



COVER STORY

Women seek solutions after enduring breast implant illness

REVERSING THE COURSE

SUBMITTED PHOTO

BY GIA MAZUR
STAFF WRITER

You must suffer to be beautiful.

While that old saying was created to convey pain from wearing high heels or waist-slimming corsets, it takes on a whole new meaning in the age of cosmetic enhancements.

Plastic surgery is more accessible than ever, but that doesn't mean it doesn't involve risks, especially when it comes to breast augmentation. An elective surgery to change the shape and size of the breasts, it typically involves placing saline or silicone implants below or on top of the pectoral muscles.

In October, however, the Food and Drug Administration made several changes to breast implant regulations, including adding a boxed warning. This came after a two-day public hearing in 2019 where the FDA heard testimony from several women who said their doctors did not adequately warn them about breast implants' potential health complications. Commonly referred to as a "black box" warning, it's the most serious type the FDA can mandate to let consumers know about potentially serious adverse reactions or special problems.

Recently, more women have spoken out about breast

implant illness, aka BII, a term denoting a collection of symptoms in women who got breast implants, either for reconstructive or cosmetic purposes, said Dr. Shirley Madhere, founder of Holistic Plastic Surgery in New York City. While the type of implant has no bearing on BII, the range of symptoms (generally classified as autoimmune) include joint pain, hair loss, anxiety, depression, rashes, digestive issues, headaches and breathing problems, she said. Symptoms can occur immediately after surgery or years later and may present differently in patients. There is no definitive way to diagnose BII,

Madhere said, and more studies are needed to better classify the disorder and to establish guidelines for treatment.

"Explantation, or breast implant removal, however, does seem to improve the condition and eliminate the symptoms in many cases," Madhere added.

Choosing removal

After years of feeling sick, Ransom Twp. resident Michelle Romanaskas had her breast implants removed in August, and she considers it to be one of the best decisions she ever made.

"We tie ourselves to these beliefs that, 'I'll finally be happy when I'm X,' or, 'Once I



DR. SHIRLEY MADHERE
Founder of Holistic Plastic Surgery in New York City

am at this weight, or once I have this thing, I will be happier,' and it's just not true," she said. "Happiness comes from inside of us, but we're

always looking toward things on the outside to make us feel good. ... I wanted bigger boobs, and I really thought I would feel happier and sexier. And that was never the case."

A health coach and personal trainer, Romanaskas owns several fitness and wellness businesses, including TRYBE Boutique Fitness Studio, Scranton; LUX Personal Training, Clarks Summit; and Body Lab Nutrition. When many women in the fitness industry got implants about 10 years ago, it deepened Romanaskas's notion that this would be the right look for her, too.

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Within about two weeks of getting implants in 2012, Romanaskas began to feel unwell. Chronically fatigued, Romanaskas needed power naps to get through her days, and she had brain fog. Even though she followed a healthy diet and exercised regularly, she always felt bloated. She struggled with mental challenges, too, like anxiety.

She later learned her body “was basically attacking itself from the inside,” trying to protect itself from the implants.

“It’s trying to get that foreign invader out, and when that happens, you’re constantly in a state of fight or flight,” Romanaskas said.

She asked her doctor if the implants could have caused her troubles but was assured that was unlikely. Romanaskas, who began her career as a registered nurse, knew something wasn’t right, though. She cut out anything that could cause an inflammatory response, including certain foods and skin and body products, and had multiple medical tests. Each lab result showed Romanaskas was in perfect health, a stark contrast to how she felt.

During that journey, she started to see pieces about BII and then found a Facebook group in which women shared stories that sounded similar to hers. Researching BII, she found almost every symptom matched hers, even down to the whites of her eyes looking cloudy.

Romanaskas scheduled surgery to remove the implants, but it was postponed almost two years thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. It was worth the wait, though, as Romanaskas woke up from surgery feeling better than she had in years. Thanks to her physical fit-

ness, Romanaskas healed quickly, and she saw her inflammation go down and her energy go up.

Chronic symptoms

Peckville resident Alexa Wasylyk also removed her implants after suffering adverse side effects for years. The director of aesthetics for the Salon at Lavish, Scranton, Wasylyk got breast implants at 22. While she never felt self-conscious about having smaller breasts, she saw implants as the way to complete her vision of beauty.

“We’re told our whole lives it’s what makes women look and feel sexy, and I loved the look of big boobs forever,” she said. “It was about six months later I started having issues.”

Her implants looked misshapen, and she couldn’t push them together. Her doctor said her muscles were too strong and likely crushing and constricting the implants. Wasylyk hoped a second surgery would fix everything. The second pair of implants were heavier and textured instead of smooth like her first ones. Wasylyk learned the texture would keep them in place, like “Velcro inside your body.”

This set looked fine for about five to six months and then began to sag and change shape. Wasylyk also suffered from chronic pain around the implants and under her chest and arms, as well as brain fog and fatigue, and she later realized that BII matched up with all of her ailments. She grew more unhappy when heard about a recall of Allergan textured implants, the same ones she had, after the FDA linked them to a rare cancer. Minutes later, her surgeon called her with the same news and offered to replace her implants. Insurance would not cover the sur-



ALEXA WASYLYK The Peckville resident holds her implants one year after explantation surgery. She had them removed after experiencing sickness, suffering complications and learning her Allergan textured implants were recalled by the Food and Drug Administration.

gery, however, so Wasylyk would need to pay \$30,000 out of pocket for it.

“At that point, I think I almost had a nervous breakdown,” she said. “I was so sick and tired, and now there was this threat (of cancer). ... I needed (the implants) out.”

Wasylyk found a doctor who removed the implants almost immediately after her consultation. After surgery, the doctor explained that Wasylyk had so much built-up scar tissue from her previous surgeries that it looked as if she had six mastectomies. He had to scrape out all of the scar tissue, which then underwent tests for everything from mold to

cancerous cells thanks to the Allergan recall.

Wasylyk felt relieved to have them removed and that she had virtually zero pain afterward.

“I couldn’t believe my body’s reaction to it,” she said. “I lost 15 pounds in a week, and my face got slimmer. I was just so inflamed for so long, and my body finally felt normal again.”

Discuss your options

While every procedure, including explantation, has risks and potential complications, Madhere suggests patients consult with plastic surgeons to answer questions, discuss options and



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

MICHELLE ROMANASKAS Shown a few days after surgery, the Ransom Twp. resident opted to remove her breast implants after suffering adverse effects including chronic fatigue, pain and brain fog for a decade.

find the right doctor for them.

While Romanaskas knows many women who love their breast implants and never had an issue, several women have approached her about experiencing possible BII symptoms. She continues to share her story through her Facebook group, Fitness Over Fear, where she streams fitness classes and members share their experiences with exercise, nutrition and wellness and provide new information about BII and breast implants.

