



## Toni & Michael's Story

Growing up I only ever had one dream. I had such a wonderful childhood, fantastic parents and a lifelong playmate in my little sister and so when people used to ask the question 'what do you want to be when you grow up' my answer was always simple, a mum!

I met my husband Michael at the age of 20; we were engaged six months later and married in April 2005. We both knew we wanted to be parents and so decided to come off the pill the following month and just see what happened.

Nothing happened! Months went by and we still weren't pregnant but being a young couple we didn't feel any pressure at that point. As the years went by we did start to feel concerned that it hadn't happened though and so thought it was time to find out if there was a reason.

Our GP referred us for fertility testing but just before the appointment I cancelled it. I was absolutely terrified they would find something wrong and tell me I could never be a mum.

A year later in August 2008, it still hadn't happened and we found ourselves at our hospital fertility clinic for testing. After various tests on both of us I was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). I had never heard of it before as I displayed none of the typical symptoms of PCOS, other than a sudden weight gain when I came off the pill in 2005, but as I had also just got married I had put that down to contentment.

The hospital tried us with a variety of medications to try and boost fertility. I was 'lucky' in that my PCOS was mild and I did ovulate myself but only sporadically. Firstly we tried Metformin, a diabetic drug proven to help some people with PCOS. For us it just made me sick though and so we had to stop after a short while.

We then moved on to Clomid, a drug that helps you to ovulate each month. This worked and I started to ovulate regularly every month but we just didn't fall pregnant. After six attempts on Clomid we did try one cycle of injections to boost ovulation but sadly on this cycle I did ovulate but also reacted so strongly to the dose I ended up with very mild OHSS, causing lots of small follicles to grow on my ovaries.

At this stage we made the slightly scary decision to go ahead with a surgical procedure called laparoscopic ovarian drilling which burns holes into each ovary to balance out the hormone levels in someone with PCOS. After the operation we continued with the Clomid for another seven cycles but sadly still didn't fall pregnant.

We had reached IVF stage and chose to have our treatment split between our local hospital for scans, with the egg collection and embryo transfer taking place at a local fertility clinic. We were exceptionally lucky that at that time we were entitled to three funded cycles on the NHS.

In 2011 we had our first attempt using traditional IVF, but of the thirteen eggs retrieved only three fertilised and by day two only one remained. It was transferred back but I started to bleed seven days later and we just knew it hadn't worked.

In 2012 we had our second attempt and this time used a process called intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) where the embryologist studies the sperm sample, selecting the

strongest and injecting it directly into the egg. We had a much better fertilisation rate and were overjoyed when we finally had our first positive pregnancy test. We had done it!

At seven weeks pregnant we had a miscarriage. We were devastated. Up until that point all our focus had been on GETTING pregnant and not once had we considered a pregnancy ending this way. Suddenly getting pregnant wasn't good enough and this was a scary prospect leading up to our third and final attempt. Not once did we consider giving up but we did wait a year before we both felt physically and emotionally ready to take the risk again.

In 2013 we had our third cycle, again with ICSI, and this time four eggs fertilised and went all the way to blastocyst stage. We had one that was a clear leader of the four and so had this one embryo transferred back and the other embryos frozen, something we had also never had before.

Taking that pregnancy test was one of the most daunting days of our lives but it was positive and we were pregnant again! Despite being over the moon we tried so hard not to get carried away as we were terrified of another miscarriage. The months went by uneventfully though and in May 2014, our little bundle called Thomas was handed over to us for our first cuddle and it felt like a dream.

It had taken so long to get to that point and as a couple we had been through so much but we came out stronger and as we gazed down at Thomas it made everything we had been through totally worth it.

We ideally didn't want Thomas to be an only child, and as it had taken so long the first time, in June 2015 we had our three frozen embryos thawed, one of which survived and was implanted back and ten days later a pregnancy test showed we had done it again, we were pregnant and baby William arrived in March 2016!

We never gave up on our dream to be parents, despite the fact it took nine years, and I feel so grateful that we even had IVF as an option available to us; 40 years ago this kind of treatment wasn't available and if you couldn't have children you just had to accept it. My dream to be a mum finally came true. Anyone out there still trying, please keep going, I promise it really is worth it.