I am a 37 year old married mother of two, and I live in a small village in Alberta, Canada. In 2020, during the height of the pandemic, I gave birth to a surrogate baby for an Irish couple. I'd love to tell you a bit more about myself and what brought me to surrogacy.

There are two events in my life that deeply impacted my decision to become a surrogate, and both of them stem from trauma. The first event was my adoption. My adoptive mother is a cancer survivor. She had to have a complete hysterectomy and was told that she would never have children. I grew up understanding how deeply infertility and loss had affected our family.

The second even happened when I was 21. I was a newlywed and had just discovered that I was pregnant with my first child. I was ecstatic! We began thinking of names and planning where the nursery would go. All of our joy turned to ashes when I suddenly began hemorrhaging. I had an ectopic pregnancy which had to be surgically removed. I lost our baby and had nearly lost my own life. I laid in my hospital bed after the operation and wept so much that I had chemical burns on my face from the tears. I couldn't stop crying. Losing a wanted pregnancy is something I understand. Being told there is nothing they can do to save your baby is something I understand. The guilt, the shame of having to terminate a pregnancy to save your own life – is something I understand.

Luckily, I was able to go on to have children, and in 2016, I gave birth to our son and completed our family. I felt so blessed to have a boy and a girl! There is nothing more important to me on this earth than my children. One day I was scrolling on Facebook and I saw post about how Canadian surrogates were needed to help others complete their own families. I had never considered surrogacy before, but something about that idea really resonated with me.

In 2017 I felt ready to begin this adventure. I signed up with a surrogacy agency and started looking at intended parent profiles. The first profile to catch my eye was an Irish couple who had been trying for many years to have a child. The intended mother had been through multiple miscarriages, failed IVF cycles, and had suffered an ectopic pregnancy herself. They had been trying for over 10 years and did not have any children. My husband and I both agreed that this was an amazing couple who had been through enough. I determined right then and there that I would do everything in my power to help them. We were introduced and became very close in a short amount of time. We spoke often, video chatted, and discovered that we had a lot in common. They were absolutely lovely – very kind, funny, and with a huge network of supportive family & friends. I learned a lot of new words for things, like "nappy" instead of diaper, and "trolly" instead of

shopping cart. I learned that chips are called crisps in Ireland, and craic doesn't refer to narcotics!

The first thing I did for our journey was medical screening. I went through this screening to make sure it was safe for me to have another pregnancy. I went through psychological screening to ensure that I was mentally well and feeling safe & supported at home. My husband was also screened for things like STI's and spoke to a psychologist to discuss his feelings around surrogacy. After that, we went through legal contracts before we started trying to get pregnant via IVF. It took 5 embryo transfers and two different batches of embryos before we were successful. On Christmas Eve, 2019, I got to tell them that they were going to be parents! Their joy, their happy tears, the wonderful reaction of their family and friends was so contagious and exciting! We had our first ultrasound and they missed work because they were so nervous. Each and every prenatal appointment I had, they would miss work because they feared we would have bad news and and not hear a heartbeat. I constantly reassured them that I could feel their baby kicking, that I knew he was alive. They never got tired of me telling them!

When I got close to my due date they flew to Canada and we met in person for the first time. We had been on this journey for 3 years at that point. My husband insisted that they needed to do Albertan things while we were waiting for me to go into labour – that included some hunting and ATV riding. Because I live in a small village, everyone knew who they were and couldn't wait to talk with that "lovely Irish couple". They were surrounded by well wishers everywhere they went! On September the 4th, when I was exactly 41 weeks pregnant, we all walked into my local hospital for a scheduled induction. The birth itself was uncomplicated and joyful. Being able to see their reaction, their happiness, their love – it was everything. I did it! I completed a family. I got to watch their faces when I gave birth and they met their child, and that was what I had been picturing in my mind's eye for 3 years. There was not a dry eye in the delivery suite as we all basked in the glow of their happiness.

After the birth, I was followed by my Dr and our local health unit nurse. I healed quickly and this was most likely due to the fact that I was sleeping through the night! No one was crying or waking me up needing to be changed or fed. It was a very different postpartum experience than what I had been used to. I visited with my intended parents every day until it was time for them to go home. In 20 days they had all the documentation they needed to fly back to Ireland. While I never shed a single tear over my surrogate baby, I did cry when they left. This couple was more than my intended parents, they were more than my friends. We had

become family. We still speak nearly everyday, and I have been to Ireland to visit them. The pain and the sadness they lived with is gone. They are happy, and they are whole! Surrogacy healed them in a way nothing else could.

My surrogate birth was a full circle healing moment for me. I myself entered this world as an unwanted child, and here I was giving birth to a child that was so very, very wanted and loved. While my own birth represented trauma and loss, this birth represented healing and love. I have never thought of myself as his "birthmother", because I am not his mother. That is also a term I associate with adoption. Instead, I like to think of myself as his first extreme babysitter. It's been nearly 2 years since my journey ended, and I have recently started out on my second surrogacy journey.

One of the purposes of my testimony today is to shed light on the question: How can we prevent the exploitation or coercion of surrogate mothers?

When it's regulated and supported by a strong legal framework, altruistic surrogacy would be an excellent way to prevent the exploitation or coercion of surrogates. Surrogacy in Canada is regulated under the Assisted Human Reproductive Act, the same act that regulates egg and sperm donation. This act regulates surrogacy as a purely altruistic process, and determines what type of expenses a surrogate may be reimbursed for.

There are several clinical requirements in Canada that could work here in Ireland. Canadian surrogates need to be of legal age, have successfully given birth before, be financially stable, and pass medical & psychological screening in order to be approved. Surrogates go through medical and psychological screening to ensure that another pregnancy is safe for them, and that they are mentally well. While it doesn't matter if a surrogate is single or with a partner, partners should be screened by a psychologist also, just as my husband was. They do this to find out if the surrogate has an appropriate support system at home, and whether she is in a healthy relationship. In Canada, it's also important for surrogates to be financially stable and not on any form of government assistance, and I think that goes a long way towards preventing the exploitation of low income women. Being a surrogate for all the right reasons is very important. I can appreciate the concern surrounding commercial surrogacy , as it may lead women in financial distress to decide to become a surrogate solely for financial gain, rather than to help build a family. That's the danger of commercialized, unregulated surrogacy. An altruistic surrogacy model, coupled with a strong legal framework, is the best

way to prevent exploitative surrogacy and coercion, as there are clear guidelines in place to protect and support the women who chose to become surrogates. As a surrogate in Canada, where there are such guidelines, we are empowered, not exploited. We are held to a high standard, and receive a high standard of care. We are free to follow our hearts, and gift our time and energy to growing and nurturing babies for the mothers and fathers who could not otherwise experience the joys of parenthood. For us, it is an experience of love, of joy, of completeness. We do not come to surrogacy from a position of lack, but one of willingness to give.