“They never made me feel sexy; they just made me feel sick,” Romanaskas said of her implants. “That’s why I want to share my story.”

Working in the beauty industry and having a natural inclination toward aesthetics, Wasylyk focuses on fitness, weightlifting, yoga and other forms of exercise. She has taken a long and expensive journey, but it was worth it.

“I can’t put into words how much better I feel. I can lift weights at the gym, and I can raise my arms above without pain,” she said. “I couldn’t even hug my husband when I had (implants). My husband can hug me now. I am so much happier.”

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Hey, Beautiful

WITH GIA MAZUR

Botox 101: Get to know the popular wrinkle treatment

Once a coveted beauty treatment reserved for the rich and famous, Botox and other injectables are everywhere — even in our little corner of the world.

Despite Botox's popularity, though, there's still confusion among patients and newbies about Botox basics. That's why I'm here.

I recently attended an injection demonstration with Stacie Yeager, a registered nurse and nurse injector, of Timeless Aesthetics, which operates out of Century Dental Associates locations in Eynon and Scranton. Then, I made the leap and got some Botox myself.

This week, though, I will break down what you need to know before booking an appointment.

I know people have a sometimes visceral reaction to cosmetic enhancements like Botox, and I just want to say that negativity of any

kind toward those who choose to have these procedures has no place here. If it's their body, it's their choice, and quite frankly, it has no effect on your life if Brittany from yoga decides to get some Botox.

Now, let's dive in.

What is Botox?

First off, like "Band-Aid" is to "adhesive bandage," Botox is the brand name for a Federal Drug Administration-approved drug, botulinum toxin.

A nerve-blocking drug, it temporarily "freezes" muscles in your face, which prevents them from contracting. By reducing that movement, the skin above the muscle stays smooth. Botox is the quickest and most effective way to minimize or completely erase forehead lines, crow's feet and more.

While it sounds scary, Botox has been the subject

of studies and clinical trials for decades. Contrary to most corny sitcom tropes, Botox doesn't numb or stiffen up your whole face. It only works on the small area where it has been injected. One injection by an experienced injector will not shut down the nerve signals in your entire face or body.

Will Botox get rid of all my wrinkles?

There are actually two types of wrinkles on our bodies, dynamic wrinkles and static wrinkles. Dynamic wrinkles occur from repetitive movements (crow's feet from squinting or smiling, forehead lines from raising your eyebrows, etc.) Static wrinkles, however, permanently form as we lose collagen and elastin over time. (Think of the lines around your neck or the folds of your arms.)

Botox works best on dynamic wrinkles — like the



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wrinkles around your forehead or the "elevens," the parallel lines between your eyebrows — since it stops them from moving. However, even visible static wrinkles will show significant improvement from Botox.

How much does Botox cost?

The cost of Botox depends on a few factors, including where you live, how many units you're getting, the area on your face you're getting it

in and your injector.

Injectors typically price their Botox either by area (i.e. the whole forehead as one price), or by unit, which is how Botox is measured. For instance, Yeager charges per unit, so patients only pay for what they need. Generally, it costs anywhere from \$19 to \$25 per unit in bigger cities and \$12 to \$15 per unit in smaller cities.

The number of Botox units you'll need will depend on your facial anat-

omy and desired result, from a subtle softening effect that requires fewer units or a dramatic smoothing effect, which needs more. Most adult women get 15 to 20 units for the wrinkles in between their eyebrows and 8 to 15 units in their forehead. Crow's feet can require up to 15 units, though your injector may inject less if you still want a lot of movement around your eyes. Because their muscles are stronger, men require twice the amount of Botox as women.

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How long does Botox last?

Botox's longevity depends on several factors and everyone is different, Yeager said. On average, Botox lasts anywhere from three to four months, though it depends on metabolism and how much you use those muscles. If it's your first time, it can last anywhere from five to six months as your body is less accustomed to it.

Botox doesn't work right away. It takes anywhere from four days after injection to start working and up to 10 days for the full results. If you're trying Botox for a big event or special occasion, book your appointment at least a month in advance, Yeager said, to ensure you have time for it to kick in and get any touchups.

What about Botox prep and aftercare?

Though, your injector will remove any makeup and sanitize the area he or she is injecting, you should still go to your appointment with clean skin. Don't drink any alcohol the night before, but do drink plenty of water.

Your skin will look fine after your appointment, although you may see a few little red marks at the injection site or, in rare cases, tiny, mild bruising that will fade within a day or so. It's imperative, though, that you don't lay down or bend forward for at least four hours after the injections so your Botox doesn't migrate. You also can't do any heavy lifting or rub, touch or press on your face (aside from gentle cleansing) for 24 hours. Otherwise, you can resume your normal life.

Does Botox hurt?

If you're my dad, please stop reading.

I have several tattoos, and they were way more painful than Botox, which feels like a little pinch. And, because it's a tiny needle (similar to an insulin needle, Yeager said) going right into the muscle, it's less painful. (Depending on the area, your injector might apply a numbing cream first.) If you've survived a Brazilian wax or have given birth, you can absolutely handle Botox.

How do I find an injector?

First, you want a licensed medical professional/ licensed injector, preferably one with reference photos and experience. Then, look at your injector's face. If you like the way he or she looks, this person probably fits your injection style.

You also want to choose someone who makes you feel comfortable. Your injector should ask you about your concerns and gently suggest the course of action.

No one should ever push you or try to upsell you. If you leave your session feeling worse about your appearance and what's "wrong" with you than when you arrived, that's not a good fit.

Finally, just say no to Groupon Botox. In most studies, the majority of unwanted side effects of Botox are usually not a result of the Botox itself but rather the injector, which is another reason to avoid shady spas or discounts and deals. At the end of the day, if the price sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. Remember that you aren't just paying for the product — you're also getting the experience of the injector. You get what you pay for.

Next week, I'll tell you all about my Botox experience.

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Stacie Yeager
NURSE INJECTOR



Hey, Beautiful

WITH GIA MAZUR

First Botox experience leaves positive results

A few weeks ago, I crossed the beauty line from creams to cosmetic procedures.

I got Botox injections by Stacie Yeager, a registered nurse and nurse injector of Timeless Aesthetics, which operates out of Century Dental Associates locations in Scranton and Eynon.

When friends and family heard I was getting Botox, most were supportive, but others worried it would “mess up” my face. Like we went over last week, the majority of unwanted side effects are usually not a result of the Botox itself but rather the injector. Thankfully, I trust Stacie; I was impressed with her knowledge and eased by her calm demeanor.

Also, some said I was “too young” for Botox, but since I’m turning 30 next month, I’m at just the right age to start. Stacie explained it’s preventative for those in their late 20s and early 30s as continuing Botox injections will reduce deeper lines and wrinkles from forming. It’s still a great option for those in their 40s and older, but to start with a smaller amount when we’re younger gets ahead of it.

