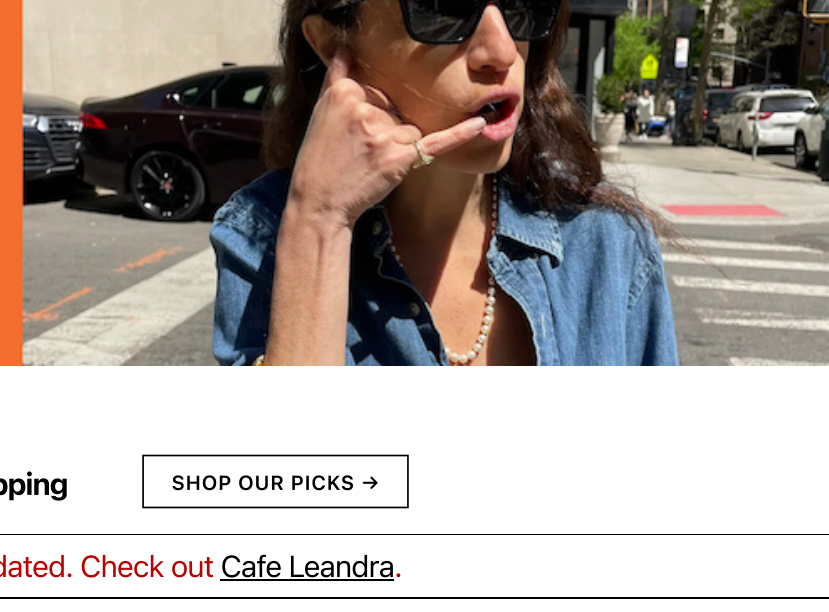




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ARCHIVE

What Surprised Me About Being a Surrogate Mother

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BY HARLING ROSS

This month on Man Repeller we're delving into the inner-workings of all types of families, from actual blood relatives to those of the chosen variety. Leia Swanberg, the Founder and CEO of [Canadian Fertility Consulting](#), is someone whose work and personal life touches multiple iterations of what a modern family looks like. I spoke with her about her experience with surrogacy (wherein a woman agrees to carry a pregnancy for another person or couple), both as a surrogate mother herself and as a business owner who helps connect surrogates with couples who want to be parents. Below, her story.

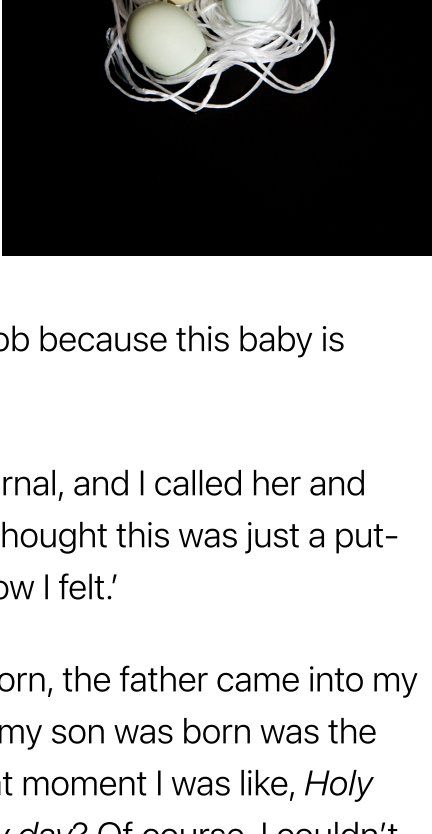
On her family life and personal experience with surrogacy

I live with a blended family of six. My husband had one son from a previous relationship, and I have five daughters, one of whom I gave up for adoption as a teenager, but she made her way back into my life.

I've been a surrogate twice. The first time was 14 years ago, and the second about a year after that, which was a twin pregnancy. Giving up a child for [adoption](#) at the age of 16 definitely played a role in this decision. I remember being pregnant my sophomore year of high school and seeing one of those signs in the counselor's office that said, "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." It still makes me emotional to think about: being 16 and [pregnant](#) and having no idea how that would impact my future career and [journey](#).

I gave birth to my daughter Alana, and her adoptive parents were there with me in the delivery room. I think a part of me knew subconsciously at the time that giving parents a child they weren't able to have on their own would be something I was meant to do again.

