

THE VIEW FROM Short Hills

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Tricia Gonnella Russo,
a Stage 4 Breast Cancer Survivor

*Her story and the beautiful gift she and her
husband received, on pages 20-23.*

Cover photo by Julia Maloof Verderosa Photography



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COVER feature

By Caitlin Perrone, Staff Writer

In December of 2011, Tricia Russo's world would be turned upside down, thrusting her down a path she had never thought she'd have to take. At the time, she was thirty years old and working at Walt Disney Motion Pictures, with plans of a family coloring her future, none of which included a breast cancer diagnosis. Yet, suddenly she was forced to grind to a halt, coming to terms with her diagnosis and begin going through the motions of chemotherapy, radiation, and a mastectomy. Four months after she celebrated the end of treatment, Trish would be delivered with more bad news, learning that her breast cancer had metastasized and traveled to her brain. In her battle to fight the heartbreaking disease that had consumed her life, Trish and her husband resolved to not let the dreams of starting a family disappear.

After discussions with her doctors, it was advised that carrying a child would be extremely dangerous, nor would in vitro fertilization (IVF) be possible after her metastatic cancer diagnosis. This moment was devastating for Trish. Void the possibility of a family as agencies require a certain life span to adopt, she found herself in one of the darkest periods of her life. Trish then chose to seek out the help of a therapist who specializes in cancer patients at Sloan Kettering. It was here that the idea was first brought to her by a nurse practitioner: With egg donation and surrogacy, a family would still be possible. Trish notes this conversation with the nurse practitioner as the light guiding her out of the darkness. With hope, Trish began to seek out more information about egg donors and surrogacy. Yet, she was astonished at the lack of media surrounding this very serious and very personal topic.

Armed with her film experience and determination to create a family, Trish decided to create the media and bring a voice to the narrative she was about to live. With her filmmaker friend Craig Shapiro, Trish began filming a documentary that would come to be called *Love Always, Mom*. The documentary chron-



icled her life and the lives of those around her as she went through the process of selecting an egg donor and a surrogate, capturing the emotional journey on camera. The entire process, this unique path to become a family, was emotionally raw and altogether uplifting, combined paradoxically with contracts and legalese.

Trish turned to Dr. Natalie Cekleniak (a Deerfield resident) and Dr. Stuart Leitner (a Hartshorn Resident) at St. Barnabas Hospital to help navigate the process of surrogacy and IVF through an egg donor. Their situation was unique according to Dr. Cekleniak, in that Trish required help from two third parties to achieve reproduction. The first step of their journey started with finding a surrogacy agency in January of 2015. Trish and her husband scoured the online databases of donors, attempting to find a woman who was close to her own personality and appearance. Trish looked at these women's faces and read their profiles, trying to see herself in the strangers in front of her. "Would we have been friends?" she had asked herself. Would this be a woman she would want to know? It wasn't about creating a perfect baby; it was about putting as much of herself into her child as she could. With both



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the surrogate and egg donor acquired by May of 2015, both women had to undergo the required medical examinations.

Trish's son was born happy and healthy in November of 2016. With the addition of her son, Trish also found a dear friend in both her egg donor and surrogate, ultimately growing her family in ways she could never before imagine. Trish will be a bridesmaid in her egg donor's wedding. Of their services to Trish, both the egg donor and the surrogate were touched deeply by the experience. In a family-style barbecue with the egg donor's family, her brother comments, "This may be the most amazing thing you do in your life." It's true, really. These women changed Trish's life, ultimately giving her the gift of life. Earnestly, Tricia notes, "They were paid for their services like any other business transaction, but no amount of money is equivalent to the gift they gave us."

With her son born, Trish and her co-director Craig began to piece the moments caught on tape to create a feature-length love letter to him. Tricia sat with Craig and editor, watching the last few years play out on the screen in front of her. "It was cathartic," she says of watching herself in countless doctors' offices, the moments of elation and the moments of sadness all being relived in front of her. *Love Always, Mom* comes together to be a voice for women all over the world struggling with cancer and infertility, promising that our paths may never be the straight lines we had hoped but may be all the more beautiful for it. Of her message, Dr. Cekleniak remarks, "Trish's bravery and openness is allowing the world

to see this possibility (of third-party reproduction), which we hope will bring much joy to many people via these incredible procedures we are privileged to direct."

At its core, the documentary is about life: how we create it, how we live ours, and our impact on the lives of others. For Trish, it goes deeper still, hoping her documentary sparks questions to the men and women in her audience. "Am I consciously making choices to build the life I want?" and "What will my legacy be?"

Trish and her team hope to have the film projected at film festivals and in association with cancer and infertility treatment centers, aiming to spread their message as far as possible. Any profits earned from the film will go directly to research for treatments of metastatic breast cancer and, with any luck, bring us closer to a cure.

For more information on *Love Always, Mom*, please visit www.cyangray.org.