The day before my appointment, Stacie told me I should drink lots of water and avoid alcohol. That morning, I arrived at the office at 11:30 a.m. with a clean face and my boyfriend for moral support.

Stacie then handed me a mirror and asked what my thoughts were. I showed her the horizontal lines in my forehead; the parallel lines, or “elevens,” between my eyebrows; and the wrinkles around my eyes. I also mentioned I would like to try cosmetic filler down the line to plump my lips. Stacie then explained to me the “lip flip” — Botox injected into a few points above my lip to relax the muscles. This lets the top lip roll up slightly and creates the appearance of a fuller top lip. I was sold.

I made silly faces to trigger all of my wrinkles and lines (furrowed brow, raised eyebrows and squinting), and she marked injection points. While I didn’t need any numbing cream for the rest of my face, lips are sensitive, so Stacie applied some above my lip.

She then started injecting along my forehead. While I felt a tiny pinch, it was over

before I knew it. She moved to my elevens — which I didn’t even feel — and then under my eyes. I’ll be honest that I was freaked out slightly when I thought about what was happening so close to my eye, but again, it was over before I could really process it. Also, I know Stacie is a pro.

She obviously kept everything sterile and safe, but she also was gentle and calming while injecting.

“Almost done. You’re doing great,” she would say. “Just breathe. Don’t even worry about what I’m doing.”

My lips were last and the numbing cream definitely worked since I felt no real pain other than a slight pinch. My eyes also started to water a bit, but Stacie (and other women I’ve spoken to about lip injections) said this was normal.

The whole injection process took about five minutes. I went back to work after, but I had a few rules to follow. I couldn’t lay down or bend forward for at least four hours, as it could cause the Botox to migrate. (So make your appointment for morning or early afternoon.) I couldn’t lift anything heavy,



GIA MAZUR / STAFF PHOTO

At left, beauty blogger Gia Mazur before Botox injections and, at right, two weeks after Botox injections.



More online

Watch beauty blogger Gia Mazur get Botox injections and more at thetimes-tribune.com. Read the Hey, Beautiful blog at accessnepa.com

work out with weights or touch or rub my face for 24 hours. Because I also got a lip flip, I couldn’t use a straw for 24 hours, either, as the pucker motion could compromise the Botox. I felt fine after my injections, but by 9 p.m., I felt fatigued (a normal side effect) and was ready to lay down. Very unlike me, I didn’t wash my face or apply any products before bed. While it wasn’t advised, I slept on my back that night to avoid pressing on my face.

After 24 hours, I gently did my skin care routine. Botox does not work right away, but by day three, I began to notice my top lip was a bit fuller, and on day four, my eyebrows weren’t moving and the lines in my forehead disappeared. On day 10, my elevens were gone.

Stacie still left slight movement in between my brows, which I love. I’m pretty expressive, and losing that movement wouldn’t have been me.

I am incredibly happy with my results. My forehead is completely smooth, and my eyes are slightly pulled upward, which lifts the corners of my eyebrows. My makeup goes on smoother, and my top lip doesn’t disappear when I smile. Also, my face looks better in pictures.

Two people who see me all the time — my mom and my boyfriend — unknowingly told me the same thing: I looked subtly different and more refreshed and awake. This is exactly the look I wanted: me, but better.

Those are just the cosmetic perks. Since forehead Botox,

my near constant headaches have stopped. I’m not sweating from my forehead anymore or getting breakouts there. Another off-label use for Botox is treatment for teeth-grinding and TMJ, both of which I suffer from, and I’m planning on getting injections to treat that.

Though its longevity varies from person to person, Botox in my forehead and around my eyes should last anywhere from three to four months (five if I am lucky.) My lip flip will only last four to six weeks since those muscles are constantly engaged when I speak, eat, drink, sing, etc. However, Stacie told me that there’s a new toxin being approved this September that will last up to six months and Timeless Aesthetics will be the only place in the area to carry it. (Right now, Timeless Aesthetics uses Botox or Xeomin.)

So, if you’re considering Botox, go for it. (Read last week’s column for tips before booking.) If you love it, great, and if you hate it, it’s not forever. Just remember that we all have autonomy over our own bodies, and whatever we choose to do is our business. Just like makeup or skin care, cosmetic enhancements are a form of self-care.

And when you look good, you feel good.

GIA MAZUR is a staff writer for the Lifestyles Department of The Times-Tribune. Contact her at gmazur@timeshamrock.com, 570-348-9127 or @gmazurTT on Twitter.



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Hey, Beautiful

WITH GIA MAZUR

Lip filler adds confidence along with new look

When you hear about Botox, you almost always hear about its sister procedure, cosmetic filler.

While Botox injections work to smooth wrinkles, cosmetic fillers are injections that add volume and plump up parts of the face, as well as lift and sculpt. Whether you want fuller lips or more defined cheekbones, filler can help. As we age, we lose plumpness in our skin, especially in our face, and filler corrects that. Certain injecting techniques can even make your nose appear smaller. It's truly wild stuff.

When I got Botox, I spoke with Stacie Yeager, a registered nurse and nurse injector who owns Timeless Aesthetics, which operates out of Century Dental Associates locations in Scranton and Eynon, about getting some filler. At my age, Yeager said, I don't need as much filler in my cheeks yet. However, I've always been self-conscious about my thin lips, and I've wondered how I'd look with a plumper pout. I have some weddings coming up, so I wanted to try it out now.

Yeager uses an RHA Collection filler, a hyaluronic acid filler formulated to more closely mimic the HA that naturally exists in our skin. This can result in a more natural look. RHA Collection filler was described to me like pudding, as compared to traditional fillers' "Jell-O-like" consistency (aka softer

and more pillowy). If you've read this column, you'll know hyaluronic acid is a humectant, which attracts water molecules to the site to enhance the plumping. I love it in my serums, so injecting it into my lips was no big deal to me.

As for the cost, filler typically is priced per syringe and can cost anywhere from \$350 to \$650 or more, and just like Botox, it is dependent on your location, your injector's experience, how much you need, etc. Filler can last up to 18 months in the cheeks and anywhere from six to nine months on the lower face, including the lips. However, I cannot stress enough that every person's body is different and things like cost, longevity and even the way it will look are super specific to you.

Yeager advised me to treat lip filler as if I was getting surgery. To prevent bleeding and bruising, she recommended I stop any non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like Advil two weeks beforehand and not consume alcohol for at least 48 hours ahead of the procedure, if not longer. I also drank lots of water the day prior. When I got to my appointment, Yeager gave me arnica tablets to dissolve under my tongue to further prevent bruising.