Fifteen years later, I became a surrogate to the most amazing couple. The mother was a kindergarten teacher, and together we decided to keep journals and record our experiences throughout the pregnancy and exchange them when the baby was born. When I finally opened hers, it was filled with poems written in beautiful kindergarten teacher writing. Every line was an outpouring of gratitude. Meanwhile mine were covered in coffee stains and sticky handprints from little kids and filled with a lot of, "I fucking hate my life," "I'm so sick today," "This is horrible," "I hope I'm doing a good job because this baby is killing me." Just real pregnancy stuff. *Real*.



I finished reading the intended mother's journal, and I called her and said, 'Is this really how you felt?' Because I thought this was just a put-on, and she said, 'Every single day, this is how I felt.'

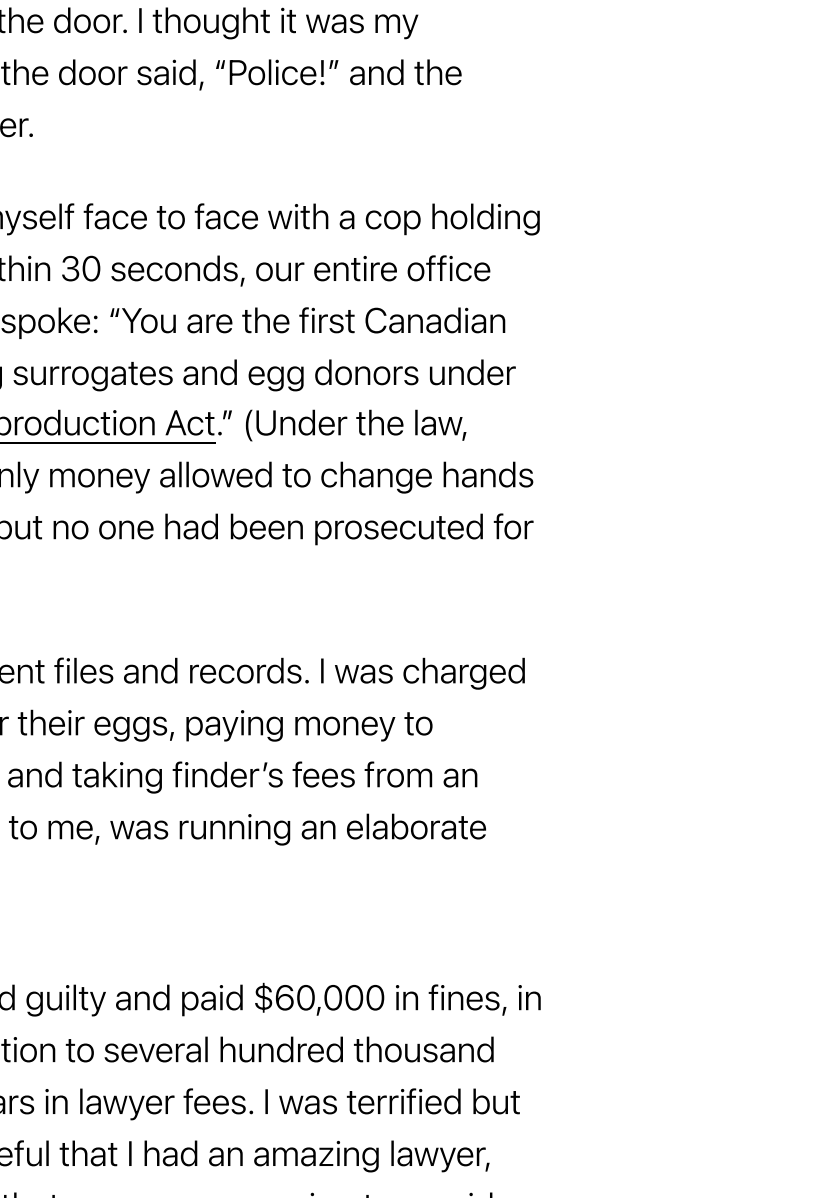
In the hospital, after the couple's son was born, the father came into my room and said, "Thank you. The night after my son was born was the first time I've truly slept in nine years." In that moment I was like, *Holy fuck, what is this and how do I do this every day?* Of course, I couldn't be a surrogate again immediately because I had just had a baby, so I became an egg donor in the meantime.

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On starting her own fertility agency...and getting arrested

After my second successful surrogacy experience, I decided I wanted to start my own full-service fertility and egg donation agency. I founded Canadian Fertility Consulting with a \$500 loan from my now ex-husband. At the time, he told me I had 30 days to pay him back or else it was a [hobby](#), not a business. That didn't end up being a problem. I had a steady intake of one or two clients a month, and before I knew it, I had hit the five-year mark.

