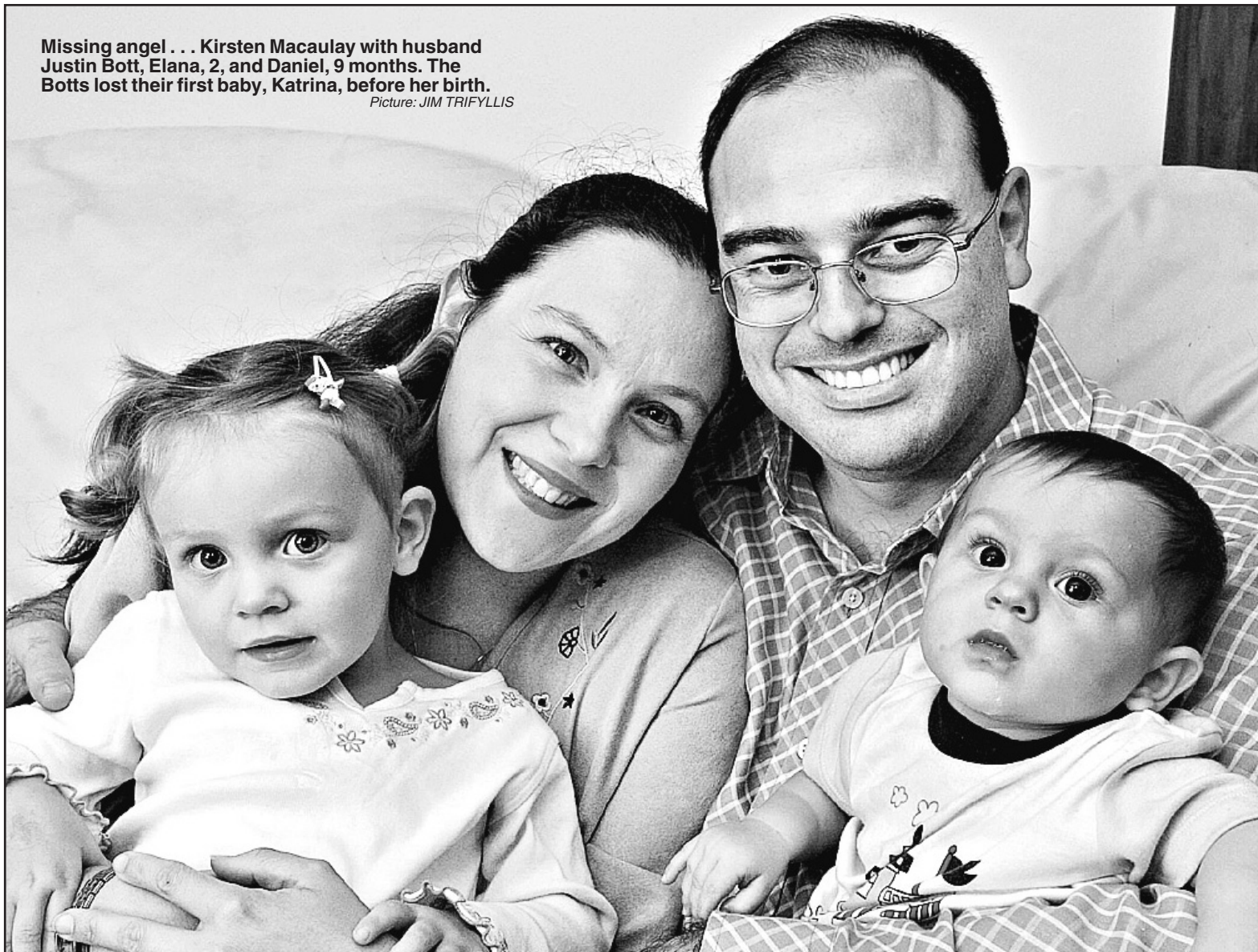


Missing angel . . . Kirsten Macaulay with husband Justin Bott, Elana, 2, and Daniel, 9 months. The Botts lost their first baby, Katrina, before her birth.

Picture: JIM TRIFYLLIS



Researchers want to know why five in 1000 babies are born dead



By ZOE TAYLOR

When people ask Kirsten Macaulay how many children she has, she hesitates. She knows that if she goes with her instincts and answers the question honestly some people might find her response confusing, confronting or even frightening.

She is delighted to be raising two beautiful, healthy children. But in her heart she will always be a mother-of-three. Her first daughter, Katrina Elizabeth, was stillborn.

Like many stillborn babies, Katrina inexplicably stopped breathing just a few weeks before she was due to be born. Every day in NSW at least one mother will find out the baby she is carrying has died, with more than 535 babies stillborn in 2005, according to figures from NSW Health.

Now specialists are calling for urgent action. More babies are stillborn each year than were ever the victims of SIDS. And there are hopes the success of the simple public awareness campaign around SIDS could be repeated to help reduce the heartbreak of stillbirth.

Macaulay, 33, says she was riddled with guilt following the death of Katrina three-and-a-half years ago.

She had delayed starting a family to ensure her Type 1 diabetes was under control and she and her extended family were delighted when they found out she was expecting at the age of 29.

At 36 weeks pregnant, music teacher Macaulay gave up work. At home on the Northern Beaches the finishing touches were made to the nursery and her sister organised a baby shower. Macaulay and husband Justin were thrilled at the prospect of impending parenthood.

"We were excited about the new life and so was our family," Macaulay says. "I had finished work. I was ready to be a mum and be at home with my baby."

The couple had decided not to find out the sex of their baby as they wanted it to be a surprise.

On a Monday morning Macaulay did some shopping and went for a walk. That evening she mentioned to her husband and in-laws that she thought the baby had not been kicking as much as usual.

