

MY PLASTIC BABY IS BETTER THAN THE REAL THING

Unable to have children herself, Sharon Gregg has an unusual solution to fulfil her need to nurture – she makes remarkably lifelike dolls, and treats them like flesh-and-blood babies

A FEW MONTHS AGO, Sharon Gregg welcomed a new arrival into the world. Weighing just 7lbs 6oz, with tufts of soft ash-blonde hair and bright blue eyes, she was named Emmalee.

“My husband says she looks just like me and she’s obviously very special,” says Sharon, 38. “When I hold her in my arms, I instantly calm down and relax. I’m able to forget all the stresses of the day when I’m cuddling her.”

They’re the kind of sentiments that you might expect from any proud new mother. But Sharon’s little bundle of joy isn’t a real baby. It’s an eerily lifelike vinyl doll, known as a ‘reborn’, and is one of five that Sharon has collected or made over the last four years.

FALLING IN LOVE

At her home in Florida, Sharon has a flesh-and-blood family of her own – welder husband Ed, 45, and stepsons Dennis, 18, and Howard, 16. But she also has Jacob, Emmalee, Gina, Nathaniel and Laura – dolls she ordered over the internet then customised herself to make them more lifelike. She’s also turned her passion into a lucrative business, selling made-to-order reborns to other women across the world for around £400 a time.

“I’ve always liked collecting dolls. But one day, about four years ago, I was shocked to see that someone was selling what looked like a real-life baby on eBay,” says Sharon. “As an artist, I was intrigued when I discovered it was a life-size doll that had been painted to look like a human baby. I ordered one and when it arrived, I was stunned by how lifelike it was – the doll felt exactly the same as a real baby. I fell in love immediately and called it Jacob. As I cradled him, I was overwhelmed by this sense of fulfilment. I’d never had a baby myself, but this was just like the real thing.”

“When Ed saw it, he said I could do a much better job creating a lifelike doll myself,



Sharon painstakingly applies hair to a doll, strand by strand

so that’s what gave me the idea for the business. I ordered more dolls to paint for other people – but I kept bonding with them. That’s why I’ve ended up with five of my own.

“My favourite is Emmalee because she’s so cute, but the boys prefer Jacob as he was the first one we owned.”

FILLING THE VOID

Sharon freely admits that a large part of her interest in the dolls stems from the fact that she and Ed are unable to have children of their own.

“I’ve known since my twenties that it wouldn’t be possible to have my own baby, and that was very distressing,” she says. “Although I’ve enjoyed helping

Ed raise his sons, I desperately wanted children of my own and couldn’t get that thought out of my head. I wanted to give my mum and dad a grandchild and I felt like I wasn’t a proper woman when doctors told me I wouldn’t be able to conceive. Ed and I looked into fostering, but because we moved around the country a lot at the time, it wasn’t suitable and we felt adoption wasn’t right for us either. So when I found these dolls, it seemed a great way to fill the natural void.”

At first, Ed and her stepsons admitted they found Sharon’s interest in the dolls “plain weird”. “I didn’t like the dolls at first,” says Ed. “They were creepy and too lifelike. I especially didn’t like the ones with

their eyes open. But after seeing how much joy they brought my wife, I became more accepting.”

Today, the family take the dolls out to parks, shops and restaurants in a pushchair or baby carrier, just like any normal family.

“We get a mixed reaction,” says Sharon. “A lot of people will approach me and say: ‘How old is your little girl or boy?’ Or: ‘He looks like a happy baby’ when we take Jacob out, because he’s such a smiley doll. They don’t realise he’s not real.”

“But some people are really creeped out,” she continues. “And other people are angry they were fooled, and they say it’s a mean joke to play on the public. I just ignore them – I’m not doing any of this to hurt people.”

“I felt self-conscious the first time I took one of the dolls out for a walk, but I soon got used to it. Once, I took all five out as a group and a lady came up and said: ‘You look like



People pay up to £400 for a reborn

Angelina Jolie with all those children!’ which I thought was funny. Now I only take one or two out at a time.”

REALITY CHECK

In the last two years, Sharon has made over 50 dolls for people all over the world. Customers choose how they’d like their doll to look from a variety of pictures on Sharon’s website.

Each doll takes around a month to customise, as each hair is individually placed in the baby’s head; eyes are inserted; and peachy or ‘newborn

“I TOOK ALL FIVE DOLLS OUT AND A LADY SAID: ‘YOU LOOK LIKE ANGELINA JOLIE WITH ALL THOSE KIDS’”

purple’ flesh tones and veins are painted on by hand. “I love bringing them to life and adding my own special touches,” explains Sharon. “If you like, it’s my own way of ‘making babies.’”

Sharon gets more orders around Christmas and Mother’s Day, and believes that many of her customers are, like her, infertile and want something to nurture.

The experts agree. “Collecting reborn dolls for many women really is about having a baby as opposed to just having a doll,” explains US psychiatrist Dr Sudeepa Varma, who specialises



Dennis, Sharon and Ed take a stroll with a pair of reborns

in family issues. “There’s something missing in their life and they’re trying to fill a void. Many women will tell you that reborns are able to elicit a warm, safe feeling. One of the theories is that oxytocin, which is a hormone women release when they are cuddling or breastfeeding a real baby, is also released by a woman when she perceives a reborn to be her own baby.”

“I guess every woman has a maternal instinct and a lot of my customers ‘bond’ with reborns, just like real mothers bond with their babies,” says

Sharon. “Ed thought it was strange at first but now he can plainly see that being with a reborn calms me. I change their clothes, brush their hair and give them a cuddle every now and then. I have a doll room in my house with a crib, but I often leave them in a bouncy chair.”

“As for my parents, they are very supportive. Mum crochets blankets for the babies, and Dad wants to learn the whole reborn process himself and help me create these little ones.”

Sharon admits that now she’s got used to the idea of being a ‘mother’, she’s actually pleased she doesn’t have a real baby to look after.

“There are benefits. For instance, I don’t have to get up at 3am to change its nappy or feed it. When I see mothers with real babies, I’m secretly quite glad I don’t have the trouble of having one,” she says. “Real mums have so much to carry and the babies always seem to be screaming, whereas my reborns are always quiet. I suppose in a selfish way, to me, it’s better than having the real thing.”

WATCH IT! THE ADULT BABY WEDNESDAY 9PM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

“WHEN I SEE MOTHERS WITH REAL BABIES, I’M SECRETLY QUITE GLAD I DON’T HAVE ONE”