Then one day, there was a knock at the door. I thought it was my landlord playing a joke. The voice at the door said, "Police!" and the knocks kept getting louder and louder.

I went to open the door and found myself face to face with a cop holding a gun and pointing it at my head. Within 30 seconds, our entire office was full of cops. Finally one of them spoke: "You are the first Canadian agency to be investigated for paying surrogates and egg donors under Canada's 2004 [Assisted Human Reproduction Act](#)." (Under the law, reimbursement of expenses is the only money allowed to change hands between parents and surrogates — but no one had been prosecuted for it before.)

They seized all of our computers, client files and records. I was charged with paying money to egg donors for their eggs, paying money to surrogates for contract pregnancies and taking finder's fees from an American lawyer who, unbeknownst to me, was running an elaborate baby-selling ring.

I pled guilty and paid \$60,000 in fines, in addition to several hundred thousand dollars in lawyer fees. I was terrified but grateful that I had an amazing lawyer, and that my case was going to provide much-needed clarity about a law in Canada that made little sense. There's a quote in the court transcript from the judge who ruled on the case where he essentially said, "The work she does is so important. Let her pay the \$60,000 fine and continue to work."

So I did. I sought input from another lawyer who specialized in Canadian health legislation. He advised me on how to adapt my business to function within legal parameters and I was finally able to get things up and running again. I was worried I would never get another client after going through all of that, but as it turned out, the opposite was true. Because I was under a microscope, and the government was watching me, people felt safe. The agency grew from a staff of four to 20 in that first year, and continued to grow afterward.

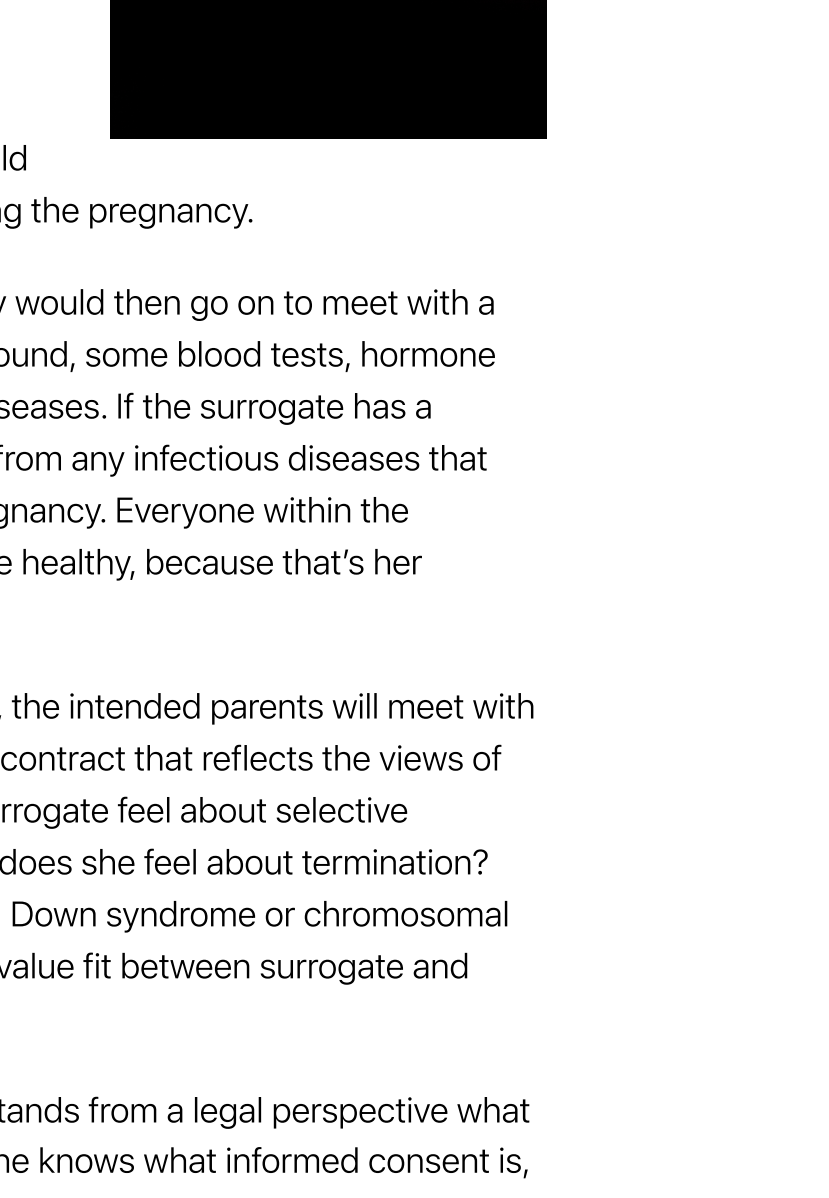
My case gave me a lot of great publicity, too. Couples [struggling to conceive](#) read about it in the news and all they saw was: they have surrogates, they have egg donors. The wait time in Canada for getting matched with a surrogate is typically a year and a half, but the wait time at Canadian Fertility Consulting has always been three months.

