

Surprising Gifts

Meet three women who became mothers in ways they'd never imagined.

Falling in Love at First Sight

Allyson Erving; Garner, North Carolina
Mother of Christina, 15; Mackenzy, 5; and Austin, 4

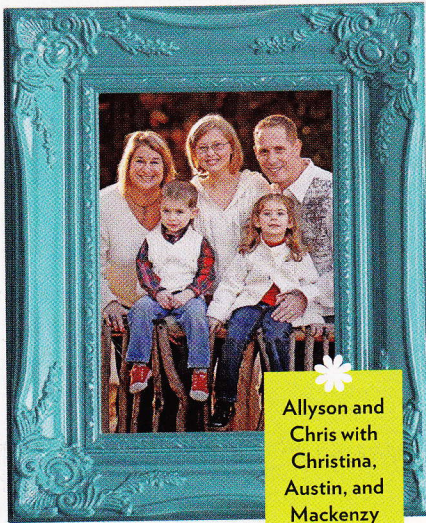
Soon after Allyson Erving and her future husband, Chris, met in February 2001, he introduced her to 5-year-old Christina, his brother's daughter, who was living with his parents. He was helping to raise his niece because her own parents had abandoned her when she was just a baby. Erving fell head over heels for her new boyfriend—and for Christina. “But I was so upset by the conditions she was growing up in, especially after Christina’s grandfather died,” she recalls. “She was living in a cockroach-infested house with drug dealers in the neighborhood.” Christina started spending weekends with the couple, but Erving knew this wasn’t enough for any of them.

“I never planned to become a mother so soon, but I loved Christina and wanted her to have a better life,” says Erving. “We prayed about it and decided that seeking custody was the right thing to do.” In 2003, the couple got married and were given custody of Christina. Though they were thrilled to finally be together, it wasn’t the happy ending everybody had been waiting for.

Christina had never been an affectionate child, and this became much more obvious once they were living together. “I’m a very emotional person, but when I’d hug Christina, her hands would be limp, and whenever I told her that I loved her,



BY MICHELE BENDER
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBYN LEHR



Allyson and Chris with Christina, Austin, and Mackenzy

she'd say, 'I love you too,' in a shallow, robotic voice as if she was forcing herself to say it," recalls Erving. When the couple sought professional help, they learned that Christina had reactive attachment disorder, a condition that can arise when a child doesn't form an attachment to a primary caregiver during the critical first three years of life. Clearly, this is what happened to Christina, whose biological parents were totally absent during that important time. Doctors also told the Ervings that Christina had ADHD and suffered from a mild case of depression. Luckily, medication, and a course of individual and family counseling, and lots of love and patience have made a huge difference. "It is the best feeling to hear her say 'I love you, Mom' or have her give me a hug out of the blue," says Erving, who now also has two biological children, Mackenzy, 5, and Austin, 4.

"This whole experience has taught me so many things. Mostly, that there is much more to being a parent than just sharing the same DNA. So many people can give birth to a child, but being a nurturer, a caregiver, a role model, and a loving and caring adult is what truly makes you a mom or dad," says Erving. "My love for Christina is no different from my love for my biological children. I feel so blessed and know in my heart that God brought us all together for a reason."

