

New Hope

Three years after the devastating deaths of their two children, Carmen and Bob Pack are rebuilding

By Darcy Brown-Martin

On a mild evening this past September, Bob Pack stood before a crowd of 275 guests gathered in the ballroom of the Blackhawk Country Club. Dressed in khakis and a polo shirt, he welcomed the crowd to the second biannual golf tournament and auction in support of the Troy and Alana Pack Foundation. Then he told the participants that he wanted to thank a few people. But rather than nod boilerplate acknowledgements to official sponsors, Bob turned to his wife.

"The person I need to recognize first is the most special person in my world, and that's my wife, Carmen," he said, his soft voice wavering. "She's been through a tremendous ordeal, and I want to recognize her determination and thank her for everything she's done to bring our beautiful baby into the world." At the head table, Carmen Pack stood up, smiling broadly and holding aloft a round-cheeked three-month-old girl with an alert gaze, a cheerful gurgle, and a tiny bow clinging precariously to a few wisps of light brown hair.

Now Bob, trying to hold back tears, introduced the couple's new daughter, Noelle Corinne Pack—born, rather fittingly, on Memorial Day of 2006. The audience responded with a prolonged ovation. For nearly three years, the Packs had been struggling to come to terms with the loss of their children, 10-year-old Troy and seven-year-old Alana. They were killed in 2003 by a substance-abusing driver in what became a nationally publicized accident. Fighting through what Bob called unbelievable loneliness and emptiness, the couple has doggedly striven to regain a foothold in the day-to-day world and become, once again, a family.

"It's never going to be the way it was," says Carmen, a 46-year-old former model whose English is still inflected with the sounds of her native Peruvian Spanish. "We're going to have part of our hearts broken forever. But we're trying to create a normal family life again. Noelle makes that possible."

In October 2003, the Packs' world was shattered. As Carmen and her two children headed down the sidewalk of Danville's Camino Tassajara, an out-of-control vehicle jumped the curb. Troy and Alana were both killed, and Troy's scooter and Alana's bicycle were hurled into the air, one of which smashed into their mother's legs. The driver, 45-year-old Colombian-born Jimena Barreto, was on her way, ironically enough, to work at a job as a nanny. Instead of staying at the scene of the crime, she fled.

In the period following the disaster, the Packs left home only for their children's funeral and to talk to police. Neither Carmen nor Bob felt psychologically capable of driving a car for weeks.

When *Diablo* profiled the couple a year later, they were still deeply embattled. Both were suffering from suicidal thoughts, recurring nightmares, and incapacitating depression. Carmen, already at an age when pregnancy can be elusive and difficult, had repeatedly failed in a compulsive effort to get pregnant again. Bob, then 47, had left his technology industry job after the accident and had never gone back to work. Their primary occupations were running the Troy and Alana Pack Foundation—which they had created to commemorate their children and support local programs for other kids—and lobbying the Contra Costa County District Attorney to press for second-degree murder charges in Barreto's criminal trial.

Because Barreto had eluded police for two days after the hit-and-run, there had been no opportunity to test her for drugs or alcohol. Without conclusive test results, the district attorney would ordinarily have had to pursue a charge of manslaughter. But Barreto's police record showed that on the night of the collision, she had been driving with a suspended license—and that she had been convicted four times previously of DUI and reckless driving. With this in mind, Bob became consumed with bringing the heavier charge of second-degree murder against her.

Beyond those pursuits, the Packs were just trying to bear the engulfing darkness in their emotional lives through a combination of Catholic faith, family and community support, and antidepressant medications. Bob was evolving, unexpectedly, into an activist, successfully working with state senators to strengthen DUI laws. Carmen was methodically reviewing all available avenues that might allow her and Bob to have another biological child—clinging fervently to the hope that they might, somehow, become parents again.

By the summer of 2004, Carmen and Bob were considering finding an egg donor and going through in vitro fertilization. They wanted Carmen to be able to carry a fetus created with Bob's genetic material. According to Carmen's now 22-year-old niece, Pamela, it was Carmen's older sister in Lima, where Pamela also lived, who decided that Pamela was the right egg donor. "Aunt

Caaro was very gruff with me. She just said, 'Pamela, you're going to have a baby for your Aunt Carmen!' " explains Pamela, who has since married and now lives in San Ramon with her American husband, Joshua Burns, and their child, Alexia. "At first I didn't know what I was being asked to do. Then when they explained it, I was very excited."