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On vetting potential surrogates

Intaking a new surrogate is all about figuring her out. A lot of women who sign up for surrogacy are "yes" people. They just want to help everybody. And it's like, *Okay, well, let's think about this critically and map out what that looks like for you: Who exactly do you want to help, and how do you want to help them?*

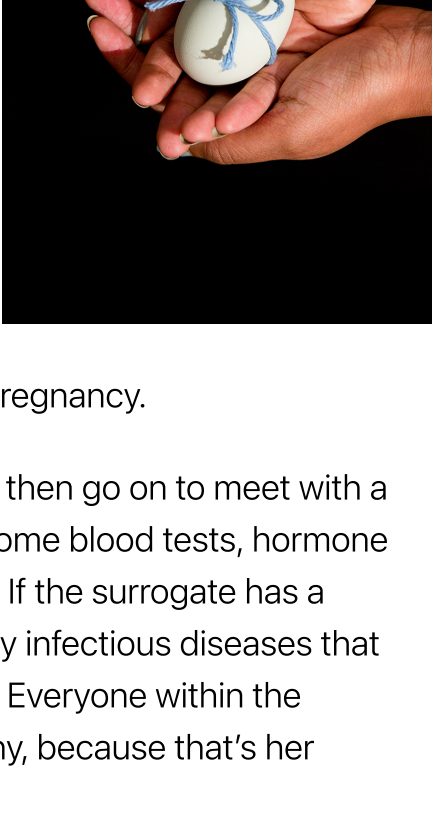
In answering that question, some surrogates come to us and say, "I'm here because my sister has cancer and isn't able to have a child. They've decided to be childless but I'd like to help another cancer survivor." And we'll say, great, we have a couple in mind.

Others say, "My brother is gay, and he's 20, so he's not ready to have a child yet, but I'd love to help a gay couple become a family."

Or sometimes, "I am a single mom of four by choice and used a sperm donor to help me have my kids, so I'd like to help a single mom."

Some women want a really close relationship with the child and family after the birth; others don't want any contact.

After the intake process, potential surrogates are required to provide medical records with proof they already have children of their own, an indication that they can carry a healthy baby to term. Agencies will also ask for a criminal record check to ensure that applicants don't have any criminal history or pending charges that would cause them to be incarcerated during the pregnancy.



If they pass those initial checks, they would then go on to meet with a fertility specialist and have an ultrasound, some blood tests, hormone level tests and tests for infectious diseases. If the surrogate has a partner he or she must also be free from any infectious diseases that could be transmitted during the pregnancy. Everyone within the surrogate's social structure has to be healthy, because that's her support system.

Once medical clearance is provided, the intended parents will meet with a lawyer to begin putting together a contract that reflects the views of everyone involved: How does the surrogate feel about selective reduction if the embryo splits? How does she feel about termination? Would she terminate if the fetus had Down syndrome or chromosomal abnormalities? Ensuring a common value fit between surrogate and parents is crucial.

We make sure the surrogate understands from a legal perspective what she's committing to, ensuring that she knows what informed consent is, what informed medical consent is and that she really is an active participant in this legal process.

