LittleONE baby

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baby.

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TRYING TO
conceive

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ISSN 1836-4824

IMAGES FROM THE *heart.*

For every 140 newborn babies cradled in their parents arms, one doesn't make it. They are born still and silent. Their parents spend a meagre few hours trying to cram in a lifetime of love and memories.

Words by Heidi McIver • Images thanks to Heartfelt

Many struggle to move on from those precious days for fear of forgetting their child forever. That is where Heartfelt steps in. This band of compassionate photographers donate a gift that chronicles those moments for families with stillborn, premature born and terminally ill children. Sensitive, poignant photos capture the love and tenderness of a family and create an unforgettable tribute to these precious little souls.

The loss of a baby is rarely discussed, yet many people are touched by the tragedy of infant death every year. One in 20 babies are born prematurely, with almost half needing life support, there are 2000 stillbirths a year and each week three children die of cancer. It was one of these tragic deaths that inspired Heartfelt.

Baby Alexandra Charlotte was stillborn on April 20, 2006 at 32 weeks with a fatal genetic disorder. Her father, Melbourne photographer Gavin Blue, instinctively got his camera out and began taking photographs of his baby girl and wife Kelly in the moments after the birth. The pictures became a treasured memento of the short time they had with their daughter.

In the months that followed, Gavin and Kelly attended group counselling sessions where they met other parents who had lost a child. They found many were struggling with the fear that they would forget what their child was like. Some had crumpled polaroids, others had artists' impressions of their child, but many had nothing.

"We noticed people were still so raw after two to three years; they were so terrified of forgetting anything about their child," Gavin says.

"Everything is such a fog and a blur, having something tangible is precious.

"We had a whole nursery for the child to come home to, but over time the nursery and baby items go and you are only left with this tangible reminder of a little person who was part of your family."

Gavin is now dad to three boys and the president of Heartfelt. The organisation has grown to include 150 photographers across Australia and 600 sessions were conducted last year.

One of those sessions was for the Tatton family after the birth of baby Avery. Mum Kristie had uncannily requested brochures about Heartfelt during her pregnancy to distribute to local hospitals after she stumbled upon the website. But in the middle of a 24 hour posterior labour she discovered she would be the mother needing the service.

An ultrasound confirmed the devastating news – Avery's heart had stopped beating.

"She caught moments of joy and family, and the moments of pain.

"I really appreciated the honesty of the photos."

Grateful for the irreplaceable gift Heartfelt gave her family, Kristie has become somewhat of an ambassador for the organisation. She blogs about her experiences as a healing outlet, a support for other mothers who have suffered infant death, and to spread the word about Heartfelt. The blog, Hespera's Garden, has generated such a significant following that Kristie was invited to speak at the Digital Parents Conference in Melbourne in March, where she also promoted the charity.

Heartfelt will always be a compassionate service to parents, but it has also become an advocate for changing attitudes towards stillbirth and infant death in society and among the medical fraternity. Only a generation ago stillborn babies were whisked away, with many mothers denied the chance to touch or even see their babies. Today, parents are pleading with their hospitals to phone a Heartfelt photographer and help them commemorate the birth of their child. In many hospitals the work of Heartfelt is almost revered, in others there has been opposition. It is Kristie's wish that parents don't lose out on precious memories of their babies because of the opinions of others.

"Hospitals need to realise this is important to parents, no matter what their opinion is," Kristie says.

"Our Heartfelt photos are something we will treasure forever."

Heartfelt sessions and photographs are provided to families free of charge. For more information visit www.heartfelt.org.au ♦

TO HAVE ONE FINAL MOMENT CAPTURED FOREVER MEANS THE WORLD TO THESE PARENTS, WHOSE LIVES ARE CHANGED FOREVER BY THEIR LOSS.