

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Pack family welcomes baby girl

By Linda Davis
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DANVILLE - A wailing newborn was music to Bob and Carmen Pack's ears as their baby arrived early this morning, bringing new joy and hope to the couple whose tragedies have been shared with the world.

Noelle Corinne Pack came on the due date, at 4:45 a.m., 21 1/2 inches long, weighing in at a robust 9 pounds 8 ounces. She also has a healthy set of lungs.

"She's a whopper, and she's very loud," kidded the Packs' doctor, Paula Melone, this morning at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek. Carmen had been in labor only about three hours before she gave birth the standard way.

As the past nine months ticked by, Bob, 49, and Carmen, 46, let build their hope of having a family again. They lost both their children -- 10-year-old Troy and 7-year-old Alana -- in October 2003. The two were struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver as they walked with their mom in their Danville neighborhood.

As Carmen cradled her newborn daughter in her arms This morning, her husband bent down and gently kissed the baby, adjusting her little cap.

"I am still feeling like this isn't real," Bob Pack said, weary but grinning. "Things happened fast and went very smoothly. One minute she was in the tummy, and the next minute she was breathing on her own."

Mother and baby are doing great, Melone said. By mid-afternoon, friends, family and the media were taking turns crowding into the hospital room for a glimpse of the infant that many called "everybody's baby."

The couple's initial tragedy, and their attempts to rebuild their family, rallied the community.

"The community has been through so much with them," said Alyson Colton of Danville. "We cried with them and mourned" the death of Troy and Alana. "It changed all our lives."

The Packs' story unfolded publicly, first with the death of the children, and soon after when they announced they had formed a foundation for traffic and child safety. They lobbied legislators for tougher DUI laws, and succeeded in helping get them passed.

In 2004, they invited the community to share their joy when Carmen became pregnant with twin boys. And everyone shared the pain when Carmen lost the fetuses at five months.

Trying again, the couple became pregnant by in-vitro fertilization with Noelle.

Carmen's Peruvian niece Pamela was the egg donor for both pregnancies. Thwarted at first by the US State Department, which refused entry to the 19-year-old, intervention by legislators familiar with the Packs' story enabled Pamela to come in October 2004.

"I wanted to help my aunt," Pamela said about her determination to donate eggs so Carmen could have a child.

Added Colton, who threw a blockbuster baby shower for Carmen in April, "For all of us, this baby exemplifies hope."

Colton became friends with Carmen after the 2003 accident, visiting her each Thursday along with other friends. Their children were in the same classes at school.

"It was whatever she wanted to do ... go out to lunch, just sit and talk. We wouldn't take no for an answer. We fell in love with this couple," Colton said.

Colton and the tight little support group she formed were in court each day of the trial of hit-and-run driver Jimena Barreto, who was convicted of second-degree murder and is serving 30 years to life in prison. On Carmen's first Mother's Day after the deaths, the friends took her to the Claremont Hotel for lunch and spa treatments.

Throughout, strangers and friends have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Packs.

On holidays, particularly Mother's Day, cards and flowers from strangers arrive on the Packs' doorstep.

A financial advisor at a local bank asked Colton one day, "Do you know the Packs?" Tearful, the banker said she wanted to help. Colton suggested she call Carmen, who was undergoing in-vitro, because the banker had had the same procedure. A bond developed between Carmen and the banker, and she was invited to the shower.

Last year, Carmen lost the twin boy fetuses. A severe infection and the strain of the trial -- where she had to relive the night her children died -- are believed to have been the cause.

Carmen was brought to tears at her recent shower when she unwrapped a quilt from neighbor Anna Wexler. In its center is a picture of Troy and Alana.

"I wanted to do something really special for this wonderful couple," Wexler said. "I did not want it to be a sad thing for Carmen, but comforting to think that Troy and Alana were watching over the new baby."

Wexler and those who have gotten to know the Packs say their grace and courage are an inspiration.

"The whole community has really been brought together by Bob and Carmen," said Danville Councilman Newell Arnerich.

They have taught others that despite tragedy, "Positive things come out. We (got) to know two people with the biggest hearts who opened up their emotions and gave us a new view of how communities should interact to solve problems," Arnerich said.

Recently, as they do often, the Packs went to Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Lafayette to visit the graves of their four "little angels." There are buried Troy and Alana and the twin fetuses -- whose tiny handprints are imprinted on the gravestone.

"I love coming to the cemetery," Carmen said. "This is where Bob and I will be too, someday. We find comfort coming here. They were my cuties."

As an epilogue, Pamela -- Carmen's niece who donated the eggs -- met and married Josh Burns of Danville, and is expecting her own daughter. Pamela's baby and little Noelle will be half-sisters, and someday their parents will explain how it all transpired.

Even Melone, Carmen's physician, has a stake in this baby. Melone recently married, and her husband moved to Illinois. But the good doctor vowed to stay until this baby was safely delivered.

"I promised," Melone said during a recent pre-natal office visit, as she moved the sonogram wand over Carmen's stomach for the couple to see an image of the growing baby.

"Look! There is a leg and a foot," Melone said. "She's in position and ready to roll."

Danville Councilwoman Candace Andersen, the mother of six, had an explanation as to why the Packs have touched so many people.

"Their story gives people in the community hope there is a brighter day."

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