

FROM THE HEART



**REFLECTIONS ** In a family's darkest hour, beautiful photographs will be forever remembered and cherished.

Treasured memories:

Brendon Pollock and Lola.
(GAVIN BLUE)

No parent ever wants to speak the words “our baby” and “autopsy report” in the same conversation, but Kristalee Pollock’s experience of motherhood encompasses both phrases. The Melbourne teacher and her police officer husband, Brendon, lost their daughter Lola, who was stillborn, three years ago.

The first sign Pollock had that her normal pregnancy had gone shockingly and suddenly off course was when a midwife could not find a heartbeat at a routine scan when she was 41 weeks pregnant.

The nursery stood ready with the tiny, fluffy, adorable additions associated with a new baby. Big brother and sister Jackson, now 7, and Millie, now 4, expected to be bumped up in the family order of things.

It was during this sad and traumatic time that Gavin Blue walked into the Pollocks’ life, camera in hand.

The Melbourne photographer is president of Heartfelt, a national organisation of professional photographers who volunteer their services – any time of the day or night – to capture images of stillborn babies, those clinging to life in neonatal intensive-care units and terminally ill children as a gift for their families.

“After the death of a baby, families go home to a nursery that was set up and over time that gets packed away, and all they do have left are the photos, so they become real treasures for the family,” Blue says. “We’ve got families who come back years later and they regularly donate to us on their child’s birthday.”

Now six years old, Heartfelt has 160 photographer members across Australia. Awareness of its services is rising, and it has a reputation for operating seamlessly to take photos of children and their families at a time when this is often the last thing families think of. The families’ tasks, after all, have turned to arranging funerals and how best to say goodbye.

Blue knows first-hand what that time is like: he and wife Kelly’s daughter Alexandra was stillborn in 2006.

At the time they had a son, Harry, now 7, and have since had Archie, 5, and Felix, 3.

“I know from our experience that the photos the hospital took of our child were forensic. My wife wanted to throw them out when she saw them,” he says. “There was no consideration for Alexandra’s skin condition or the lighting. It’s such a difficult time anyway that having some sensitive photos that aren’t too confronting for people means you’re more likely to share them with people, and when you share your grief and pain you’re already moving through it in a different way. On our wall at home we’ve got birth photos of the boys and birth photos of Alex (that Blue took). When people come over and look at the photos they know we’ve had four children, not three.”

Heartfelt is run solely on the \$50 annual membership fee paid by its photographers and donations. The service is enhanced with generous suppliers that provide discounted printing, presentation packs and delivery. Photographers spend about an hour with parents, their child and any immediate family who want to be involved. Days later, the family receives a digital gallery of photos, and a couple of weeks later they receive a DVD of images as well as prints. Reactions include gratitude for the gift and the relief at having something physical that relates to their child, Blue says.

The organisation works closely with charity Very Special Kids and maternity and neonatal intensive-care units across the country. Blue receives requests to place photographers “two or three times a week” in Victoria.

A photo session is a chance for parents and other family to engage with a child who has just died or one who is clinging to life. Blue asks family members to cuddle the children, look at them, talk to them.

He says there are still some hurdles to get over to ensure all grieving families feel they can use the service.

“Sometimes families hesitate and say, ‘no thanks’, and we’ve got a project going to address some of the barriers to people using our service. One of the barriers is that when a child dies, the family’s first thought is often, ‘who would want to take the photos?’. Especially if the baby isn’t in the best condition. So we are doing a book of our work to give to all the maternity wards and social workers across the country just to show what we can do and how sensitive treatment and special lighting can really make a beautiful memory of their precious child.”

Pollock, who has added Lucy, 1, to her family since having Lola, says Blue arrived while she was still in surgery after Lola was stillborn, so she was separated from her baby for hours.

“My husband bathed her and got her dressed and took care of her, and Gavin took photos of all of that, which was amazing because I had missed it all and having the photos was so fantastic,” she says. “It was really hard to see them, but I was really glad I had them because I had forgotten so much of that time from being in shock, and I was even forgetting parts of her.”

“I really love the ones where Brendan is bathing her, and there’s one where the two of us are holding her, and we had that one blown up for the funeral.”

That photo is now on display in the family’s hallway. Blue knows that the carefully chosen photographers who join Heartfelt offer more than just images, giving families something they desperately need during some of the most intense hours they will ever experience.

“Often you’re the first non-medical person they’ve seen since it happened and you’re a total stranger and you’re doing something for free. It helps give them that little bit of faith in humanity.”

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The family receives a DVD of images as well as prints

» www.heartfelt.org.au