

## From hope to heartbreak

[The Lowell Sun](#). Lowell, Mass.: [May 21, 2007](#).

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It was the middle of the afternoon when she went into labor. And by early next morning, all three babies had been born. Sara, then 29, held them, each in a pink and blue hospital blanket.

Said hello. And, just as soon, good-bye.

At just 20 weeks, the triplets had come too early. Each weighed less than a pound. Their skin was mottled and red. Like new kittens, their eyes never opened.

But each was perfect. Tiny snub noses. Marvelous little ears. Ten little fingers and toes. Twenty-four weeks, what doctors call the age of viability, is the earliest a child might be born. Just four more weeks, and they might have been saved.

"We were so close," Sara said. "But far away, too."

Nothing, explained UMass Lowell psychologist Doreen Arcus, is more tragic and unnatural than outliving your children. But there's a unique grief when pregnancies end early. The American Pregnancy Association estimates that between 10 and 25 percent of pregnancies end in miscarriage. But in an era where fertility treatments have become more common, so, too, may these kinds of losses. Web MD estimates that two-thirds of women using IVF, for example, never have a child.

For Sara and Sam (not their real names), the hope for family came close on the heels of marriage. But getting pregnant wasn't supposed to be so hard. Twice they conceived, only to miscarry. After more than a year, they opted for fertility drugs. Then hormone injections. Sara was put on progesterone suppositories. Poked, prodded and monitored. Finally, she was inseminated.

Two years after her first pregnancy, the two were ecstatic to learn they were again. Six weeks later, an ultrasound showed twins. Then at 12 weeks, the ultimate surprise: three beating hearts.

"We rushed to tell everyone," Sara, now 30, remembered. "It was real."

With multiple births come risks, they knew. Sara stopped teaching aerobics, but worked full-time. Her belly quickly swelled. By just 18 weeks, she'd gained 37 pounds. Morning sickness had passed. It was glorious.

But on a Sunday night in early August, Sara woke with a sopping nightgown, her water broken. Worried about infection, doctors advised that the pregnancy be terminated. The two refused. There were several foggy days of hospitals, doctors, and exams, and the continued leak of amniotic fluid. When the contractions began, everyone knew the babies' chance was slim.

God never gives you more than you can handle, people told them later. Things happen for a reason. You're young; you've got plenty of time. Just relax -- it will happen.

And later: You need to get over it, my dear.

"When you get to adult life, and it's time to have children, it's a natural part of life -- it should just happen," said Arcus. "But nobody ever says, 'Here's the doll that's going to have fertility problems.' 'Here's the one coping with miscarriage.' When it doesn't happen quite so easily, we are not well prepared to cope with that. Neither are our friends and family well prepared to help us."

These days, Sara's in a tug-of-war, pained at fielding questions but both devastated and indignant that few want to talk about the triplets. Nearly a year later, she avoids baby showers. Loathes offering advice to friends about getting pregnant. And aches each time someone announces they have a baby on the way.

In their polished Dracut home, few reminders remain. A small wooden box holds the sonograms, footprints and snapshots. Congratulations nestle alongside cards of condolence. Two pairs of infant shorts are tucked there, too, tags still on.

They gave back the handmade blankets. Canceled the crib order. Put away her maternity clothes. And the nursery is now an office, its walls a fresh, dreamy blue. No one much goes in there except their overindulged dog.

It's better that way, Sara explained.

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Mother's Day in 2006 found Sara and Sam newly pregnant, and their future spread out before them. This year, there was mostly ache. But even without the triplets' presence -- they'd have been nearly a year old by now -- Sara still considers herself a mother.

And through the peaks and valleys of the past three years, they're trying again, though it may again require medical intervention and possibly surgery.

Anything for just one healthy baby.

"We were made to be parents," said Sara. "And we have more than enough love to give. One way or another we will become parents. "

[Illustration]

Caption: Delicate baby clothes are part of the memories that Sara and Sam, a Dracut couple, have left of the triplets they lost 20 weeks into Sara's pregnancy. sun/tory germann

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