

FOCUS

Hangging on to Hope

After losing her first child unexpectedly in late pregnancy, Sally Heppleston has realised her dream of becoming a mother to a living child. She tells BRIGID O'CONNELL how her lost daughter, Hope, will always be part of the family

It would be a callous thing to tell a widow that going out to get a new husband would make everything all right.

Yet Melbourne's Sally Heppleston has been told "countless times" over the past 18 months that having another baby would cure her of the overwhelming grief she carried after losing her first-born during labour.

Since the 30-year-old first told her story to *Sunday Herald Sun* readers in August last year, her silent nights and empty nursery have been replaced by the cries and gurgles of her now five-month-old son.

But the taboos and stereotypes that prompted her and husband Simon to initially tell their story remain — and she says the well-meaning still want to push the stillbirth issue under the carpet.

The couple are learning that you can never replace a human loss.

Grief has become part of the Heppleston family since Hope Angel was stillborn on August 19, 2008 — five days past her due date — when a "lightning strike" hit during early labour after a healthy pregnancy.

And while they are living, loving and growing as a family, their pain will be felt even more this Mother's Day.

They now know that the grief, and the yearning for what could have been, doesn't diminish.

Life, instead, grows around it. "A lot of people will think this is my first Mother's Day, but I was still a mother last year. It was just an invisible motherhood that not a lot of people recognise," Sally says.

"Hope still has a mother and that's me. It's just that she's not here any more."

It was six months after Hope's passing that Sally became pregnant again.

"It got worse for me after the funeral. For others it was a chance to say hello and goodbye, some closure, but I fell into a very deep black hole," she says.

"It was only the hope of another pregnancy that kept me going."

She was met with constant reminders of her loss — when mixing with child-bearing friends, bumping into people who had last seen her with a bulging belly and even when walking past the nursery so meticulously and dotingly set up by her and Simon.

"I couldn't bear to take it down, plus we knew we were going to have another baby," she says.

"We packed a few things away to stop them getting dusty, which was sad enough in itself.

"People think life goes on, but you come home to constant reminders of what could have been."

When Sally returned home



from hospital without her child, and to 12 months' maternity leave in a silent house, she allowed her instincts to direct her path.

"A lot of people questioned why I still took the maternity leave, but I really used that time to make sure I was grieving, almost taking it upon myself as a full-time job," she says.

"I think having done that has been very healthy for me. I

don't think anything's going to come back down the track.

"I'm not over it, but I've processed it thoroughly."

Being around little girls was also especially hard for Sally for quite a while.

"I cut myself off from a lot of people. Being the age that I am, all our friends are having kids and I found it really hard being around pregnant people.

"I made it clear I couldn't see

their babies, that I felt awful for it and that one day I hope I'd be able to.

"Having Angus here now, I don't have much of a choice, but mixing with mother's groups and babies has been nice.

"It's brought that joy back and reminded me that pregnancy and childbirth can be a happy, joyous thing."

The statistics on stillbirth are shocking and they swirled



Tears and joy: Clockwise from left — Sally and Simon Heppleston when pregnant with Angus; the *Sunday Herald Sun*'s story last August; Sally with Angus during the week; Sally holds Hope's hand.

Bottom picture by Gavin Blue, of the Australian Community of Child Photographers (www.acocp.org.au). These photographers donate their services to families with children who are stillborn, premature and ill.



around in Sally's head as she spent those second nine months "terrified".

About 2000 babies from 20 weeks' gestation die each year in Australia.

The second time around, Sally made sure she was as prepared as she could be, with extra medical check-ups and monitoring.

"There were no increased risks of anything going wrong

again, but I lived those nine months in fear thinking it was going to happen again," she says.

ANGUS'S birth was everything Hope's was supposed to be.

But even up to the final minutes before holding her son for the first time, Sally could not enjoy the moment.

"I remember lying on the table for the caesarean, waiting for

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Picture: NICOLE GARMSTON

them to do it, thinking there's moments to go and I'm still terrified," she says.

"I couldn't relax until I heard him cry — and that was a special moment."

She fondly remembers the tender rituals of her first birth — the first cuddle, the first bath, dressing her tiny body in the first outfit — all loving acts they performed with Hope in the first and last 24 hours they had with her.

"But this time with Angus it was everything it was supposed to be with her.

"Some people found it morbid that we did those things with her, but it's not like we had a plan, it just felt the right thing to do."

Her second birth went to plan and 15 months after Hope's passing, Angus was born two weeks early on November 17, 2009 weighing 3.94kg.

Sally says talking and educating mothers-to-be about the one in 140 pregnancies that end in a stillbirth will help families be prepared.