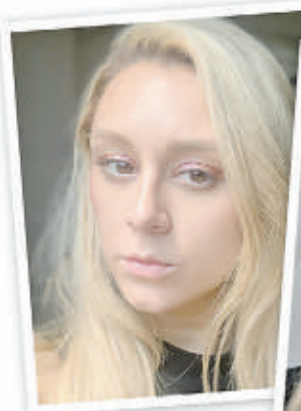
Everyone who has had their lips done warned me that it hurts worse than Botox, probably because the needle has to be dragged through your skin to dis-

perse the filler. Some also told me their injector didn't use any numbing agent, which had me even more anxious. Thankfully, Yeager always uses a medical-grade numbing cream before injecting, and filler has lidocaine (a numbing agent) as well. Since I was super nervous, though, one of the dentists gave me a dental block before getting the filler, which numbed the front of my mouth and lips as if I was getting dental work done (a perk of your injector operating inside a dentist's office). Thanks to the dental block and numbing cream, I didn't feel a thing.

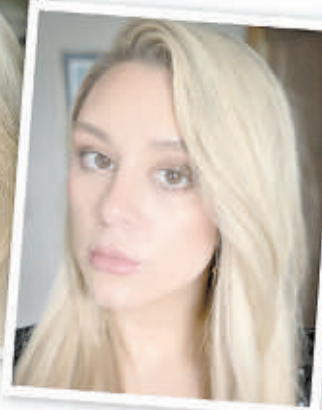
The best part about filler is that Yeager can see exactly where it's going, so there's no risk of accidentally overdoing it. After each injection, she massaged my lips to mold the filler into place.

When finished, I had considerable swelling, which is completely normal since your body will be mad at you for injuring it and it will try to heal itself. Also, I had an added layer of drooping since the numbness needed to wear off. (It went away in about three hours, and I still would take numbness over pain any day.)

I went in to work that day but wore a face mask and stuck a small ice pack in it to stop the swelling on my lips. Much like the Phantom of the Opera, this also hid my face from the cruel world. I couldn't work out or use a straw for 24 hours, but I iced



GIA MAZUR / STAFF PHOTOS



At left, beauty blogger Gia Mazur before Botox injections and lip filler; at right, one month after Botox and one week after lip filler.

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my lips like crazy to keep the swelling down and bruising at bay. I also applied a steady layer of Vaseline, an occlusive, to keep moisture in and bad stuff (dirt, dust, pollution, etc.) out.

Everyone told me I would wake up the next day very swollen. Even Yeager told me I would think to myself,

"What did she do to me?!" However, my lips seemed to be the most swollen about 12 hours after injection, which also was the only time I thought that maybe I made a mistake by getting my lips done. I kept icing and applying Vaseline until I went to bed, and by the next morning, I could see my lips had

started to settle into their new shape. There was very minimal bruising and swelling, and I even wore a lip color, which looked amazing thanks to the new real estate on my lips.

One week after the injections, I am so in love with my lips. They are plumper than normal but nowhere near duck-like or "Botched"-adjacent. Yeager truly is an artist, as she kept the shape of my lips in tact, as well as my cupid's bow, which I've always liked on myself.

Remember, you don't NEED anything — not makeup, not Botox, not filler, etc. You have every right to try it, however. If you're thinking about it, go for it.

I like the way I look in pictures and love the way my makeup looks. I feel more confident, too, which is probably the best part of all.

GIA MAZUR is a staff writer for the Lifestyles Department of The Times-Tribune. Contact her at gmazur@timeshamrock.com, 570-348-9127 or @gmazurTT on Twitter.

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A mother's voice

for COVER STORY change

Clarks Summit mom spearheads legislation after newborn daughter loses hearing to virus

BY GIA MAZUR MERWINE
STAFF WRITER

The instant Cassandra and Ryan Romanaskas heard “Nova,” they knew it made for the perfect name for their daughter.

“Nova” is “new” in Latin and it’s also used to describe stars that burn bright. A supernova, for example, happens when a star contains so much energy inside it that it bursts, causing a bright explosion in the sky. While some look at this as the end of a star’s life, supernovas can actually trigger thousands of new stars that will burn bright across the galaxy.

When Cassandra thinks back to the beginning of her daughter’s journey, it felt like their world was caving in. Now, she realizes Nova’s world was actually just expanding to be bigger and brighter.

“It directly aligns with who she is,” Cassandra, who lives in Clarks Summit with her husband, Ryan, and their children, Nova, now 6, Hudson, 5, and Ledger, 3, said. “There couldn’t be a better name for her because we always say, she really is the brightest star in the sky.”

New baby and diagnosis

After an easy pregnancy and delivery, Cassandra gave birth to Nova on Dec. 9, 2016. After failing her newborn hearing screening, Nova continued to lose hearing, though doctors couldn’t figure out the cause. Thanks to Cassandra’s tenacity, Nova was diagnosed with Congenital Cytomegalovirus (or CMV), a virus that can cause serious medical issues or even death in babies infected before birth.

One per every 200 children is born with congenital CMV in the U.S., making it the most

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CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ryan and Cassandra Romanaskas of Clarks Summit — with their three children, Nova, 6, Hudson 5, and Ledger, 3 — have advocated for Nova since she was born with hearing loss caused by Congenital Cytomegalovirus (or CMV). Cassandra then worked with a group of other moms to help pass a law that requires Pennsylvania infants who fail their newborn hearing screening be tested for CMV.



More online Watch a video of Cassandra Romanaskas talking about CMV, motherhood and advocacy work at [thetimes-tribune.com](https://www.thetimes-tribune.com).

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common congenital viral infection affecting newborns, according to the National CMV Foundation, and infants can only be diagnosed with a blood sample from the first 21 days of life. However, at the time of Nova's birth, there were no mandatory CMV screenings for Pennsylvania babies. After searching for answers and advocating for her daughter in the community, Cassandra took things to the state level and worked with a group of women to help pass the CMV Education and Newborn Screening Act in June 2022, which requires that every infant who fails a newborn hearing screening in the state be tested for CMV.

It was a long journey to get to where they are today, but that's because Cassandra's love for her children knows no bounds.

"She is not going to back down from something, especially if it's for the kids. If something's wrong, she's going to go after it and she's going to try to figure out why," her husband said. "That's just who she is. She really made this her mission. I'm so incredibly proud of the wife and mother she is. We're so lucky to have her."

Over the moon

Kassandra always longed to be a mom. So when she and Ryan found out they were going to have a baby, Cassandra was over the moon. Their first child also felt sentimental as Nova's name was connected to Cassandra's father, the late Randy Kordish, who died in 2005. Growing up, the Kordishes spent time on horse farms, and Cassandra's dad cared for a beloved horse named Nova. It felt like the stars had aligned and Cassandra couldn't wait to meet this beautiful new addition. Immediately with Nova's birth, the world was a different place.

"My whole focus shifted," she said. "Whatever my life

was before her was before and she was now the center of my universe."

Kassandra was in a blissful state during her time at the hospital, in love with their new baby. That's why when nurses mentioned that Nova had failed her newborn hearing screening, the couple wasn't too worried. Hospital staff assured them it was probably nothing, and even a few weeks later when they arrived at a follow-up appointment with an audiologist, neither Kassandra nor her husband were thinking of permanent hearing loss as a possibility.