Against All Medical Odds

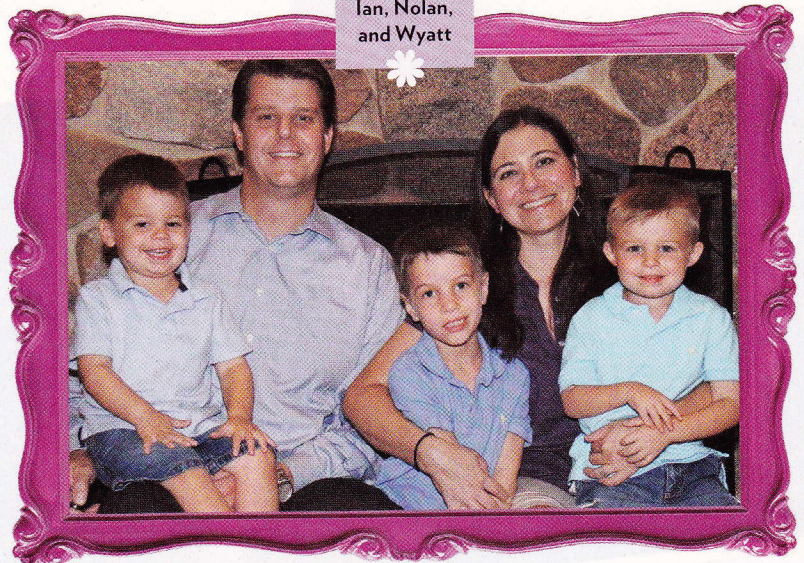
Laura Fiste; Homer Glen, Illinois
Mother of Nolan, 5; Ian, 3; and Wyatt, 2

At age 32, all Laura Fiste wanted was to have a baby. One month after going off the Pill, joy—she was pregnant. At 11 weeks, though, she miscarried. "My doctor said, 'It's a fluke. Don't worry. The next one will be a keeper,'" Fiste recalls. But it turned out that she was in early menopause. "My FSH levels were way above normal, which meant that my ovaries weren't responding the way they were supposed to," says Fiste. Even getting the maximum doses of fertility medications didn't help—she still produced relatively few eggs, and most of those were of poor quality. Over the next six years, she had eight miscarriages. She also had three D&C procedures (with one resulting in a horrible infection), two hysterosalpingograms (an extremely uncomfortable procedure to examine her uterus and fallopian tubes), laparoscopic surgery, four intrauterine inseminations, and three rounds of IVF. "It was absolute torture," she says.

Besides taking a toll on her body, her struggle with infertility also cost Fiste several friendships. "After years that were filled with loss and heartache, it was extremely painful for me to be around pregnant women and children, so I avoided going to baby showers and birthday parties," she explains. "As my friends started their families, I found we had less in common. I couldn't relate to their lives with children, and some weren't able to relate to my feelings of immense grief."

Worse, the emotional roller coaster strained her marriage. "All the doctor appointments, fertility medications, and anxiety and sadness made Eric and me feel like we were growing apart. It was ironic because our focus all along was on building a loving family." Finally, they decided to pursue an overseas adoption. "After we let go of the idea of having a biological child, we felt more united. For the first time in a long time, Eric and I were actually hopeful," Fiste says.

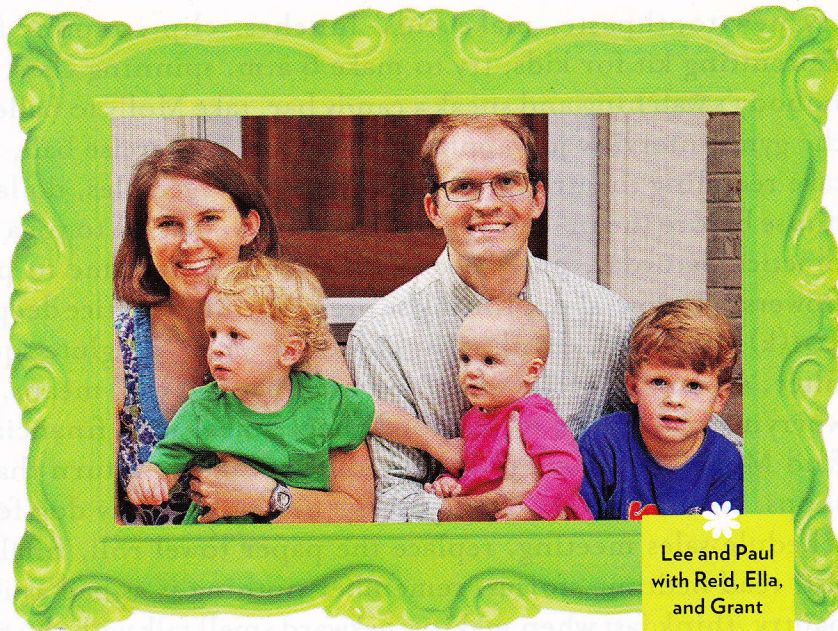
Eric and Laura with Ian, Nolan, and Wyatt



