

Michigan Fertility Alliance

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When your birth makes history: Meet the world's first baby born via gestational surrogacy

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Dr. Elliott Rudnitzky, Jill Rudnitzky Brand and Sandra Rudnitzky at Jill's wedding in 2016

If Louise Brown and Jill Rudnitzky Brand ever meet, the two women will have a lot to talk about. That's because their births marked significant first leaps in the science of assisted reproductive technology (ART). Louise's name may likely ring a bell because she was the world's first "test tube baby", born through in vitro fertilization (IVF) back in 1978. Meanwhile, though Jill's name may not be known –in part because her parents were keen on

privacy and anonymity— her birth was just as significant. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1986, Jill was the first baby in the world who was born not by her biological mother but via a gestational carrier. (To learn more about why all this was happening in Michigan in mid-1980s, please check out our piece on [the role the state has played](#) in global surrogacy history).

Before that, any children born through surrogacy were born via a traditional surrogate, meaning the carrier was also the egg donor. But thanks to the gumption not only of her mother Sandra and her father, Elliott, who is a cardiologist in New Jersey, but also [Dr. Wulf Utian](#), Jill—the genetic child of Elliott and Sandra— was born via [gestational surrogacy](#). (Jill’s birth was not only a huge leap for surrogacy but also for women who, for whatever reason, can carry a pregnancy to term but have to use donor eggs).

Though she was featured on the cover of Life magazine on her first birthday –where she was called by her middle name, Shira, to keep the family’s privacy— Jill has kept a low profile over the years. She is the married mother of two young children and lives in New York City where she is a marketing executive for an on-demand fitness company. In an exclusive interview for MFA, Jill spoke with Ginanne Brownell about the significance of her birth and how that has in many ways shaped who she is.

Brownell: Have you always known about the story of your birth or was there a moment when your parents sat you down and said, “You know, you are the first...” ?

Brand: There was never a time I didn't know the story. So there are two parts of the story-- there's my parents, what they went through, which is, to some extent, not my story to tell. I wasn't there. And then there's the part of the story of my own upbringing, which is more my story. But what may surprise you is while I've heard the story a billion times, I don't know all the details. And I think to some extent the story for me is equal parts amazing and beyond a miracle, and then equal parts just me, totally mundane. My parents had a quest to have a biological child and went through a lot of things to try to make that happen. My dad had this idea and sought out clinicians who could help them do it. And Dr. Utian had the guts, the gall and the resolve to partner with them on it.

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Jill on the cover of Life magazine on her first birthday in 1987

So you just grew up always knowing that you were the first baby in the world born this way?

I'd like to say there was some well-conceived moment when they told me, but I just grew up always knowing. I think the first time that it struck me as being really amazing was when I was a freshman in college. There was a fundraiser at the Cleveland Clinic to help fund the procedure for families who couldn't afford it. And they honored my parents and me, I suppose—even though it's really more my parents—for their bravery and courage. And we spoke at the event, and there was just couple after couple after couple coming up to me saying, “Because of your family, because of you, we have a child of our own, and you don't know what that means.” And that was the first time that I felt like I understood, “Wow, like, this is my story.” It changed the world yet I had never felt that before.

Does that at all feel like pressure?

That's an interesting one. I'm not even sure I've necessarily expressed this before but I've always felt this tremendous feeling that I've got some sort of responsibility. Not a responsibility to anyone so much as a responsibility to be special. Like, I was born special, I have a responsibility to be special. I've thought this many times in my life. I don't think I've ever said it out loud. I've never said to my parents or my husband. And I don't necessarily even know fully what it means.

That's interesting to hear how you have always processed it over the years.

The other thing I remember thinking as a kid sometimes being like, “What if I just malfunction one day? Like a robot?” I would guess between the ages of six, seven, eight thinking, “this hasn't been the done before and it's so bizarre.”

[Susan Golombok](#) at University of Cambridge has done the world's only longitudinal study of children born through surrogacy and her findings are, pretty much, that the kids are alright. They view how they came into the world as either a quirky story or something they don't really think much about.

Yeah, it kills at a dinner party. One thing my parents ask me, not all the time, but they'll ask me “Does that person know? When do you tell people? How does it come up?” My dad is always very curious about that. “Why does it come up? How do you introduce it? What do they say?” And it's probably pretty bespoke in each scenario of how it comes up. But it's never like me saying, “Let me tell you a cool story.” There is normally a reason if comes up.

Those who are against surrogacy will often say that children born through surrogacy are sold like chattel or commodities that are traded. How do you feel when you hear something like this?

I live in New York City. I am surrounded by a fairly socially liberal people. So I've never encountered that point of view. The devil's in the details here, like you have to understand the motivation [of why] people come to surrogacy. But by and large you are giving a viable option for people who otherwise couldn't have a biological child. And making that blanket statement is just like whenever you make a broad, gross generalization: you miss the nuance, you're going to make a lot of really cataclysmic errors.



Jill, her husband and children

Did you struggle to conceive?

I have two kids. I have one who was born the good old fashioned way. And then my second, it just was taking a long time. And we knew we wanted more. So we did IVF. And I had some interesting conversations throughout that process. Things resonated in real ways when I was doing it. My husband and I talk about it sometimes, the stories that my parents have told about what it was like and what they went through. It's like folklore. What we went through, they went through many times over the course of many years with so many roadblocks and failures. We experienced 1/1000th of what they did.

Do you follow the conversations around surrogacy, especially living in [New York](#) where the law just changed last year?

A little bit. Like when Phoebe got pregnant on "Friends" my friends would be like, "That's because of your parents and you!" Now in some ways it is so common, like, everything with fertility. It's mundane to some extent. My fertility doctor, when I told her my story, because you know it came up pretty quickly, she was so like, "Oh my god." It's like I was Beyonce. She told me that there have been mentions of [my story] in courses she's taken. And she told me of this IVF doctor that she follows on Instagram. And the doctor had posted a picture of the Life magazine where I'm on the cover. She wrote that, "We always hung that magazine on our wall because that was what inspired my mom to go to Cleveland to meet these doctors to try this thing. And because of that family, I have a younger brother."

Your family have not kept in touch with your carrier but you are still in touch with Dr. Utian. He was the one who kindly passed my email on to you so we could speak.

Yeah, my parents get teary eyed every time they think about him. They really do. They definitely email, maybe two times a year. They invite him for my things and they'll send him pictures and periodic updates like when I had my kids, that kind of stuff. They have so much love and affection in their hearts for him. I don't think there's a person on this planet other than their immediate family that they love more than him.