About an hour later, the audiologist walked out, holding Nova's results in his hands. Before he even said a word, Kassandra sensed something was wrong. Her knees felt weak, her heart sank and her body temperature started to rise as the doctor began to read Nova's official diagnosis, which was severe hearing loss in her right ear and mild hearing loss in her left. Everything was a blur and Kassandra only made out buzz words, like "severe," "lifelong" "hearing aids" and "sign language," as she imagined how difficult her daughter's life was going to be.

"The tears just started pouring down my face," she said. "But the reality of life is, you can't plan for it. You just have to take what you're given and do the best that you can. And that's where you'll find that silver lining."

Early intervention

Still reeling from the diagnosis, she and her husband brought Nova to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), where doctors gave a more positive prognosis. Because Nova was born with some hearing, there were technology and services available to help her. So, the couple also sat down and discussed goals for Nova, as the Romanaskases wanted to do the necessary steps for their daughter to have access to sound.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Kassandra, here with a baby Nova, immediately started her daughter in early intervention therapies and community programs to ensure that Nova had the resources to succeed in whatever way she chooses as she grows up.

Meet Kassandra Romanaskas

Age: 31

Residence: Clarks Summit

Family: Husband, Ryan; children, Nova, 6, Hudson, 5, and Ledger, 3

Work: Advocate for Cytomegalovirus (or CMV) awareness

Background: After failing her newborn hearing screening, Kassandra and Ryan's daughter, Nova, continued to lose hearing, though doctors couldn't figure out the cause. Thanks to Kassandra's tenacity, Nova was diagnosed with Congenital CMV, a virus that can cause serious medical issues or even death in babies infected before birth. Kassandra then took things to the state level to help pass the CMV Education and Newborn Screening Act, which requires that every infant who fails a newborn hearing screening be tested for CMV.

"This is who she is and how she was born. She's absolutely perfect in every which way, but if we can give her it, we will do anything in our power to give her access to sound. She can experience the gift of hearing that we all have," she said, noting that this was the best decision for their family as both she and her husband come from hearing backgrounds.

Nova needed to begin interventions immediately, and her team at CHOP consisted of an audiologist, who identifies auditory disorders, an otolaryngologist (aka an ear, nose and throat doctor, or an

ENT), an ophthalmologist, who specializes in vision care, and a genetics team, Kassandra said.

These days were filled with appointments, tests and early intervention therapies as their loved ones, including Kassandra's mom, Robin Reno, and mother-in-law, Patty Romanaskas, rallied around them. Kassandra, Ryan and Nova began to learn American Sign Language, and the toddler also was fitted with a pair of hearing aids to help amplify sounds. Between their medical team and their own research, the family learned a lot, including that Nova's hearing loss was

not genetic. The couple wanted a big family and second child, Hudson, was well on his way at that point, so they weren't worried about any of their other children having hearing loss. Still, no one could explain why Nova was progressively losing hearing. By the time she was 2 years old, tests showed that she was profoundly deaf in both ears.

With her hearing aids not benefitting her anymore, the Romanaskases made the decision that Nova would receive cochlear implants. While they can be controversial to some, the Romanaskases knew this was the best decision for their family. Cochlear implants are surgically implanted devices that bypass damaged portions of the ear and directly stimulate the auditory nerve, generating signals that the brain recognizes as sound. While it was hard to watch their toddler go through this, plus be parents to newborn Hudson, the couple felt more educated and empowered this time around.

"I didn't feel as worried or vulnerable because we knew better," she said. "We were involved in the communities. I had seen the kids with cochlear implants and we were surrounded by all kinds of families ... so it was a much different experience then."

Getting answers

While speech therapy and other interventions were proving to be successful for Nova, there was still a lingering question as to what happened in the first place. Since the genetic tests came back negative, it was considered a fluke, but that answer wasn't good enough for Kassandra, who was determined to get a diagnosis for her daughter.

She's always been a natural leader, Robin said. She's also incredibly nurturing and, the oldest of three, Kassandra always stepped up to help her mom with her younger siblings, Kourtney and Mason. It was no sur-

What is CMV?

According to the National CMV Foundation, Cytomegalovirus or CMV, is a virus that can be symptomless or presents in cold-like symptoms, such as a sore throat, fever, fatigue and swollen glands, which makes it easy to misdiagnose.

CMV is very common and typically found in home and daycare settings. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 50 and 80% of people in the United States have had a CMV infection by the time they are 40 years old.

CMV also can cause severe disease in babies who were infected with CMV before birth (referred to as congenital CMV infection). One per every 200 children is born with congenital CMV in the U.S., making it the most common congenital viral infection affecting newborns. CMV can be easily transmitted to an unborn child by a pregnant mother experiencing a CMV infection, which can often be symptomless. Children born with CMV who go undiagnosed may go on to have developmental or medical problems later in life, with no diagnosis of origin.

Woman who plan to have children can be tested for CMV by asking their doctor to have a blood sample drawn for a CMV IgG and IgM antibody test. If the doctor refuses, the patient should ask them to document their refusal in her chart.

There are ongoing antiviral drugs in development that may prevent or lessen the severity of CMV in newborns. However, early diagnosis is critical. If a baby is diagnosed with congenital CMV, his or her hearing and vision should be checked regularly to identify any early onset of hearing or vision loss.

For more information, visit the National CMV Foundation at nationalcmv.org.

prise to Robin that Kassandra immediately took to being a mom herself. When Nova was diagnosed, it was difficult for the whole family, but Kassandra stayed focused on what

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Nova could do, rather than what she couldn't.

"Nova is who she is because of Cassandra," Robin said. "Nova is confident and self-assured because Cassandra has empowered her to be that way. Nova advocates for herself because Cassandra showed her the way."

Through her own research and working with Nova's ENT at CHOP, all of the evidence pointed to CMV as the cause behind Nova's hearing loss. A failed hearing screen is a telltale sign of the virus in newborns, and worse, CMV and its complications can yield different serious medical issues and even cause death. CMV can only be diagnosed from a blood or urine sample from the first 21 days of an infant's of life. Nova was over 2 years old at this point, so her hospital blood card was seemingly their only hope. But the hospital did not keep blood cards longer than one year, which felt like a dead end.

In the meantime, the family was moving and while Cassandra was packing up some of Nova's things one day, she found a box under her bed filled with all kinds of newborn items, including the plastic clamp once attached to Nova's umbilical cord that fell off at seven days old. As Cassandra picked it up, she saw the tiniest speck of blood on the plastic clamp and felt a surge of hope rush through her body.

She immediately notified the ENT, and, the next day, drove the clamp down to Philadelphia to deliver it to him. From there, it would be sent to his colleague at University of Minnesota, who would test it for CMV. Results took a few weeks, but Nova's blood tested positive for CMV. And not only that, but that tiny speck of blood contained 10 times more traces of CMV than any hospital blood card. Kas-

sandra took it as the ultimate sign that she was moving in the right direction.

