



“I was t

Making every
minute count

Melanie Turner
Dawson and 1-
year-old Robert

told I'd *never* have kids”

Four moms who beat the odds and had the families they'd always longed for

by Dina Roth Port

“I was too sick”

When **Melanie Turner Dawson** was diagnosed with stage III breast cancer at age 35, her first thought was, “This can’t be right. I’m too young to die.” There was no history of the disease in her family, she ate a healthy diet, and she didn’t smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol. Despite the dire news, she tried to keep a positive attitude with the support of her mom, siblings, and friends.

That wasn’t always easy. Dawson endured a single mastectomy, followed by six months of chemo and 36 rounds of radiation. While she knew these treatments might help her live, she was worried that they might damage her ovaries and leave her infertile. “It was devastating enough to be confronting my mortality, but the idea that I wouldn’t be able to have a child was almost too much to bear,” says Dawson.

She thought her fears were realized when she stopped getting her period for seven months, and a fertility specialist found that she might be in early menopause. Though her menstrual cycle started again two months later, she still assumed she’d likely have to give up her dream of getting pregnant and bearing children.

Dawson also worried that even if she did have a child, she might not live to see him grow up. She knew the odds:

22 percent of women with breast cancer that spreads to the lymph nodes, as hers had, don’t survive past five years. “For that reason, I sometimes thought maybe I shouldn’t get married and have kids,” she says. But then September 11 came, and she realized, “Life’s never a guarantee, and while cancer may have robbed me of one breast, I’m still alive. Why should I stop living?”

So she didn’t. In November 2002, at age 37, she married her boyfriend of eight months, Richard. The couple honeymooned in Hawaii, but when Dawson spent most of the trip nauseated and exhausted, she was terrified her cancer had come back. On the other hand, her period was late, so she took an at-home pregnancy test when she and Richard got home from their trip. It was Thanksgiving morning. “Waiting for the result seemed like an eternity because I knew it was going to be either the happiest moment of my life or one of the saddest—I’d either be calling my gynecologist or my oncologist,” she says. “When it was positive, my husband and I certainly felt like we had a lot to be thankful for that day!”

Dawson was a little concerned that the pregnancy would raise the chances of the cancer recurring, but she felt the risk was worth it. “Part of my life had already been taken,

Told I'd never have kids

and I couldn't spend the rest of it living in fear," she says. "I just kept faith that everything would be okay."

After a normal, relatively smooth pregnancy, she gave birth to a son, Robert, in July 2003. The cancer has returned, but Dawson, who lives in Rochester, Minnesota, is determined to beat it again. "With my new husband and baby boy, every day seems fuller and more worth living than ever before."

"I was infertile"

Every month since she was 12, **Lynn Witwer**, 32, has endured periods so heavy she'd bleed right through her clothes and pain so excruciating she'd miss days of school, work, and many special occasions. Witwer saw a dozen different gynecologists who said she was suffering from constipation or ulcers. One even told her her symptoms were in her head. When she was 25, Witwer finally diagnosed herself when she read a magazine article about endometriosis and realized, "This is me!"

She immediately started researching the condition through the Endometriosis Association and discovered that not only what she'd been going through has a name, but it also affects more than 6 million women in the U.S. "It was an incredible relief to know I wasn't crazy all those years—and that I wasn't alone," she says. With endometriosis, the tissue that lines the uterus grows outside of it onto organs such as the ovaries and bladder. Each month, as hormone levels rise and fall, the tissue builds up, then breaks down and bleeds. Because the blood has no way of leaving the body until a woman's period, it causes internal bleeding and inflammation, which can lead to intense pain, blood clots, and the formation of scar tissue and adhesions. The cause of the condition is unknown.

Over the next few years, Witwer had two surgeries to remove adhesions on just about every organ in her pelvis, and she knew she might have trouble having children: She'd learned that endometriosis is a leading cause of

infertility, since it can both inhibit ovulation and block the Fallopian tubes. After her second surgery, at age 29, Witwer, who lives in Herndon, Virginia, went to an infertility specialist in the Washington, DC, area to see what her options were. He told her, "You'll never have kids even if I perform every technology we have."

"I left his office devastated," says Witwer. "I felt



“Every day I look at my son and am overwhelmed by how fortunate I am. My organs may be unhealthy, but they gave me an incredible gift.”

One-on-one
time Lynn Witwer
and Ethan, age 2

betrayed by my body—all my life I'd loved kids and now I couldn't have my own.” Witwer and her husband, Michael, decided they wouldn't attempt any fertility procedures, figuring they might adopt down the road.

That same year, Witwer and a friend went on a camping trip, which was ruined by a sneak attack of endometriosis. As she sat alone in an outhouse at midnight, passing golf-ball-size blood clots, she vowed to have one more surgery to remove adhesions and then try for a year to get pregnant. If she didn't, she'd have a hysterectomy. Although this wouldn't cure her endometriosis, it would stop the heavy bleeding that left her anemic every month.

