacy with our big bellies. I bought compression hose, and she got two wrist braces for her carpal tunnel. I thought, This has taken a really bad turn. One day we accidentally dropped our keys in front of the door to our house, and I said, "We should just call a locksmith." It seemed easier to change the locks than bend over.

MAURA ELLIS, SARAH'S SISTER-IN-LAW: I felt bad for them, because during my pregnancy I could say

to my husband, "You empty the dishwasher." And I knew that there were nights when stuff had to get done and someone had to do it.

KRISTEN: The giggly high we had earlier in the pregnancies left the building. We were just tired and hungry. Sarah was a lot more mellow than she had been. She didn't have any other choice.

CATHY HENDERSON, KRISTEN'S SISTER: It was smooth sailing until the last month, when there was no unpregnant person there and both were so uncomfortable. Kristen kept saying, "Now I know what everyone was warning us about."

LIZ BROOKS, THE COUPLE'S BEST FRIEND: I came to stay with them for the last week. I did everything that involved bending. Sarah would go off to work, and Kristen and I would talk. She would say, "I'm nervous. I'm terrified."

KRISTEN: It sounds obvious, but the big issue was, How do you get this baby out? That was weighing on my mind heavily.

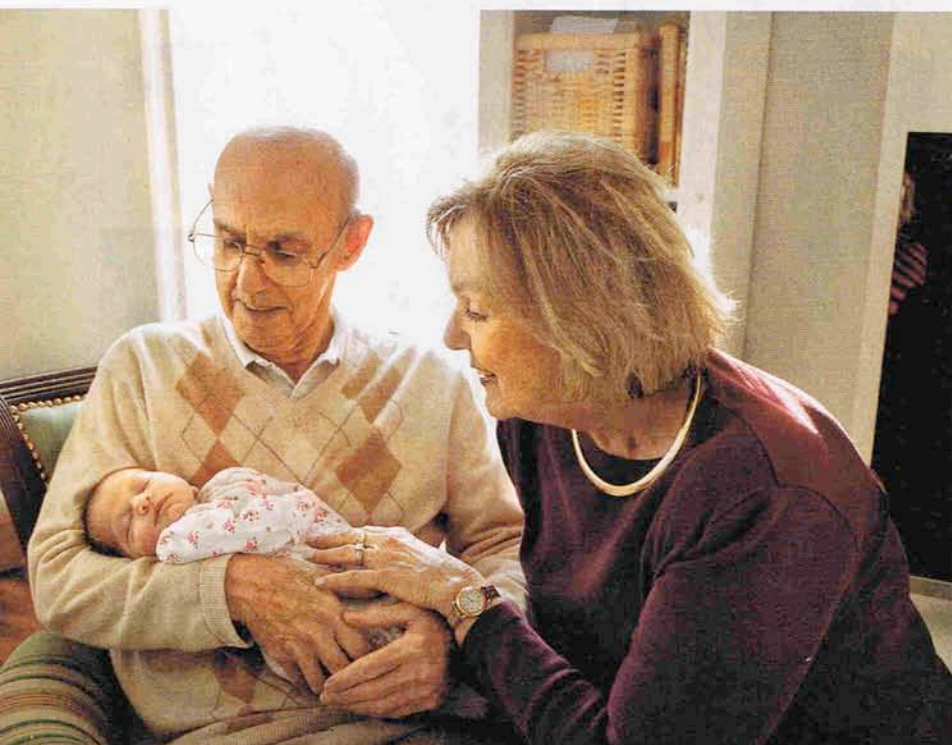
SARAH: We couldn't remember anything. We would start a conversation and it would just end. And there was no such thing as cuddling. It was hard to get near each other. We would try it, then her hand would go dead and I would get restless legs. So we would say, "On the inside, I really want to be with you."

THE BIRTHS: February 2009

KRISTEN: We had been at our house in Long Island when I went into labor, but we were having our babies in New York City, so we hightailed it to NYU Langone Medical Center. We were both planning on giving birth there, with the same doctor. Sarah drove. She has major anxiety about tunnels. She asked me to please not make fun of her at that moment, so I didn't.

SARAH: My baby, which had been transverse, flipped in the middle of the Midtown Tunnel. It felt like an alien was moving in my stomach. But when I got to the hospital, I forgot I was pregnant, because Kristen's birth was so exciting. Honestly, the thing that caught me off guard was that during every birthing class, I had somehow pictured only myself giving birth. It was really upsetting to see Kristen in pain for so long.

Sarah's parents, Kenneth and Barbara Ellis, with one-week-old baby Kate in Sea Cliff.



"SARAH AND I ARE ON THIS TEAM NOW, DEDICATED TO BRINGING THEM THROUGH THIS LIFE."