"I did not save that for Hudson and I did not save that for Ledger. Why did I save that for her? And why did it still have blood on it?" she said. "That to me is the universe being like, 'I got you. I got you and I'm gonna get you the answers you need.'"

Moms for change

The story of Nova's diagnosis was miraculous, but Cassandra also understood how easily someone could contract CMV. The diagnosis likely meant that Cassandra had CMV when she was pregnant with Nova and the virus passed through the placenta and damaged Nova's hearing as it was developing. CMV can present like the common cold or with no symptoms at all. She wondered how many other women this would happen to. That's when Cassandra got involved with the National CMV Foundation and realized there was no required CMV screening for newborns in the state of Pennsylvania.

Early diagnosis of CMV is critical, according to the foundation. There are ongoing antiviral drugs in development that may prevent or lessen the severity of CMV in newborns, and hearing and vision can be checked regularly to identify any early onset of hearing or vision loss. One way to ensure this is by babies being tested for the virus at birth, so Cassandra got involved with state policy work. After giving birth to the couple's youngest child, Ledger, Cassandra was juggling her duties as a mom of three. Still, she had to do her part to help other moms and their families facing CMV.

Through this process, Cassandra met Lindsay Lawless. Lindsay, who lives in Abington Twp., near Philadelphia, was about 35 weeks pregnant with her late daughter, Wynne, when at a routine prena-



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



At left, Nova, who uses cochlear implants, has "fabulous" spoken language, her mom said, though the whole family keeps up on American Sign Language, which they use when Nova turns off her technology. At right, a toddler Nova holds one of her baby dolls, which at that time were all outfitted with a pair of hearing aids to match Nova's.

CMV by the numbers

1 in 200

Children born with congenital CMV every year

91

Percent of women who don't know about CMV

400

Number of child deaths resulting from congenital CMV every year

1 out of 3

Pregnant women who become infected with CMV during pregnancy will pass the virus through to their unborn child

1

Number of children permanently disabled every hour because of CMV or complications from CMV

21

Window of days in which congenital CMV must be tested in an infant's urine, saliva, blood or other tissue in order to properly diagnose

6,000

Number of children born with permanent disabilities because of CMV

Source: National CMV Foundation

tal visit, something was wrong. After an emergency C-section, Wynne was taken to the neonatal intensive care unit where doctors confirmed the infant had CMV. After fighting for her life, Wynne died in her mom's arms nine days later from a virus Lindsay had never heard of. She rushed to get involved to honor her daughter's legacy, and she and Kas-

sandra clicked over their advocacy efforts. They joined forces with other women who either had legislative experience or had children with medical issues that could have been prevented.

"We were all just moms fighting on behalf of our children and families across the state," Lindsay said. "This is what's come out of my love for (Wynne), Cassandra's

love for Nova and all of the love we have for all of our kids. That's what's motivated us to get this done."

The moms worked for about two years and on June 27, 2022, the CMV Education and Newborn Screening Act was signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf. It was amazing and fulfilling because it took a lot of hard work, Cassandra said, and was well worth it for all of the babies and families it will benefit. After this milestone, the goal is to make universal CMV screenings mandatory for all infants across the country, Cassandra said.

Finding community

While her sights are set on creating change on a larger scale, the best thing she and her husband did for Nova was to fully immerse themselves in the community, Cassandra said. The Romanaskases found outreach that benefited their entire family, like services, events and programs, including Choices for Children, where they can connect with families like them. They've also met

amazing doctors, speech therapists, teachers and other advocates along the way.

Today, Nova's surrounded by hearing children, kids with cochlear implants, friends who come from culturally Deaf families who don't use any technology and others who make up her group of friends, Cassandra said. Nova's spoken language is fabulous, but the family also continues to keep up on their ASL, which they utilize whenever Nova's technology is off. No matter the outcome, their goal was to give Nova the resources so that she can succeed in whatever way she wants.

"It's so fulfilling and rewarding as a parent to be working so hard to give her access to all of these things, and then watching her take it and run with it and absolutely just become this inspiration to all of these kids and families," Cassandra said.

She also noticed a shift in Nova's self-advocacy over the last year. Things once reserved for her mom, Nova is now taking the lead, like explaining her cochlear implants to new friends or telling them about her journey. She's proud of herself and her story and she wants to share it with the world.

That's because Nova's differences are what make her shine so bright.

"Whatever difference your child is faced with, we as parents should be talking about it, we should be embracing it and we should really be helping them to feel proud of who they are by being proud of them and believing in them," Cassandra said. "Never set limits to what you think they can or can't do, because any time I've ever in my head been like, 'I don't know if she can do that,' she's always proved me wrong. ... She's exceeded so many goals. She is a rock star. She's amazing."

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FRESH FACED

Better self-care starts with the skin this year

BY GIA MAZUR
STAFF WRITER

When you feel good, you look good, and vice versa. Typically, skin is the first thing someone notices about another, but most people weren't born with perfect skin.

That's where skin care professionals come in.

The key artist and owner of MBMUA LLC in Scranton, licensed cosmetologist Maria Bonacuse-Martin has worked with celebrities and brands such as MAC Cosmetics and studied skin care through the Dermal Institute and other courses. She and a few other health and beauty professionals share their tips on looking — and feeling — your best all year long.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Bonacuse-Martin believes signs of aging have less to do with years and more with how people care for their skin. For young people, she suggested adopting a skin care routine, or at least falling in a habit of cleansing and moisturizing once or twice per day. Take an extra step by getting professional facials, exfoliating two to three times per week and adding a retinol product into your routine, she added. Creams and serums with retinol stimulate the production of new skin cells.

As skin adapts to a routine, it responds better and can make you look younger longer, Bonacuse-Martin said. Diet can influence your skin, so she suggested drinking a lot of water and cutting out some dairy.

"If you find a rocking skin care routine, you may be one of the lucky few that can really just throw on moisturizer and run out the door," she said.

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JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Maria Bonacuse-Martin, a licensed cosmetologist, is key artist and owner of MBMUA LLC, Scranton, and holds extensive knowledge on skin care.



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BE PREPARED

Bonacuse-Martin said you absolutely need to spend a bit more on skin care if you want to see real results. Head to specialty stores or department stores or find reputable beauty retailers online for quality products.

“The more expensive products contain more potent ingredients, which you will use less of over time,” Bonacuse-Martin explained. “Skin care products from the drugstore contain less potent ingredients and more fillers, costing you more in the long run, with almost no results.”

The drugstore is a great place to pick up other beauty products, however, such as foundations, body moisturizers and makeup wipes, she noted. With healthy skin, makeup not only looks better but also can be applied lightly. Apply just foundation, concealer and powder to let skin breathe, Bonacuse-Martin suggested.