She scheduled her surgery—then had to cancel it because the impossible had happened: She skipped her period. “It was usually such an event, I knew something was up,” she says. A home pregnancy test came up positive. Witwer sobbed for 15 minutes. “I was overcome with joy,” she says, adding that spreading the news was the most fun that she'd had in her life. “My parents just didn't believe me, and my doctors were speechless.”

Though her pregnancy was rocky—she had extreme vomiting and wound up dehydrated and anemic—she now has a healthy 2-year-old son named Ethan. “I'm so grateful that, when it really counted, my doctors were wrong in a good way,” says Witwer, a past president of an endometriosis support group in her area who's pregnant with her second baby. “Every day, I look at my son and am overwhelmed by how fortunate I am. My organs may be unhealthy, but they gave me an incredible gift.”

“I was single”

For as long as she can remember, **Traci Powell** has wanted to be a mom. “My own mother has been such a good role model, and I yearned to give children the kind of wonderful life she's given me,” says the 36-year-old nurse from Salem, New Jersey. She thought that by the time she was 25, she'd be married with two kids, a dog, and a picket fence. But that didn't happen. When her 29th birthday rolled around, “it became apparent that Mr. Right hadn't been informed of my life plan,” she says.

That wasn't going to stop her though—she felt the timing was right for her to have a child. She made a decent

Told I'd *never* have kids

salary and knew she could take care of a baby on her own, particularly with the help of her family, who lived nearby. Powell started researching her options and decided that since she wanted to experience pregnancy, finding a sperm donor would be the best decision—especially when she found a sperm bank that offered a lot of information about the donor. “I have his family profile, pictures and a video of him, plus a letter he wrote—things I could give my child to show there is a man whom he or she is connected to,” she says. “I felt confident this was the right choice for me.”

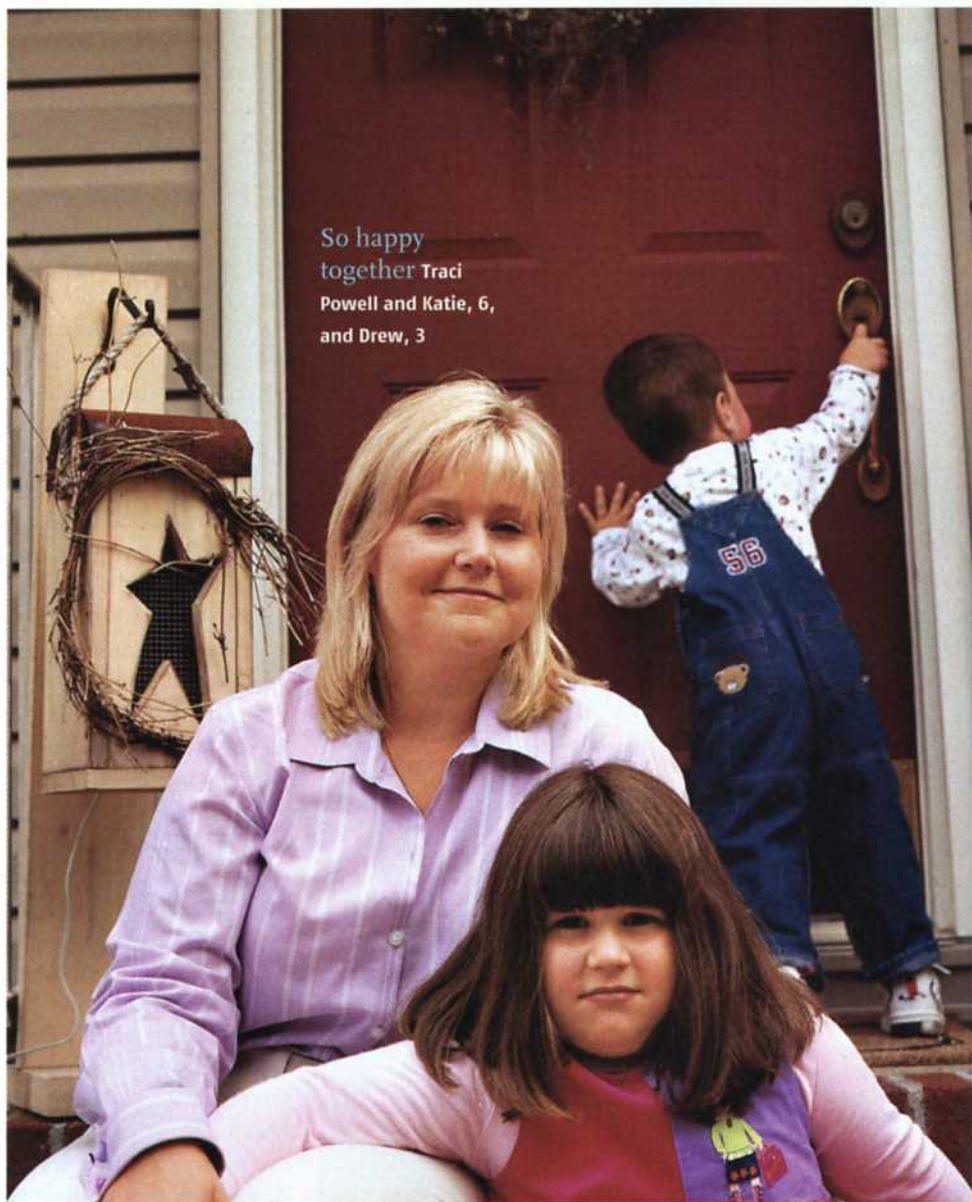
In December 1997, Powell became pregnant after a second round of intrauterine insemination. “When Katie was born, it was like the world had color for the first time,” she says. Having a child, she adds, was the experience she had always imagined it would be. “Everything was perfect,” she says. “I wasn’t even overwhelmed, because I had plenty of support from my family. I was so happy that I barely noticed the sleepless nights.”

