

Remembering Babies Lost

By **ANDREA TODD**
BEE STAFF WRITER

The quilt is cut from the cloth of cuddly receiving blankets and cozy cotton infantwear.

Each of its 80 squares represents the birth -- and death -- of a baby.

Kim Lotz points out one square near the bottom. It is her son's. This past Sunday, Tyler Branden Lotz would have been 8 years old.

Merced resident Lotz, 27, gave birth to her first child on Jan. 11, 1996. He was born at 40 weeks, 3 days, and weighed 7 1/2 pounds and was 21 inches long.

Tyler was stillborn, because of complications with the umbilical cord that occurred in the last week of Lotz's pregnancy. Unable to find a fetal heartbeat, Lotz's physicians induced labor.

"The silence in the delivery room haunts me to this day," she says.

It's been a health issue no one knows much about, and a loss no one has wanted to talk about.

A fetus is stillborn when he or she is delivered dead after 20 weeks of gestation (before 20 weeks, doctors call it a miscarriage). There are more than 29,000 stillbirths in the United States annually, more than 3,000 in California. Stillbirth, or sudden antenatal death syndrome (SADS), is 12 times more likely to happen than sudden infant death syndrome, or SIDS.

SADS takes more lives in one year than all other causes of infant death combined, according to the National Stillbirth Society.

"Even when an autopsy is performed, doctors don't know what went wrong, or what caused it," says Lotz, who founded the Merced chapter of the Mothers In Sympathy and Support (MISS) Foundation, a network of support groups for local parents who have lost a child before, during or shortly after birth.

"For months, my husband and I suffered alone, unsupported by those around us who questioned our grief. It was as if, because he was never born, he never existed. You cannot measure love by the age of a child or how many breaths he has taken. A parent's love doesn't work that way. "

After Tyler's death, the Lotzes had to answer seemingly countless jarring questions -- first about the baby, from those who didn't know what had happened ("Did you have a boy or a girl?") and then about when they planned to get pregnant again ("As if we could just forget about Tyler and 'get another puppy,'" Lotz says).

Eventually, they found the support they desperately needed, thanks to MISS -- at that time, newly formed and based in Arizona.

"I was embraced by them," says Lotz, who recovered and now is the mother of three healthy children. "They let me feel intense grief. They let me love and remember my son."

Lotz adds that many new MISS members are in their 70s and 80s. "These women were never allowed to hold or even see their babies. They were just whisked away and never talked about again. These women are just now beginning to grieve."

"It's my theory that the younger the child, the less time society gives you to grieve the loss of that child. And the death of a baby not yet born is one of the most minimized losses in the world," says Joanne Cacciatore, national MISS founder, whose daughter, Cheyenne, died 15 minutes before she was delivered on July 28, 1994.

Cacciatore describes how, after delivery, she experienced total isolation akin to Lotz's. "I had to let her go to the morgue within three hours after giving birth, and no one talked to me about it. The doctors and nurses just left me alone. I gave birth with babies being born all around. On my way out of the hospital, I had to walk through the nursery.

"I couldn't believe no one was helping me through this."

She started working with families in crisis and with medical professionals. Phone calls for services started coming in, so Cacciatore organized support groups in 1997. Since, membership in MISS has catapulted, with 60 chapters worldwide and membership numbers estimated to be "in the several thousands," she says.

Cacciatore hopes to raise SADS awareness and prevent stillbirths, much the way the SIDS "Back To Sleep" campaign has prevented SIDS deaths in recent years. She's made significant progress: Two results of tireless MISS efforts are the "Kick Count" campaign (fetal movements are monitored and recorded on a Kick Count card, provided by physicians) and fetal heartbeat Doppler availability (machines that track fetal heartbeats). Parents who have had a stillborn child and are pregnant again find having a Doppler machine at home can provide some ease of mind, Lotz says, adding that one woman in her group says she never would have gotten through her second pregnancy without one.

Additionally, in partnership with the International Stillbirth Alliance, Cacciatore says MISS will launch one of the largest, most comprehensive studies on stillbirth ever done, to begin this year at the University of Oslo in Norway.

Here in the states, the National Institutes of Health recently allotted \$3 million to study stillbirth, "after we implored them," Cacciatore says.

"I'm proud of the organization," she says of MISS. "We have provided a very necessary service."

Lotz met Amy Vann through the MISS Web site. The Atwater resident contacted Lotz for support after she gave birth to her second child, William Fredrick, on July 15, 2001. At 33 weeks, he weighed 4 pounds, 2 ounces, was 18 inches long, and was stillborn.

Her experience at Emanuel Medical Center in Turlock was very different than Cacciatore's in Arizona seven years earlier. "I had pre-eclampsia with my first baby, so they were probably watching me more closely. The doctor was very sensitive. The nurses let me see him right away, then cleaned up and dressed him before she brought him back to me. The ladies from a local hospice took so many pictures of him, which later I was so thankful for. We buried him at the Winton cemetery. On his headstone, it is engraved, 'He is precious in the eyes of God.'"

Her doctor told her about MISS, and Vann and Lotz e-mailed each other for almost a year before meeting

face to face, when Lotz started the Merced group. Now, the two work together to provide charity and support for other parents who experience this loss.

"I never held Tyler, and I regret that," Lotz says. "I try to help parents grieve."

She's often right there at the hospital, encouraging parents to love their babies as best they can before they bury them, helping put together photographs and baby books for moms and dads too shocked and sad to do it themselves.

And she's there for the sad months afterward, if needed -- with information about local support groups, MISS "kindness projects" -- like baby-blanket and teddy bear drives -- and the quilt.

Lotz displays it at MISS functions, and she takes it with her when she visits parents at hospitals. Again and again, with these parents, she points to her son's square, to reassure them that she can understand their loss.

Studying it, she says, "Tyler will never be forgotten. We will always love and miss him."

Bee staff writer Andrea Todd can be reached at 238-4537 or atodd@modbee.com.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

- Mothers In Sympathy and Support meets the first Tuesday of every month at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 350 W. Yosemite Ave., Merced. For more information about the Merced MISS chapter, contact Kim Lotz, 725-9241.
- For more information about MISS, visit the Web site, www.missfoundation.org, or write to the MISS Foundation, P.O. Box 5333, Peoria, AZ 85385.
- For more information about The National Stillbirth Society, visit www.stillnomore.org.
- For information about purchasing or renting fetal heartbeat Dopplers, visit www.bellybeats.com.

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