Cleansing your face is an essential skin care step, but remember to clean your makeup brushes and cell phones frequently, too, said Kara Cordaro, a certified physician assistant at Lackawanna Valley Dermatology Associates in Scranton. Chatting on a phone covered in bacteria and oil can lead to break-



CORDARO

outs and rashes along your jaw line and cheek, she said.

Cordaro warned that prodding and picking at pimples can cause more breakouts, depressed scars and, occasionally, broken blood vessels. If you really can't stand to see a white head, apply a clean, warm compress to it.

Feel better all over

What about the rest of your body? Maura Zangardi, stylist at Hez Studio Salon and Spa in Scranton, offered these tips to glow from head to toe, all year long.



ZANGARDI

Nails and hands Gel manicures work best, and adding a paraffin dip to a manicure locks in moisture. **For natural nails**, massage on cuticle oil (Zangardi suggests CND SolarOil) at nighttime to keep them strong and healthy.

Lips Vitamin E and C lip balms applied throughout the day keep lips soft. **For chapped lips**, mix a little honey with sugar and rub it on lips in a circular motion to slough off dead skin. Follow with balm.

Hair For those struggling with static during the dry, cold months, prep while hair is still wet. Use Goldwell Kerasilk Control De-Frizz Primer from midshaft to ends before you blow dry. **Finish with a keratin spray**, such as Goldwell Kerasilk Humidity Barrier Spray. Protect your hair from heat-styling to keep it healthy. **Use a heat spray**, such as KMS Free Shape 2-in-1 Styling and Finishing Spray, before curling or flat ironing. With a little heat, the product reactivates on days you don't feel like washing your hair. **Look to social media** for new ideas when in a rut. Check out @hezstudio on Instagram for do-it-yourself tutorials or search hashtags on the app to find looks from all over the globe. Use keywords on YouTube and Pinterest, too, to search for looks from salons, stylists and social media influencers. — GIA MAZUR



PROTECT YOUR SKIN

Long, steamy showers have a tendency to dry up skin and create a scaly appearance, Cordaro said, so opt for lukewarm temps instead. Right after stepping out of the shower, apply body cream or lotion to seal in moisture while skin is most vulnerable. Dry, itchy skin is most common in the winter months, but moisture is important year-round.

Sunscreen is a must, too, Cordaro said. Apply at least SPF 30 to the face, neck, ears, chest and hands daily to not only prevent skin cancer but also premature skin aging. The SPF level translates to the amount of time the sun protection will work for, so, for example, SPF 30 works for 30 minutes. After that, Bonacuse-Martin said, you need to reapply.

“What you do, or don't do, for your skin

now is what is going to rear its ugly head later in life,” she said.

Wear sunglasses with UV protection to shield your sight from the sun's rays and keep you from squinting, which can create fine lines and crow's feet on your face, and avoid tanning beds.

“If you really want that bronzed skin appearance, please get a spray tan,” Cordaro said.

FIGHT SIGNS OF AGING

Around 40 is when people start to see signs of aging, although Bonacuse-Martin insisted that depends on how you've taken care of yourself. The regeneration process is much slower at that point, she explained, and collagen doesn't replenish as quickly as it once did. Adding a retinol and vitamin C serum to your daily



skin care routine or getting a facial or microdermabrasion treatment every eight weeks or so should help.

Although it's not for everyone, seeking cosmetic procedures is an option, too, Bonacuse-Martin said.

“I am also a firm believer that a little Botox and filler can go a long way,” she said. “If you've ever wanted to try it, just do it. If you hate it, it wears off. If you love it, go back for more.”

Be on the lookout for new or changing spots or moles on your body. If something looks different or out of place, make an appointment with your dermatologist. Cordaro also recommends yearly screening exam with your dermatologist, too. “It can save your life,” she said.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

KEEP THE FEELING

After you've got your routine down, stay on track.

“I mean, let's all be honest with ourselves, when you're feeling confident and good about yourself, people take notice,” she said. “When you know you look good, everyone else can see that and you immediately feel better.”

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Hey, Beautiful

WITH GIA MAZUR

YouTuber's look at celebrity surgery a fascinating watch

This column is a reflection of my beauty life: what I'm using, wearing and obsessing over this week.

My latest beauty binge has been Lorry Hill's channel on YouTube. For her 400,000 or so subscribers, Hill goes over, in detail, the cosmetic procedures she personally believes various celebrities have had. While she makes it clear in every video that she's not an expert (her YouTube bio also states, "Please visit a plastic surgeon for medical advice"), Hill comes from the world of cosmetic and general dentistry. She's also an enthusiast, having had several procedures of her own, including a facelift and nose job.

Hill notes that she does extensive research about each celebrity whose procedures she dissects, including comparing the person's unretouched photos, social media profiles, news stories and even timelines to deduce recovery time.

Her videos are absolutely fascinating, but what I like most is that they're not designed to call out celebrities or shame anyone for getting plastic surgery

As Hill told The New York Times, she makes these videos to show how much work goes into a celebrity's image.

"We're sitting here comparing our natural selves — in most cases it's younger people doing the comparing — to a celebrity's surgical images, and they don't know a person has plastic surgery at all," she told the newspaper.

Also, Hill typically spends the first part of each video discussing her favorite features of the celebrity in question.

And she doesn't just talk about celebs, as she's also made videos about her own plastic surgeries. These videos aren't aspirational either, like when she documented nearly every step of her facelift, including the sometimes painful month-long recovery and the year-long swelling and healing process.

Her videos are eye-opening, too. I think I'm pretty aware of beauty products and procedures, but after watching Hill's content, I learned so much more about plastic surgery and how many procedures actually exist. Botox and filler

are like finger paint compared to what's available. You have your typical procedures — such as rhinoplasties (nose jobs), facelifts and neck lifts — but there also are ones I didn't realize existed, including upper and lower blepharoplasty, aka eyelid surgery, which repairs droopy eyelids and also may involve removing excess skin, muscle and fat from below or above the eye.

Hill surmises that this is a pretty popular surgery among celebrities (this includes most of the Kardashian-Jenner family, Megan Fox, Margot Robbie and Ariana Grande, to name a few). As we age, our eyelids stretch, and the muscles supporting them weaken. As a result, excess fat may gather above and below our eyelids, causing sagging eyebrows, droopy upper lids and bags under the eyes. This can impede eyesight, so many people opt for this procedure to correct that.

However, sagging eyelids and undereye bags are signs of aging, and lots of the girlies are getting this surgery done to combat that, or to just change the shape of their eyes



SUBMITTED PHOTO

YouTube creator Lorry Hill dissects, in detail, the cosmetic procedures she personally believes various celebrities have had for her 400,000 or so subscribers.

Read more online at thetimes-tribune.com/blogs/hey_beautiful.

completely, Hill surmises. They open them just a bit more and give the lifted, sculpted look that's synonymous with being a celebrity.

