

TECHNOSTORKS

A documentary about the true life stories
of three couples going through infertility and assisted reproduction.

An ANDREI KIRILENKO Film

Produced by ANDREI KIRILENKO and SHELLEY KIRILENKO

Written by ANDREI KIRILENKO

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Production Assistant ERICA HUFFMAN

Camera Operators THOMAS BEACH, BEEZHAN MEEZAN, TIM FABRIZIO, ANDREI KIRILENKO, ALAN RIDDLE, ANDREW SCHWARTZ

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Special Thanks to

DR. SUHEIL MUASHER and the Staff of the Muasher Center for Fertility and IVF,
JOSEPH C. ISAACS, BARBARA COLLURA, JODY B. MILLER of Resolve,
ELEANOR NICOLL of The J. Benjamin Younger Office of Public Affairs of the American
Society for Reproductive Medicine,
LISA EAVES of Heal-From-Within,
NANCY ROSE SENICH of Nancy Rose & Associates,
MARGARET ADAMS of the Corcoran School of Art,
CANDICE CHARLTON, DANA HACKLEY, SHAVKAT KARIMOV, KIMBERLY
POPPKE, ANGELIKA and PETER SHASHKIN, ROMAN ZOLIN,
and the owners and staff of Bell Nursery.

FILM NOTES

USA

51 minutes

Documentary feature / Video/ Color

In English

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SYNOPSIS

Technostorks documents the true life stories of three couples - Joann and Sean, Nora and Eric, and Wendy and Rodney – as they go through infertility and assisted reproduction. We follow them into the operating room, hear their views on infertility, spirituality, and parenthood, and learn with them the outcomes of their cycles of treatment. Throughout the film, top experts explain the technological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of assisted reproduction. In the end, not all of our couples will achieve pregnancy, but all will undergo a personal transformation.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

When producer and director Andrei Kirilenko set out to make his feature-length documentary on infertility and assisted reproduction, he knew that finding couples willing to be filmed might be pretty hard. What he did not realize is just how hard it would be. Although, by now, well over 50 thousand infants conceived through assisted reproduction are born in the United States every year, people who are about to create a baby in a lab like to keep it private. For one thing, the strict regimen of injections, blood tests, and procedures is overwhelming. For another, by the time a couple is ready to start, say, a cycle of in-vitro fertilization, they have already been through a lot of stress, pain, and disappointment and have reached deep into the emotional reserves of their relationship.

So, Andrei, who has produced and directed several short films, his writer and producer wife, Shelley, and their crew went to a conference. Not just any conference, but the annual gathering of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, a professional association with about 9000 members who specialize in assisted reproduction. With help from the association's public relations office, they set up interviews with leading doctors, packed in the gear, and hoped for the best.

As they finished taping one of the interviews, a public relations representative of a fertility clinic stopped by to chat. An interview was arranged on the spot with the clinic's founder, Dr. Suheil Muasher. At the end of the interview, Dr. Muasher agreed to allow the use of his clinic in Fairfax, Virginia to help find couples for the documentary. Similar arrangements were made with two other Washington, DC-area clinics and the crew returned to their base in Bethesda, Maryland feeling pretty hopeful that finding the participants was just a matter of time. The numbers were on their side. With over three and a half thousand IVF cycles done annually by the three clinics combined, someone would certainly agree to be filmed. That was in November of 2004. By the end of January 2005, no one had stepped forward and the team was running out of ideas. Multiple announcements in bulletin boards, presentations at IVF orientation sessions, and numerous meetings with doctors did not yield positive results.

Meanwhile, in anticipation of filming several couples going through IVF at the same time, Andrei had arranged for multiple crews to be put together at short notice. With each day of

waiting, the crews were losing interest and the project was rapidly losing momentum. To revitalize the project, Andrei set up a long production weekend at the end of February 2005. Several friends and acquaintances who went through IVF agreed to talk about their experiences on camera. Two or three people to interview, one interior location, start late, wrap early: the production was just supposed to acclimate different crew members – all experienced professionals shooting for ABC, CNN, Discovery Channel, and Fox – to each other.

