

Bereaved parents aim to help others

The harrowing experience of a stillbirth shattered Cheryl Kilby's life. Now she is working hard to raise awareness about such tragedies and keen to help other parents in a similar situation. SUE MASON reports . . .

There should be a toddler creating havoc in the sitting room; a pretty little girl with her mum's eyes and her dad's chubby cheeks. Instead, there is a space forever empty and an all-pervading sadness.

In the kitchen, a rose-surrounded photo shows a beautiful baby, all dressed in pink and surrounded by her family. But no happy smiles light up the faces of mum, dad or the baby's two big sisters.

For Cheryl Kilby's baby died in her womb shortly before the birth in November 2006; the only time they saw her suck her thumb was on a 3D scan before she was born.

Cheryl hardly left the house for the next year but now she is busy organising a ball to raise awareness of still births and neonatal deaths. She hands me a flyer saying 420 babies are born dead in the Hull area every year and I'm shocked. I see the occasional poignant notice in the columns of *The*

FACTFILE

- According to Sands:
- 17 babies die every day in the UK (10 are stillbirths, seven are neonatal deaths) totalling almost 6,500 baby deaths a year – the equivalent of 16 jumbo jets crashing every year.
- This is four times the number of people who die every year of MRSA (1,593 MRSA deaths in 2007, UK Statistics Authority).
- This is double the number of adults who lose their lives on Britain's roads every year (2007 – 2,940 people were killed on the roads, Department of Transport).
- Ten times more babies are stillborn than die of cot death every year in the UK.
- The stillbirth rate has remained almost unchanged for the past 10 years.

Journal's sister publication, the *Mail*, and hear a sad tale every so often, so my guess would have been maybe 20 a year, which, of course, is 20 too many. But never would I have thought the Kilbys' tragedy was being repeated often and it's no wonder Cheryl wants to raise awareness. "I'm doing this because I can't do anything else for her," says Cheryl.

A petite blonde casually dressed in jeans and a green top, Cheryl has known a tragedy before. "I'd had a miscarriage at five months before I had Sasha (14 in April) and Nina (12)," she says. "And when Nina was two, I wanted another baby but I had six miscarriages in five years.

"Then after three years, I was pregnant and I couldn't believe it. I had the perfect pregnancy and felt so well."

Both Nina and Sasha had been born a couple of weeks early so when Cheryl thought, 36 weeks into her pregnancy, that she was going into labour, she wasn't unduly concerned. It was only when hospital staff attempted to monitor the baby's heartbeat and called for assistance that she realised something was wrong.

"It's the worst thing ever to think you are carrying a dead baby, and then have to go home and tell your two children, who were absolutely elated because you were pregnant. It's the worst thing," says Cheryl.

After a night of sobbing, Cheryl and husband, Andy, returned to the hospital, where their baby was born after a six-hour labour. They'd known she was going to be a little girl and had chosen her name, but always think of her by her special middle name, Princess.

"After you've given birth, you should be the happiest person in the world but everyone was in tears," says Cheryl of her traumatic experience. "It's totally the opposite of what you expect and you take turns holding a dead baby. They look perfect but there's no life in them.

"The room was lovely and our daughter was placed in a crib. You go to sleep with your baby next to you and you wake up the next morning wanting to see her. The saddest part is cuddling a dead baby.

"You go in to hospital expecting to come out with a baby but instead you come out with a box with mementoes in. It's so hard walking out of the hospital with empty arms, having to leave your baby behind.

"You see people going in to hospital and you think, 'you've no idea this could happen'.



Cheryl and Andy Kilby, who have organised a sell-out Angels Ball at Lazaat, Cottingham, to raise awareness of the SANDS charity

PICTURE: JACK HARLAND

"You have to make the most of the time you have with the baby because you don't get that time back. You go every night to the funeral directors' until the day of the funeral clutching on to every last moment, not wanting to say goodbye to your precious baby. Miscarriages are soul-destroying but nothing compares with giving birth to a dead baby."

More than two years on, Cheryl is still trying to cope with what has happened. "I look at two-year-olds and think, she would be like that now. It upsets me to see nappy adverts on TV because I'd give anything to be able to change her nappy. I didn't go out of the house for a year because I couldn't bear to look at babies.

“It's so hard walking out of the hospital with empty arms”

"When people ask me how many children I have, I say, three, but one's an angel."

