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Ranks of moms older than 40 are growing

RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER, Star Tribune

Sheryl Tuorila Jorgensen — with 20-month-old son Finn in their garden in Brooklyn Park — always wanted to have children. She finally became a mother at age 42, one of a growing number of women becoming first-time mothers in their 40s.

The number of babies born to women 40 or older has more than doubled since 1990, to nearly 2,000 a year in Minnesota and more than 100,000 nationally, according to government reports.

By **MAURA LERNER**, Star Tribune

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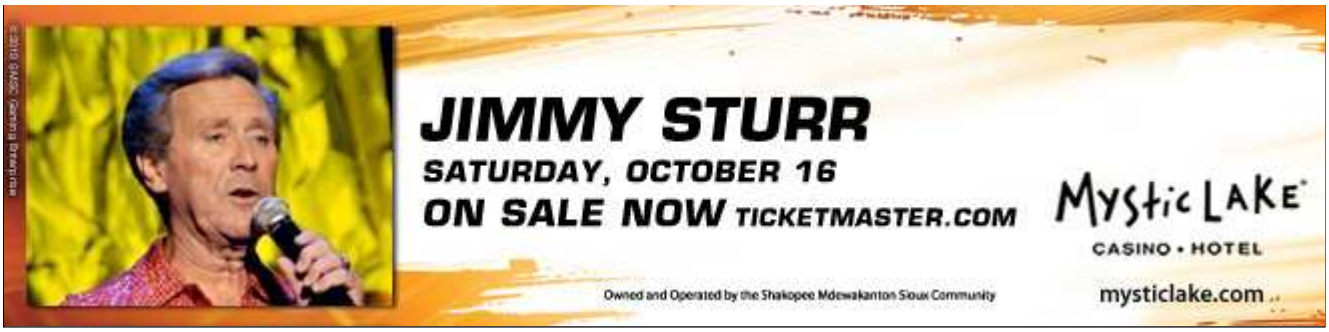
Sheryl Tuorila Jorgensen thought she'd get pregnant right away when she got married at age 35. Having a baby was the main reason, she said, that she and her husband, Jeff, decided to tie the knot after six years together.

"We never thought it would be a problem," she said.

In fact, it would take eight more years before she gave birth to son Finn in 2008, just two weeks shy of her 43rd birthday -- and became part of the fastest-growing subset of new mothers: women over 40.

Nationally, birth rates have been falling for every age group but one: older moms. The number of babies born to women 40 or older h as more than doubled since 1990, to nearly 2,000 a year in Minnesota and more than 100,000 nationally, according to government reports.

In some ways, parenthood doesn't look much different from the far side of 40. They're just as sleep-deprived, overwhelmed and awe-struck as new parents half their age.



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But after waiting for this moment for so long, they also face a kind of stigma, some say: a nagging sense that society doesn't approve of their choice.

"They are considered to be selfish," said Angel La Liberte, founder of FlowerPowerMom.com, a California advocacy group for "motherhood after 40."

The criticism, she said, is "that they put their career first, that having children was an afterthought ... and that's just not how we all got there." Even among other mothers, they o ften feel isolated, she said. At preschools and play groups, younger moms -- she calls them "mommy cliques" -- often ignore the older ones, as though they don't really belong there.

For this Mother's Day, La Liberte has launched a campaign called "Celebrating Midlife Motherhood 2010" to inspire this growing group of older moms to, in her words, "wear it with pride instead of hiding in the closet."

Jorgensen, for one, said she noticed the quizzical looks when she was pregnant at 42. "A lot of people would say, 'Oh is this your first?'" the Brooklyn Park resident said. "I'd go, 'Yeah.' I'd kind of notice that some people were speechless for a second."

Monica Kremer of Bloomington braced for the comments when she and her husband adopted their daughter, Kylie, now 14 months old. Occasionally, Kremer, 45, would hear: "Oh, is this your granddaughter?"

But she laughs it off. "Some people are becoming more sensitive, like, 'Oh, and who is this? And you are related to her how?'"

Like many older first-time moms, Kremer never expected to wait until now to be changing diapers. By the time she met her husband, Brian, they were both in their 30s. After trying to conceive, they decided to adopt -- and waited four more years to bring Kylie home.

"I always imagined myself being a mom," said Kremer, a global sales executive for Delta Air Lines. "I guess I was imagining myself with the two children and dog and white picket fence. But life really isn't how you imagine it to be sometimes."

Gradual shift

The average age that women have their first child has been creeping up for decades -- from 21 in 1970 to 25 in 2006, U.S. statistics

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show. It's a trend that has been fueled by equal parts medical science and lifestyle choices.

On the front end, many women delay marriage and childbirth to finish college and start careers. On the back end, they rely on advances in fertility treatments to overcome the limits of Mother Nature. Today, some women in their 50s and even 60s give birth with the help of donor eggs and high-tech treatments.

That's one reason people tend to recoil at older moms, said La Liberte. "There's [an] almost Frankenstein effect around the whole idea of science meddling with nature," she said.

Yet even when they have kids the old-fashioned way, "midlife mothers" often find themselves on the defensive, said La Liberte, 49, who has a 7-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter. Doctors and nurses treat them with suspicion, she said, because of the risks of childbirth past 40.

"There's a lot of fear-mongering," she said, adding that she was "just terrified" that something might go wrong during her p regnancy at age 44. "As soon as you walk in the [clinic] door, you sense it," she said. "You feel like you've suddenly become this frightening health risk."

Of course, there's good reason for that, said Linda Hammer Burns, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota's Reproductive Medicine Center. "They are a walking time-bomb, but they don't want to hear it," she said.

Past 40, women are at much higher risk for pregnancy-related complications, and their children are at higher risk for birth defects.

And down the road, she said, there's the prospect of coping with teenagers while approaching retirement. "There's a lot of avoidance of looking at the possible negatives of this," Burns said. "Some people say, 'I don't want to think about that.'... Other people say, 'It won't happen to me.'"

Youth vs. wisdom

At the same time, older moms say there are advantages to their maturity.

"What they lack in youth, they balance with life experience, wisdom," said La Liberte. "You understand mortality. You value time. You understand what's important."

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Jorgensen, an artist, admits that she wasn't prepared for how thoroughly the birth of son Finn would change her life. She remembers locking eyes with her husband as she fed their newborn one day. "Our hair's crazy. We haven't slept a wink. There was this look we exchanged. It was like, 'Oh my God, what have we gotten into?'

"Our peaceful life completely changed, you know, in such a wonderful way. But it was really shocking."

One fear, she admits, is how she'll keep up with Finn when he's 8 and "running around like a crazy maniac. ... I'll be in my 50s!" Still, she says, "I just think it's such an amazing gift." Not just for her, but for her mother, Nancy Tuorila, who finally became a grandmother in her 60s. "She's so excited," Jorgensen said.

Kremer, too, says her daughter's arrival has opened her eyes in ways she never expected. She and her husband, Brian, are more conscious about taking care of themselves, too, so they can treasure life with their daughter.

"You read Mother's Day poems, and they actually have meaning," she said. "Before, they were really sweet poems. But now they stab me in the heart and I can't stop crying.

"You're just so thankful that you actually have become a mother. And until you do, you can't understand it."

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