Three days before the shoot, Andrei received an e-mail from Sean. Sean and his wife, Joann came across a flyer about the project in the waiting room at Dr. Muasher's clinic and thought that it was a worthy cause. They have been married for three years and tried to conceive for the last two. They thought it would be easy. Neither of them has any medical history of infertility. In fact, Sean has a son, Ryan, from a previous marriage. In anticipation of having a bigger family and in order to be closer to Ryan, Sean and Joann moved to a big house in suburban Maryland. They kept trying, but to no avail. After seeing several fertility specialists, Joann and Sean decided to start their first cycle of IVF. In fact, Joann was scheduled to have an appointment at the clinic during the production weekend. After a few phone calls, an arrangement was made with Dr. Muasher and his staff to film at the clinic. Suddenly, the production schedule was getting full. Three remote locations, about a dozen people to film, lots of things to keep track of.

That weekend, the filming started as planned at Sean and Joann's house early in the morning. The crew then followed them to the clinic. When they got there, Andrei left the crew to film multiple takes of the arrival scene and went to see Dr. Muasher and the clinic's staff. Kiley Kraskouskas, the associate producer, was supposed to get there early and alert them about their imminent arrival. But Kiley got lost on the Capital Beltway and had just arrived. As Kiley and Andrei were scrambling to stop the crew from filming unsuspecting patients sitting in the waiting room, the clinic's business manager asked Andrei to come into the conference room. "I'd like you to meet somebody," she said, ushering in an attractive, petite woman, and left. Andrei thought that the woman was one of the nurses on staff and began explaining the logistics of the project to her. After a few minutes, Nora, as the woman introduced herself, smiled and explained that she was a patient at the clinic and was willing to be interviewed. "However, my husband, Eric, might not be," she said as Andrei rushed out of the conference room, because the business manager had just opened the door with a look on her face that pretty clearly signaled what had just happened in the waiting room.

It took Andrei a good 30 minutes to stop the filming, apologize profusely to the couples in the waiting room and assure them that they were not on tape, co-sey up to the business manager, and get the crew to prepare for the shoot inside the clinic. Meanwhile, Kiley stayed behind in the conference room to talk to Nora. By the time Andrei got back there, they were friends, and Nora agreed to have herself filmed, but her verdict on Eric remained the same: "I'll ask him, but I don't know if he'll agree to be interviewed." One of Nora's procedures was scheduled for early the next morning.

Frost was visible on the grass around the clinic as one by one Andrei and his crew arrived at the empty parking lot before sunrise. They unloaded the gear, took it to the entrance of the building, and waited for the doors to be unlocked. Soon, Eric and Nora arrived. After a short silence, Eric broke the ice by asking the crew about the gear (it's like asking kids about their favorite toys). Amidst the chatter, Dr. Muasher let the couple and the crew in. Because Eric was not allowed to be in the operating room during Nora's procedure, he and Andrei stayed in the waiting room talking, while the crew changed into scrubs and went in to shoot.

Having found out that Andrei and Shelley went through six years of infertility and two IVF cycles, Eric felt more comfortable telling his story. He told Andrei that during the last four years he had several medical procedures, including open-heart surgery, and was finally diagnosed with a very rare type of auto-immune disease. His disease attacks the blood vessels, but can be kept in remission if treated with chemotherapy and other drugs. Because chemotherapy impedes reproduction, Eric froze some of his sperm before he started treatment. As if this were not enough, Nora was diagnosed with stage four endometriosis, a condition that could cause scarring of the uterus and prevent pregnancy. Because of these medical issues, they decided to try in-vitro fertilization. They had already undergone IVF three times and were now going through it for the fourth time. At the end of the conversation, Eric suggested that he be interviewed for the film, because "it's the right thing to do." Two days before the scheduled interview, Andrei received an e-mail from Eric and Nora asking to postpone it.