KRISTEN: I had an 18-hour labor, with an epidural, which ended with a normal vaginal birth. We named the baby Thomas Tupper Ellis-Henderson. The homecoming was the least smooth part. We had four grandparents and my sister at the hospital almost the whole time. And then somehow we didn't have a single person on hand when we were leaving.

SARAH: I was 9½ months pregnant, Kristen couldn't move, and we had five bags of our stuff and gifts, plus Thomas. Oh, and it was snowing. As we walked outside, my baby dropped down. Kristen started crying. We just felt overwhelmed and agreed we would plan this better with the next baby.

JEANNE HENDERSON: Because their due dates were so close, we had all assumed they would give birth a few days apart. Three weeks after Thomas was born, Sarah was still pregnant.

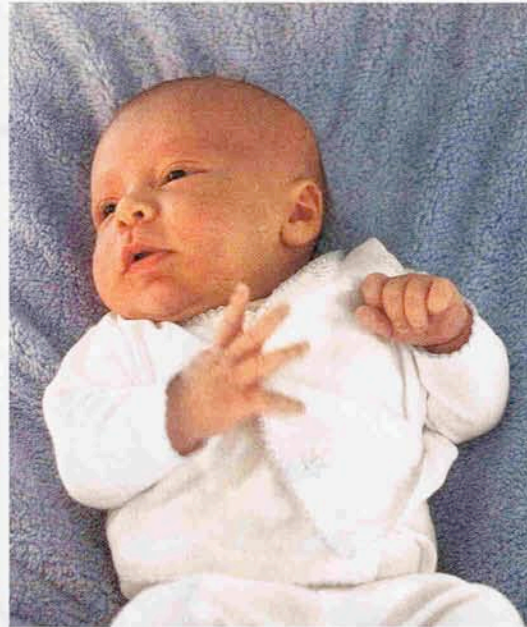
KRISTEN: Once Thomas arrived and we came home, that was the first moment we said, "Hey, how are we going to do this?"

SARAH: Thirteen days after my due date, on the day I was going to be induced, I started going into labor.

KRISTEN: I had this weird reaction. I wasn't sure I could see another labor again so soon. It was hard to lie to Sarah about how hard it was and how much it hurt. There was a moment when she was ready to quit pushing, and it was hard for me not to say, "Yeah, you should quit. It's not going to get any better." But I didn't say that. I think I did all right.

SARAH: She did great.

KRISTEN: After Sarah went through 12 hours of labor and had an epidural, our daughter, Kate Spencer Ellis-Henderson, was here. We had help getting



Left: Kate, at seven days old, weighing 7.3 pounds. Right: Thomas, at four weeks old, weighing 10 pounds.

home this time, and once we were there, the entire family came over, with little-boy and little-girl flowers, and we sang “Happy Birthday” and had cakes.

SARAH: When the babies are next to each other, they almost hold hands. They always seem to be touching. It’s just the sweetest thing. You’re never prepared for how amazing it’s going to be.

RIGHT NOW...AND THE NEXT 18 YEARS

SARAH: It often takes two people to attend to one baby. If she’s with Thomas, I’m preparing his bottles. I think the biggest difference between this and when Georgia was born is that with one child you can trade off. As parents of multiples know, with two you’re always on duty. If Kristen is showering and the second one wakes up hungry, she’s got to move a little faster. It’s just different.

KRISTEN: Everyone says sleep when the babies sleep, but the babies don’t necessarily sleep at the same time. And while Kate was feeding every two hours, Thomas was refusing breast milk. Now he’s breast-feeding fine, but it took us a while to get into a rhythm.

SARAH: People always want to know what we plan to tell the kids about their donor. We’ll tell them the truth, which is that somebody helped us to create them because we wanted them so badly. And we made sure that their donor would be contactable when Thomas and Kate are 18. So if they want to, they can reach out to this person who was very helpful to their mommies.

KRISTEN: We will always emphasize what our kids have, versus what they don’t. And they have such an abundance of love: two mommies, and aunts and uncles and grandparents on both sides. And we’re really excited to have gotten through the pregnancies and the births—having it all go pretty much the way we hoped. Sarah and I are on this team now, united for the benefit of Thomas and Kate, dedicated to bringing them through this life. ■



ARIANNE COHEN

WRITER | PORTLAND, OREGON

Wrote “Two Women, Two Babies, One Family” (page 208), in which a same-sex couple shares the experience of dual pregnancies. Her novel *The Tall Book* will be published in June.

“When I was hanging out with Sarah and Kristen, the fourth member of our clique was pregnancy fog. They would laugh really hard or start trailing off midsentence. They were hilarious. Giggly and foggy.”