Life with a baby was so blissful, in fact, that two years after Katie’s birth, Powell decided to have another child using sperm from the same donor. The idea didn’t go over as well with everyone this time. “People who had no clue what it was like inside my house seemed to have this ‘poor thing’ attitude, as though I were home alone and struggling, which wasn’t the case at all,” she says. “And even those closest to me didn’t think I could handle another child, particularly since Katie was a very active, precocious toddler who demanded a lot of attention.”

Several friends actually said she was “nuts.” Even her parents told her that

having another baby would be too much for her. Her best friend said flat-out: “Don’t do it! Managing two kids is hard enough with two parents.” Fortunately, by the time Powell’s son, Drew, was born, in March 2001, her loved ones had gotten over their reservations and were ecstatic about the newest addition to her family.

Powell, who dates off and on, says she’d still love to meet the right man and get married someday—for herself *and* the kids. “I’d like to give my children a wonderful father, but the chance that I’d never know them was not one I was willing to take. They’ve been a part of my heart since long before they were born, and this is how they were meant to come to me.” >>



So happy
together Traci
Powell and Katie, 6,
and Drew, 3

ERIKA LARSEN



Reveling in the wonder of it all
Morgan Zantua and
3-year-old Auriel

“I was too old”

It seems that in **Morgan Zantua's** case, good things really do happen when you least expect it. After her first marriage, at 29, didn't work out, it was some time before she met the man she wanted to start a family with: She was 44 when she walked down the aisle a second time.

Zantua and her new husband, George, decided to start working on a family right away. She quickly conceived—and miscarried at 12 weeks. She assumed she wasn't meant to have kids, and her doctor agreed. “She explained that my age—not to mention my history of uterine fibroids and irregular periods—was a natural form of birth control,” says Zantua. “It was surprising I got pregnant in the first place.”

She gave up hope of ever having a child and figured she'd have a baby in her life when her husband's son from his first marriage had kids. “That's how I coped,” she says. Plus, she adds, George's pragmatic, “go with the flow” outlook on life helped her accept the reality.

Five years later, at age 51, Zantua was in graduate school and juggling three jobs. She and her husband, then 56, planned to eventually sell their home in Tacoma and

travel around the world. Then Zantua noticed she couldn't button her skirts and often felt exceptionally warm and tired. She thought, “Boy, menopause is hitting awfully fast,” and she booked a consultation with her doctor.

Before the appointment, a friend suggested she take a pregnancy test. And since she always tried to be open-minded, she did—and discovered she was having a baby. “I was stunned,” she says. “I have friends younger than I am who are grandparents, and here I was becoming a mom.” Luckily, she says, her husband kept her calm. “I was overjoyed and totally petrified at the same time, but George was such an anchor,” she says. “He was surprised, too, of course, but he helped me shift gears for this next stage in our lives. We were both elated.”

The next day Zantua's gynecologist confirmed she was five months pregnant with a healthy baby girl. She felt blessed to become a “geriatric mom,” as the nurses dubbed her, but what she didn't realize at the time was how rare it is—only 239 women between 50 and 54 gave birth that same year in the U.S. And although she was at an increased risk for miscarriage and other complications, Zantua breezed through her pregnancy and worked until the day before she gave birth in August 2001.

Today, Zantua is the 55-year-old mom of 3-year-old Auriel and the special projects consultant at a community college. She says that while she's getting gray hairs and wrinkles, “I'm not thinking about slowing down, like a lot of people my age,” noting that her first issues of *AARP* and *BabyTalk* (*Parenting's* sister publication) arrived in her mailbox on the same day. “I'm thinking about the Wiggles, imaginary tea parties, and swimming lessons—and I love every minute of it.” ●

Dina Roth Port, a former associate editor at Parenting, is the mom of a 3-month-old baby girl.