The interview was postponed again and again. There was another lull in production. Schedules fell apart and new crew members had to be brought in. Just as Andrei was reading yet another e-mail from Nora and Eric asking to postpone, a message arrived from someone name Wendy. The message said: "Hello, I got your email address from a co-worker who knows my current situation. I have gone through one IVF cycle, and am scheduled to go through cycle #2 in two weeks. If I can help in any way, please let me know." After a brief exchange, a production schedule was quickly put together and the next morning the crew was waiting in front of Wendy's house. But, there was no Wendy. When Andrei called the cell phone number she had provided, Wendy apologized and said that she and her husband, Rodney were to arrive shortly. When they arrived, Wendy greeted Andrei and the crew, but Rodney went straight into the house, sat down, and turned on the TV. The crew began unloading the gear and pretty soon the first floor of the house was filled with lights, camera and sound equipment. After about 15 minutes of sitting through the commotion caused by having a half dozen strangers in his house, Rodney got up and asked: "Who is in charge here?" When Andrei came forward, Rodney asked another question, "What exactly are you doing here?" It turned out that Wendy had not told him about the filming. In the end, Rodney reluctantly agreed to be filmed, but only because Wendy believed in the project.

After the rocky start, Andrei needed to break the ice. He started with a simple sit down interview, but Rodney was clearly not interested in the process. He had his hands crossed and responded to questions with monosyllabic answers. That went on for about an hour. Meanwhile Wendy told their story. Right before they got married, she had surgery on both of her ovaries. That is when she started thinking about having kids for the first time. A little

while later they started trying and she got pregnant. Unfortunately, it was a tubal pregnancy. In order to save her life, the tube with an embryo growing in it had to be removed. That left Wendy with only one remaining tube on top of the problems she had with her ovaries. They were advised to try in-vitro fertilization and did their first cycle of IVF in December 2004. Unfortunately, that cycle was unsuccessful. They felt bad, but knew going into it that the procedure had low odds: about two-thirds of IVF cycles for women in Wendy's age group do not result in pregnancy. They were about to try again.

While Wendy sobbed her way through the story, Rodney kept watching basketball on TV (acting irked about the muted sound). In an effort to get Rodney engaged, Andrei asked him about his job. Rodney said that he was an educator dealing with problem high school kids. Encouraged by such a long response, Andrei asked him how he would describe his experience with infertility and assisted reproduction to his students. Suddenly, something in Rodney changed. He was looking for an answer, but could not find one. He uncrossed his arms, forgot about the basketball game on TV, looked at Wendy and the camera, but was still at a loss for words. Then he said: "Imagine that you were a very good basketball player and you had a basketball and you were dribbling down the court and you had the ability to dunk the basketball, but every time you went up to go dunk the basketball, the rim rose a couple of feet." Opening up this way seemed to make Rodney feel good and he began to talk frankly about what they were going through. He even switched off the TV.

This project took a year to complete and required about twenty people, including six camera operators working in more than a dozen difficult locations. It was financed by Shelley and Andrei out of pocket. But despite the tremendous effort of the team, this film would not have been possible without the three brave couples who volunteered to tell their stories to the world - Joann and Sean, Nora and Eric, and Wendy and Rodney. They are the true heroes of this film. At one point, Joann and Sean were so immersed in an interview that they almost missed a critical trigger injection. Nora and Eric not only brought themselves to face the camera, but even sang a song Eric had written about their experiences. And Wendy and Rodney ended up treating the crew almost as family. It is because of them that this film is what it is – a look through the eyes of people who have to use sophisticated, intrusive, and incredibly expensive technology with low probability of success to get something that all of us consider our essential birth right – the chance to have a baby.

They are your friends and neighbors. In fact, you may know people like them or be one of them. Do you?