"You don't want to burst people's bubble because it's a happy, exciting time, but it will never be like that again for me because I've seen the other side of it," she says.

"People think something went wrong in my pregnancy, that it wasn't healthy, but it was a lightning strike at the last minute.

"Most think it's best just swept under the carpet."

She wants the topic given a proper airing in pre-natal

classes, discussed openly by midwives and doctors and written about it in books for expectant mothers.

But most of all, Sally wants women to take charge and demand the care they believe they deserve.

"Don't let midwives and doctors palm you off as being an

over-anxious first-time mother. I think that happens a lot," she says.

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SALLY HEPPLESTON

over-anxious first-time mother. I think that happens a lot," she says.

"If people are worried about anything, don't feel silly about ringing up or fronting up and asking for help and not leaving until you get it.

"Trust your instincts. It's your baby and it's your body."

Obedying hospital orders once contractions had started, Sally says she was told for three days to stay at home until she had dilated further.

It was an infection she picked up in those days that sealed Hope's fate.

"In that last day (at home) I started to think, 'This doesn't feel right. Why isn't the labour progressing?'"

"But I kept being told to stay at home, go for a walk around the block or have a bath to relax.

"If more people were aware

that stillbirths are so common I probably would have insisted on staying in hospital."

Sally is conscious of preserving Hope's place in the family, even if outsiders are not always comfortable about it.

Her daughter's name sits in silver curvature script around her neck.

Professional portrait photos of the perfectly-formed baby hang on the living room walls.

"A lot of people see Angus as our first baby, but he is our first living baby," she says.

"If someone asks I generally tell them.

"People get put off when I say I've got two kids — I explain if I'm pushed further — but that's their issue.

"My story is my story. If it upsets people... well, it's upsetting for me to live with it every day."

SALLY's mother made donations to Oxfam and the Stillbirth Foundation in lieu of a Christmas present for Hope.

"I certainly remember the nine months of carrying her, and so do our family," Sally says. "I feel like if I don't mention, don't include her, it's doing her a disservice."

Knowing the right thing to say, saying the wrong thing or saying nothing at all has severed many of the couple's friendships.

"I was really hard to be around for a time because I was so grief stricken.

"It took about five months before I was ready for people

again and some people who said they'd be there had moved on when I was ready to let people in again.

"They didn't understand the intensity and amount of grief.

"You spend nine months so excited — I was the happiest I've ever been waiting for this baby, until the moment it fell apart.

"I felt a lot of shame and horrible guilt that I couldn't bring this baby into the world alive; as a woman you have this role to do."

Life has lightened and is slowly getting easier for the trio. The cheeky, giggling Angus is keeping life busy, while also being a constant reminder of their loss.

"It's all those joys you missed out on, but now we're here we realise how hard it really is," Sally says.

"We've been so busy, so it's

been hard to include Hope more. It's similar with a second baby — it's hard to give the toddler as much attention."

Mother's Day will be forever bittersweet for Sally and Simon, a constant reminder of having some children here and one not.

"We spent last Mother's Day at the cemetery — it was pretty horrific," she remembers.

"There were a lot of people there visiting their mothers.

But I think there's probably a lot of mothers there who have lost babies and children.

"You feel that pull to spend the day with all your children.

"We're moving on, but we're not over it. I'm pretty guarded these days. I sort of had to

rebuild myself from the ground up. She died and the person I was died with her.

"All the hopes and dreams we had for Hope in terms of what she would do, where we would take her to school, what we would do with her, they all carry on for Angus, they weren't specific for her.

"I hope that it's a natural thing where he grows up learning about her, seeing pictures and it just evolves.

"I want him to know there was someone who came before him, who was equally loved.

"My two babies are still the biggest thing in my life. It's just that one's here and one's not."

THE SAD FACTS

STILLBIRTH Foundation Australia is a parent-driven charity, which aims to increase awareness about stillbirth and raise money for medical research into the condition.

A STILLBIRTH occurs when a baby dies while still in its mother's womb and can occur between 20 weeks and just before birth.

THERE are more than 2000 stillbirths in Australia each year, with the rate of unexplained stillbirth 10 times more common than SIDS deaths.

AUSTRALIAN Institute of Health and Welfare Figures show one baby is stillborn for every 134 live births.

THE rate of stillbirth in Australia has remained steady for the past decade.

THE cause of up to half of all stillbirths remains unknown.

ACCORDING to research, obesity, a maternal age 35 and above and smoking are risk factors for stillbirth.

Source: Stillbirth Foundation Australia, www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au