It seemed an ideal solution. Pamela, who had grown up constantly hearing how much her thick, dark hair and wide smile made her resemble Carmen, was thrilled about traveling to the United States and helping her aunt and uncle. Bob and Carmen were elated to think they might be able to have more children who carried at least some of Carmen's familial DNA. But there were obstacles ahead.

The U.S. Embassy in Peru initially denied Pamela a visa, stating that she was unlikely to return to Peru; the government relented only after Representative Tom Lantos (D-San Mateo/San Francisco) intervened. Pamela arrived in Danville in October 2004. What she found was a house engulfed in sorrow.

In order to create guest quarters for Pamela, the Packs had cleared Troy's room, haphazardly squeezing his dresser, bedding, sports pennants, and trophies into Alana's adjacent room amid her Beanie Babies, SpongeBob posters, and little-girl sparkle makeup. Then they simply shut the door to Alana's room and carried on in a sort of fog.

"When I first arrived," Pamela says, "my Uncle Bob was just not present. You could talk to him, and you'd realize that he was looking at you but hadn't heard a word. Once, we were going to Safeway, which is a few blocks from their house, and we wound up miles down the road. After a while, he shook himself and said, 'Where were we going?' His mind was somewhere else entirely. And Aunt Carmen wasn't much better off. She was always reading books about heaven and angels. She disappeared into them."

After Pamela and Carmen both underwent preparatory hormone injections, Pamela's eggs were harvested and fertilized. In January 2005, two of the resulting embryos were transferred to Carmen, and they grew into healthy male fetuses. But in May, just two weeks after Carmen went through the agonizing process of testifying at Barreto's trial—which concluded with Barreto being convicted of two counts of second-degree murder—the twins' amniotic sacs developed irreparable tears. Carmen was forced to terminate the pregnancy to avoid the certainty of infection and the possibility of losing her uterus.

Bob says of that period, "It was a terrible time. We were completely worn out. Carmen was in the hospital for a week, so we were just living there. And after she was released, we had to have another funeral, for the twins. We buried them with Troy and Alana."

Where others might have given up, the grief-weary Packs soldiered on. Carmen waited just a few months before attempting another in vitro fertilization. In August 2005, doctors transferred two more embryos, and one of these implanted, promising new life again. But three months later, while Carmen was attending an afternoon mass at St. Joan of Arc in Danville, she began hemorrhaging and was soon diagnosed with a placental rupture. She was put on complete bed rest for the remaining six months of her pregnancy. "I couldn't do anything," she recalls. "But that pregnancy was my priority. Nothing else was more important."

When Bob wasn't ferrying take-out meals to his wife, he was channeling some of his own anxiety-produced energy into thinking about how lawmakers might enact a statewide prescription drug—monitoring program. As had been the case with his push to strengthen DUI laws, he felt compelled to try to remedy a specific system failure that could have contributed to his children's deaths.

"During the trial, it came out that [Barreto], who had no injuries but who admitted in the police report to having taken multiple pain pills on the day of the accident, had gone to six different doctors through her HMO and obtained hundreds and hundreds of Vicodin tablets over the years," Bob explains. "I was so disheartened by that. The doctors had had no good way of checking medical records. So I met with Senator Tom Torlakson (D-Antioch), and he agreed to write a state senate bill mandating that all doctors in California report to the Department of Justice every time they wrote a prescription for a narcotic drug. That would lay the groundwork for a system that would allow doctors and pharmacies to share prescription information online, in real time."

The Packs' best hope for rebuilding as a family arrived on May 29. A few hours before sunrise, Carmen—who said in 2004 that she was "born to be a mom"—had a short and uneventful labor, and gave birth to healthy, 9.8-pound Noelle. These days, Carmen rarely sets the baby down, and when she does take a well-deserved break (Noelle has been gaining weight nicely through a combination of nursing and bottle-feeding), Bob is at hand to hold their daughter, a half-smile playing under his mustache. Carmen says repeatedly, "Noelle never wants to be out of my arms. I can't put her down for a second." But it's clear (and hardly surprising) that it is Noelle's parents who are hard-pressed to let go.