In April of 2006, the couple brought 14-month-old Nolan home from Russia. Fiste was ecstatic to finally be a mom. But then two months later, she found out she was pregnant. "I was stunned but also upset, because I was sure that I would have another miscarriage." However, this time things turned out quite differently. Fiste had a normal pregnancy and in March of 2007, she gave birth to Ian. He was perfectly healthy, but Fiste was not. Immediately after delivery, she began bleeding uncontrollably from a fallopian tube that had become badly infected because of scar tissue from her prior miscarriages and D&C procedures. "As I listened to Ian utter his first cries, my OB leaned over the curtain and said to me, 'We have to remove your right fallopian tube immediately,'" Fiste recalls.

Four months later, Fiste got yet another shocking piece of news: She was pregnant—again! "I was happy but stunned," she recalls. She braced herself for the possibility of losing another child but, amazingly, Fiste beat the odds one more time: Her third son, Wyatt, was born in March 2008. "I still can't believe that after more than six years of gut-wrenching infertility, losing friends, almost losing my marriage, and losing a fallopian tube, we are a family of five," says Fiste, now 42. "Now I know that the impossible can, and does, happen. Eric and I are aware of how lucky we are to have three beautiful, amazing children and that our marriage survived despite enormous obstacles and hardships. I feel like I've won the cosmic jackpot."

✿ "The impossible can, and does, happen. We're aware of how lucky we are to have three beautiful, amazing children."



Lee and Paul with Reid, Ella, and Grant

Putting Her Life on the Line

Lee Buchmann; Memphis, Tennessee
Mother of Grant, 5; Reid, 2½; and Ella, 11 months

Although it was relatively easy for Lee Buchmann to get pregnant with her first child, Grant, she never imagined she'd have to risk her life to have a second child. "I wasn't getting my period, so I went to a fertility specialist, and he suspected a tumor on my pituitary gland might have been causing my low hormone levels. But an MRI showed that I had a condition called hydrocephalus, in which excess fluid in my brain was putting pressure on my pituitary gland and hypothalamus," says Buchmann. Since this is the area of the brain that controls the hormones involved in triggering ovulation, it explained why she was having trouble conceiving. Though she likely had this condition even before her first pregnancy, it had probably gotten worse over time. Unfortunately, the impact of hydrocephalus goes beyond infertility—it can cause a range of problems including headaches, blurred or double vision, balance or coordination problems, memory loss, and confusion. "I was lucky that my only problem was low hormone levels," says Buchmann. The potential solution was risky neurosurgery in which the doctor would create a hole close to the basilar artery (one of the arteries that

supplies the brain with oxygen-rich blood) to drain the excess fluid. "Even if the procedure was successful, there was no guarantee I'd be able to conceive."

Buchmann had to make an agonizing decision: risk her life to have the surgery in order to ward off potential symptoms of hydrocephalus and maybe have a second child or wait to have the procedure only if she developed more serious health problems later in life. She spent countless hours weighing the pros and cons with her husband and parents, talking to her minister, and praying. "The thought of dying and leaving my husband and only child to grow up without me was terrifying me, but we decided to go ahead with the surgery while I was healthy." Still, Buchmann cried all the way from her home in Memphis to New York City, where she was going to have the procedure.

The surgery went smoothly. Just three months later, Buchmann started ovulating. Before long, she was pregnant with her son Reid. Amazingly, almost two years later, she gave birth to her daughter, Ella. "Every day I'm reminded by my children—whom I call my miracles—that going ahead with the scary procedure was worth it all." □