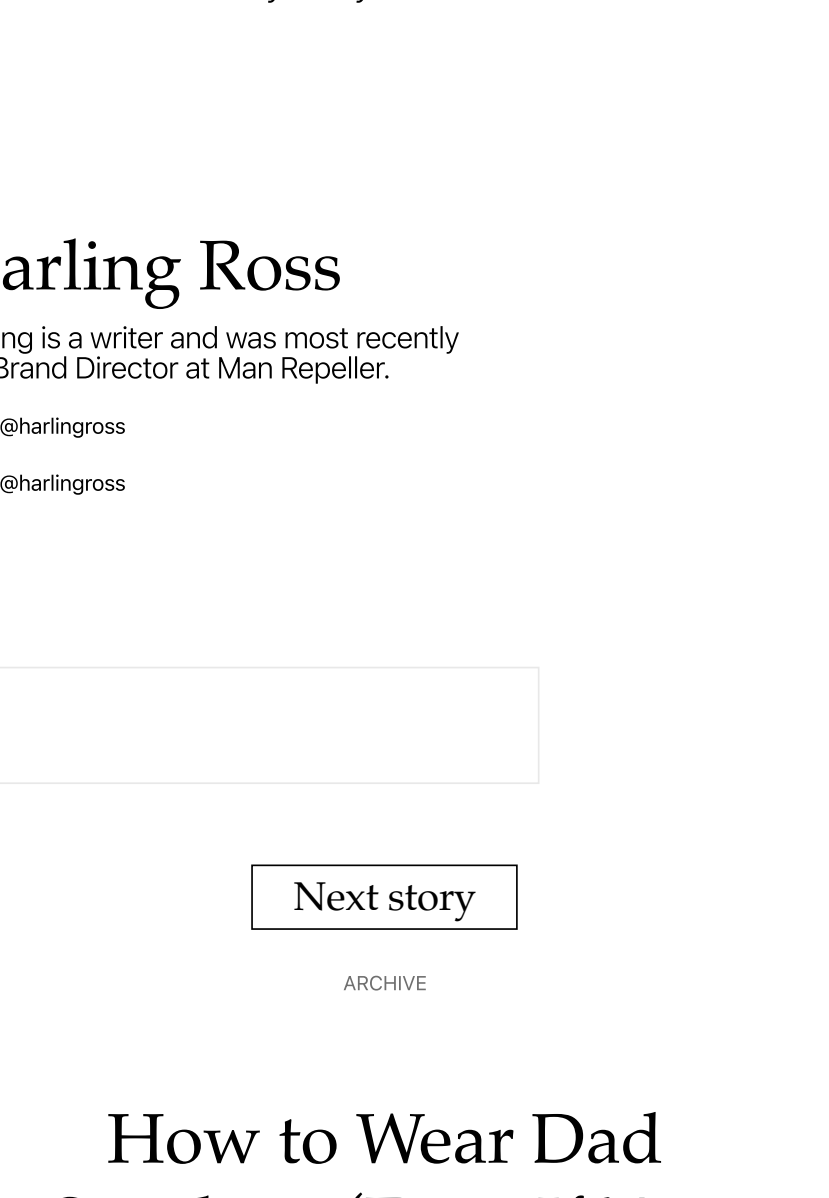
After the contract is signed, the surrogate will go to a fertility clinic and start hormone treatment to prepare her body for implantation. The treatment takes about six weeks and usually involves an intramuscular injection each day or patches or pills. Then the embryo (provided by either an egg donor or the intended mother) is implanted.

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On common misconceptions

I think the most common misunderstanding about surrogacy is that it's easy, and that it's the first choice couples are making. Working with a surrogate is not like waking up and deciding to buy a purse. Most people don't want to have a surrogate. People are put in a position that requires it, whether you're born into a body that doesn't allow pregnancy, or if you're a man and it's biologically not possible for you, or if you're in a same sex relationship, or if you are a trans person, or if you have cancer, or can't go off a certain medication.

The other misconception is that it is the surrogacy process involves wealthy people exploiting poor women. Most of the surrogates I work with have other full-time jobs. They are nurses and teachers and dental hygienists, and many of them make an equivalent wage to the intended parent they are helping. The ideas that these women are uneducated and uninformed and helpless is simply false.

On seeing the babies she carried grow up

The baby boy I gave birth to — I got an invitation last month to his Bar Mitzvah last spring, and I was like, *Holy shit*. He's not a baby anymore. He's a boy who's literally becoming a man, and I got to watch it happen with 150 other people. Knowing the role I played in his story still makes me teary.

He knows who I am and I know who he is. We don't see each other in person often, but we exchange pictures and talk all the time. Giving a gift means you give it without expectation, and yes, you cross your fingers and hope for a whole bunch of stuff, but I honor whatever choices his family makes along the way.

When people talk about surrogacy, they often question how women can possibly make this choice — the choice to sacrifice themselves physically and emotionally for nine months to give another couple a baby. To that I always say, yes, pregnancy can be difficult: morning sickness, back pain, sometimes miscarriages or terminations. But the feeling of helping two people complete the family they were always meant to have eclipses all of that one hundred times over.

Photos by *Louisiana Mei Gelpi*; **Creative Direction** by *Emily Zirimis*.

 **Harling Ross**

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