Both Carmen and Bob are aware of the likelihood that they could become overprotective parents. "I think I was protective before," Carmen says. "I will probably be even more so now." Bob admits that it will be nerve-racking to try and let Noelle become a normal child: "We always thought we did a good job of being watchful while still letting the kids be outside, playing, on the go. It will be tough not to be too conscientious this time."

And, of course, although Noelle is fundamental to Bob and Carmen's tentative new sense of peace, signs of the couple's enduring grief are still clearly present. Bob has tried several times over the past three years to stop taking antidepressants but has felt each time that he needed to go back on them. He and Carmen still cannot bring themselves to visit Bob's parents' home

in Saratoga, which before the deaths of Alana and Troy was a wonderful—but now painfully reminiscent—family gathering place. Everyone hopes that, with time, this will ease.

Even in the Packs' own home, Alana's room has remained untouched since 2004, when Carmen and Bob squeezed in Troy's furniture and belongings to make room for Pamela. "I didn't feel strong enough to do more than that," Carmen says. "Alana's drawers are unchanged, with all her clothing, her socks, and underwear folded just the way she left [them]. Their laundry baskets are still full of the clothes they wore in the last days before the accident. I don't know when I'll have the strength to move those things."

Perhaps Noelle herself will inspire—or insist upon—changes someday. For the time being, she sleeps in a small space adjoining the master bedroom; Carmen and Bob can see her crib from their bed. The room is stuffed with gifts: a handmade quilt with a picture of Troy and Alana stitched in the middle, a wooden sign reading "Dreams do come true," a letter-learning book based on Noelle's name. Carmen, pulling this book out to show a visitor, inadvertently calls it "Alana's book." Bob corrects her, gently but quickly.

A few weeks after the Troy and Alana Pack Memorial Golf Classic in September, says family friend Alyson Colton, who cochaired the event, "We decided that this would be the last such effort for a while. We did very well; we raised about \$75,000," which will help bring programs about drunk driving and substance abuse to high school kids. "But we didn't get anywhere near the response we had the first time we did this, which was within a year of the accident. I think that's because some people may have moved on.

"Bob still has a passion for making a difference in the community," Colton says. "I don't see that dwindling. If we need to get back to fundraising in a few years to continue to support these groups, we will. But for the time being, he has other things to focus on."

In October, Bob brought out the first project he has undertaken since 2003 that has no direct relation to his children's deaths: He launched Sproose, a startup company that creates personalized Internet search technology. Although Bob's team is tiny (just seven engineers) and it faces Goliath-sized competition (Google is just one of several large companies now offering personal-preference weighting as an option for search results), Bob is unmistakably thrilled. "I'm really excited," he says, his face breaking into a relaxed smile. "It will be a full-time thing for me. I'm so glad to have something positiveto work on."

Meanwhile, the Packs are mentally preparing, with some trepidation, for another in vitro process. There are still four frozen embryos created from Pamela's donated eggs in storage at the San Ramon Reproductive Science Center. The plan is to use two of them to do another transfer this coming May, when Noelle is a year old. "It's not easy to go through all that in vitro stuff," says Carmen. "And being pregnant at my age—well, it's definitely not the same. But we're older parents, so it seems even more important to me that Noelle has a sibling. I know how much Troy and Alana supported each other."

As it turns out, Noelle has a biological half sister who is just two months younger—her cousin, Alexia. Carmen's niece Pamela got pregnant shortly after her aunt became pregnant with Noelle. Both the Packs and the Burnses expect their daughters to grow up as great friends and plan to fully explain to them the circumstances of their intertwined family when they are old enough to understand.

All the same, Carmen is resolute about wanting another child. "I want one more, for Noelle as well as for us."

As the Packs rebuild, the one thing they try to avoid thinking about is Barreto, who is serving 30 years to life at the Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla and who filed an appeal last June for which she is awaiting a hearing date. When thoughts of her or the accident do intrude, Bob says, "I just—oh, God, I get so angry, so frustrated; I just have to shut it down. I think about the moment when she got into her car—all the things that could have been just slightly different, that could have changed the whole event, our whole lives."

When Carmen feels down, she says, "I just look into Noelle's eyes. She's a source of strength for me. Now I know that you don't know what lies ahead. Life is so fragile. But I also see, when I look at Noelle, that miracles can happen."

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