Meeting Maggie Simkiss, the local organiser for Sands (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society) and herself the bereaved parent of a neonatal baby, has helped. "All you want to do is speak to someone in the same situation because they know what's in your mind. I used to sit and look at American websites, just searching for people who had a baby girl born the same day, and read their stories.

"People think you will get over it but next year it will be what she would be doing at three. You can't not do it."

Last year, on a trip to Lazaat, near Cottingham, Cheryl discovered the restaurant manager had also had a stillborn baby. She'd been keen to do something to raise awareness of stillbirths and the idea of a ball at Lazaat came out of this discovery.

Tickets for The Angels Ball were sold out

even before Cheryl had collected them from the printers. The 336 guests at the £40-a-head ball will see a one-metre high ice-sculpture of an angel and the interior of the pavilion will be decorated with angels' wings.

Auction prizes include a painting valued at £850; an American fridge-freezer and a framed signed photo of Ricky Hatton and Floyd Mayweather, and there are many more prizes for raffle winners.

The Kilbys sold their previous house after the death of their baby, primarily because they couldn't bear to live where she should have been, but wasn't. They're still living in Elloughton because they wanted to be near to the family and close friends who had helped them through their painful ordeal.

"I couldn't have got through it without them," says Cheryl, who now hopes to train as a "befriender" for other bereaved parents of stillborn babies. Andy, who has his own heating and plumbing business, tells me how the death of his baby daughter has affected him.

"It's terrible," he says. "It's the worst thing that can happen. We just didn't know how we were going to come home and tell the girls. We had everything planned. Miscarriages are devastating but to have to give birth to a baby and then to bury her, it's just not in your plan.

"You have good days and bad days. Something will come on the radio and remind you. For me it's hard walking into a customer's house and seeing a baby.

"You go through stages, being totally upset, angry – all the stages of grief – and we still get angry. You can see why some couples break up.

"Also, when I meet people I haven't seen for a couple of years and if they don't know what happened, they ask me if we got a girl or a boy. It's so hard to explain to them.

"Some people shy away from you but I'd rather they asked about it because people need to know what happens. In most cases it happens for no reason and we just want people to be aware how common it is."

■ The Angels Ball at Lazaat on Friday, 24th April, is sold out. For further information on the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society, visit: www.uk-sands.org

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ANGELS BALL

Lazaat, in Cottingham, was the venue for the Angels charity ball in aid of SANDS (the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society), for which £10,500 was raised.



Matt Johnson and Sasha Kilby



From left: Steve Long, Alison Maxwell, James Maxwell, Heidi Silk, Stuart Carmichael, Nichola Carmichael, Richard Silk, Vicky Harrison, Angie Long and Richard Hains



From left: Nina and Sasha Kilby with Angels Ball organisers, Andy and Cheryl Kilby



Nichola Guest (left) and Victoria Hart



From left: Linda, David and Liz Peach with Christopher Atkinson, Emma Peach and Dave Hastings



From left: Melanie and Jonathan Burns, Christopher and Janet Holme and Donna and Philip Taylor



From left: Kerry Marsden with Nick, Jason, June and David Brown



Melanie and Jonathan Burns



From left: Victoria and Dean Burman with Joanna and Neil Henderson



From left: Juliet Jennings, Jonathan Rogers, David Hilton and Shelly Bolder



RIGHT: Nick and



From left: Will and Juliet Jennings with Shelly and Trevor Bolder



Lizzy and Richard Todd



RIGHT: Jane and James Taylor



Simon Balne and Emma Hunter



Julie McFadden (left) and Sally Hodges



From left: George, Brittany, Sharon and Abigail Taylor with Denise Kurring and Carol and Peter Spencer



From left: Victoria Burman, Sandra Morrow and Joanna Henderson



From left: Wendy and John Guinness with Lucy and Craig Stephenson



From left: Jennifer Thackaray; Kevin Simkiss; Maggie Simkiss, Hull SANDS organiser Maggie; Sandra Pearson; Stuart Simkiss, and Kirsty Elwood



LEFT, from left: Jane and Chris Maxwell, Leane Foster, Mark Keeting, Rachel Stainforth and John Johnson



Paul and Nichola Guest



From left: Gareth and Kirstie Braithwaite with Angel and Steve Brown



Elaine and Andy Gaze

Gary and Julie Baldwin



LEFT, from left: Lyndsey Hughes, Tony Johnson and Lauren Maney



RIGHT: Lesley and Paul