But with an appointment with her obstetrician booked for the following morning, she decided to wait.

"At the time I didn't realise that I could have gone to the hospital at any time to get things checked," she says. "I know that now, but nobody had told me."

When she went to her obstetrician appointment the next morning her world fell apart.

Despite her concerns, she expected to hear the reassuring fast thud of her baby's heartbeat when the doctor placed the monitor on her belly. She was incredulous when there was silence.

An ultrasound then revealed the baby was not moving.

The couple were sent to Royal North Shore Private Hospital for a further ultrasound and the sonographer, through her own tears, confirmed that their baby had died.

The following day, on August 6, 2003, baby Katrina Elizabeth was born following a caesarean, weighing 2.7kg. Macaulay was placed on the maternity ward and when she came round from the general anaesthetic, she shared some precious time with her baby girl before saying goodbye.

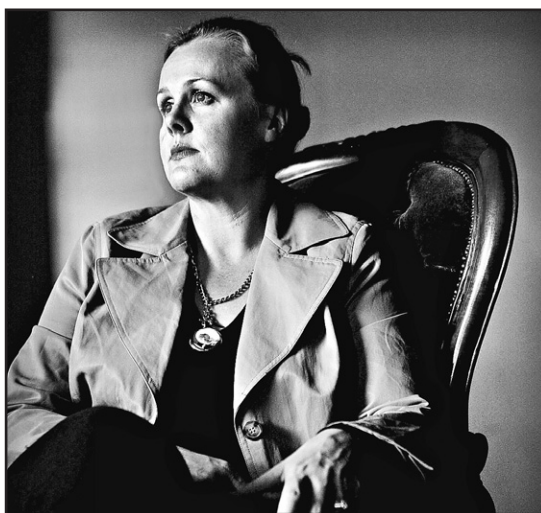
"It was incredibly difficult," she says. "But I did cope with seeing other people's babies and hearing them cry. I didn't begrudge anyone else their beautiful new babies."

"But I would be hobbling down the corridor and people would ask 'Where is your baby?' and I would tell them she had died."

For a while Macaulay would tell anyone who asked her about having children that her little girl had died.

"I am quite an emotional person and I would always end up in tears,"

The forgotten family tragedy



Living with grief . . . fund-raising for research is mother Emma Kirkwood's legacy to her baby Olivia.

Picture: BRIANNE MAKIN

she says. "Most people would say sorry but a lot of people would then want to run away."

Some friends were also at a loss as to what to say and, along with their incredible grief, the couple sometimes felt stigmatised.

"As a parent of a stillborn child, you believe you are a parent, but your child has died," she says. "Society doesn't want to deal with that reality. Some people alienated us, because they could not deal with our grief. Others were just fantastic."

An autopsy could find no conclusive reason why Katrina stopped breathing and Macaulay battled feelings of guilt for many months.

"I felt incredibly guilty. I just wanted someone to tell me that it

wasn't my fault," she says. "We had no explanation. I was quite miserable about that."

The couple, from North Balgollah, experienced many months of tears and counselling but found the courage to try again to fulfil their dream to become parents. Just over a year after losing Katrina, they had another little girl, Elana. Her brother Daniel was born last June.

When she fell pregnant the second time, Macaulay was extremely anxious. She waited until having a second scan at 15 weeks before breaking the news to friends and she monitored the baby's movements throughout the pregnancy.

The Macaulays found comfort from other parents who had

suffered similar tragedies after becoming involved in the Stillbirth Foundation, a charity and support group established by Sydney mother Emma Kirkwood.

Kirkwood, from Stanmore, established the Stillbirth Foundation following the death of her second child, Olivia, in July 2002, 36 weeks into her pregnancy.

"It still causes me so much pain that something so perfect could have died," she says. "While living with the grief of my beautiful Olivia, I was not only horrified to learn of the high statistics, but amazed that so little research was being done specifically into stillbirth."

"It's about time stillbirth got the attention. It suddenly seems to be becoming a topic which people can talk about."

The foundation is now part of the driving force behind a new focus on research into stillbirth, which, it is hoped, will help reduce the number of deaths. Nationally, about five in 1000 pregnancies end in stillbirth.

"I had heard of stillbirth, but I thought it was very, very rare," Macaulay says. "I was surprised when I heard the statistics."

Jonathan Morris, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Sydney, says it is an area where medical research has been under-resourced.

"My kids go to a school with about a thousand pupils," he says. "If five of them died, questions would be asked. But stillbirth seems to be something which isn't really in people's consciousness."

Janet Carey, formerly head of research at SIDS and Kids, is now a

member of the new collaboration of clinicians and campaigners called the Australian and New Zealand Stillbirth Alliance (ANZSA).

She says she is now passionate about switching the political and social focus to stillbirth to ensure that vital research gets funding.

"We need to look at the risk factors for stillbirth and we need to look at best clinical practice for women who have had a stillborn baby," she says.

A Brisbane-based perinatal researcher, Vicki Flenady, has studied 700 Australian women with reduced foetal movements and hopes to put together a project to study tens of thousands of women.

A similar study in Norway suggests that around one in five women who have a stillborn baby had previously reported concerns that their baby seemed to be moving less in the womb.

But the study also found that a third of women waited more than 24 hours before reporting concerns about their baby's movement.

The results of another study of 800 women, who had unexplained stillbirths in Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia, are also being analysed by Flenady.

"There has been so little research done in Australia into stillbirth," Macaulay says. "Even if one family is prevented from going through this, that would be enough for us."

Research fundraiser the Stillbirth Foundation is holding a Little Feet Taking Big Steps Ball at the Hilton Sydney on May 5. Contact 0419 995 464 or stillbirthfoundation.org.au

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