As far as body procedures, the Brazilian butt lift, aka BBL, is pretty popular. This procedure takes your own existing fat to make your butt bigger for an hourglass shape. Excess fat is removed from the hips, abdomen, lower back or thighs via liposuction, and then some of this fat is then strategically injected into the butt for a rounder, more lifted look. While I've known for a while that this is how many celebs (and social media influencers) are running around with very big butts and tiny waists, I didn't realize that it's one of the most dangerous pro-

cedures since accidental injection of fat into large veins can cause that fat to travel up to the heart, lungs or brain.

While I learned about procedures from Hill's videos, the way she presents them also got me thinking about how skewed our perception of body image really is.

I will always be pro-plastic surgery because I am pro-what-ever you need to do for yourself. However, it's a dangerous and slippery slope in more ways than one. As adults, we're pretty skeptical that most famous people aren't walking around in the bodies they were born in. However, it's still hard not to compare ourselves to celebrities. I can't even begin to imagine the effect it has on the younger generations.

Plastic surgery also is more accessible now. Treatments that were once only reserved for the rich and famous are available almost everywhere as medi-spas pop up in strip malls like nail salons used to and places like hair salons, dentists' offices and even urgent care facilities offer Botox and filler.

Everyone deserves to look and feel good in their own skin, and I will never judge anyone and what they choose to do with their bodies, but we have to make sure it's for the right reasons and not because we're trying to keep up.

GIA MAZUR is a staff writer for the Lifestyles Department of The Times-Tribune. Contact her at gmazur@timeshamrock.com, 570-348-9127 or @gmazurTT on Twitter.



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Hey, Beautiful

WITH GIA MAZUR

Social media's obsession with weight loss drug unravels 'body positivity'

For years, when I heard people talk about the obsession with thinness that took place in the early- to mid-2000s, I marked myself safe from having a negative body image.

And I can't believe how wrong I was.

I think it's partially because, by the 2010s, society started to lean into "body positivity" and accepting "curvy" bodies.

Now thinking back, it wasn't so positive, as there were still parameters. Being "curvy" meant you had a big, round butt, but it also meant you had to have a flat tummy, slim shoulders and a thigh gap along with it. Otherwise, you were still either too big, or too small. The funny part is, no one said any of this out loud. We just continued to talk about "body positivity," while simultaneously scrolling by hundreds of images of people with perfectly symmetrical features, teeny-tiny waists and big butts. You don't need to proclaim something is the ideal body type when you're constantly bombarded with it.

So, up until now, things felt unrealistic, but the bar was so low 20 years ago, that calling anything other than a very thin body type the "ideal" body type felt like a step up.

Then, I heard about Ozempic.

A buzzy drug that's gaining popularity on TikTok and Instagram, Ozempic is the most well-known brand name for semaglutide. Part of a class of drugs called GLP-1 receptor agonists (others are Wegovy and Mounjaro), these drugs can lower blood sugar and spur insulin production, making them ideal for pre-diabetic or diabetic patients.

They also mimic the fullness your body feels when you eat food, and sometimes, they even bring on the nausea you'll get from overeating. Thanks to this, more people have been using drugs like Ozempic to lose weight, which is perfect for those

Google searches for "ozempic" spiked to an all-time high one week after the 2022 Met Gala, right around the time Kim K notably dropped 16 pounds in a week to fit into Marilyn Monroe's dress.

whose weight impacts their health. However, thousands of people are using drugs like Ozempic to drop those last 15-20 pounds effortlessly. It's concerning, as the Guardian put it in a recent story.

"After being injected with

Ozempic, a user could try to imagine ... a half-pound Baconator bacon cheeseburger from Wendy's, and their body physically revolts, with spasms of nausea and waves of ill feeling," the article read. "It's the chemical realization of a behavioral psychologist's wildest dream; A Clockwork Orange for junk food, an eating disorder in an injection."

According to Reddit.com, celebrities and other wealthy people have been on the Ozempic train for a while. And though the Kardashians-Jenners always attribute their weight-loss to diet and exercise, those gurlies have been looking thinner than ever, in my opinion. Google searches for "ozempic" spiked to an all-time high one week after the 2022 Met Gala, right around the time Kim K notably dropped 16 pounds in a week to fit into Marilyn Monroe's dress.

But it's not just for the first family of reality TV. Hollywood's newest weight-loss drug has trickled down to the mainstream and I would bet you know someone who (possibly secretly) is using Ozempic or one of its sisters.

I'm pro-whatever you want to do to feel better in your own skin, but things are getting sticky. Ozempic's uptick in popularity has led to a short-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Read more online at thetimes-tribune.com/blogs/hey_beautiful.

age. According to the Food and Drug Administration, the shortage is expected to last for several months, which means people who have diabetes or others who desperately need this drug for health reasons may not have immediate access to it.

At first, I was disturbed. Then, I got angry.

The other day, I saw an article proclaiming that, along with the fashion of the time, the "heroin chic," very thin body type of the late-'90s/early-2000s is back in the spotlight. I hate the term "heroin-chic," because not only does it promote an unhealthily thin body, but also, as someone who has known and loved those in the throes of opioid addiction, heroin is more horrifying, upsetting and exhausting than it is "chic."

I am not shaming skinny bodies, either; as some people are naturally thin, but to refer to a specific body type as more desirable or "trendier" than another is harmful. "Curvy" positivity felt

radical, but now I realize it was just another unattainable body type disguised as inclusivity. The cycle continues and we continue to pick apart our reflections.

As I looked back at my relationship with my body, I realized that I wasn't safe from negative body image, but rather, I've learned to live alongside it.

It was there as a pre-teen when I dreaded being "too fat" for (aka growing out of) clothing from abercrombie kids. It was there as a teenager when I thought my cheerleading uniform highlighted my belly fat or when I wouldn't wear the ultra-low-rise jeans of the time because my "muffin top" would stick out. I battled it in my late teens as my weight fluctuated throughout college and especially when people (men) in bars I was singing at made (unwelcome) comments about my body. I fight it every day when I look in the mirror and think I look "wide" or my jeans feel too tight

around my waist or my belly pokes out in my dresses.

It's so normal to me and such a part of my daily life, that I never even realized what it really was. And neither do most people as nine times out of 10, conversations with others turn to talking about our bodies, usually in a negative way.

While I appreciate it and it's kind of you, this isn't for anyone to tell me how great they think I look. This is just because I'm tired of thinking and talking about my body in any other way than thanking it for what it does for me. Every day that I wake up and can walk, talk, give hugs, etc., is a good day. A friend said it best, "Your body is your home. Keep her running smoothly — your health is your wealth."

I'll keep trying to remember that.

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Old Forge residents Leslie and Ron Ricci tried to conceive a child for more than a decade. On their final round of treatments when they were out of resources, financial and otherwise, they finally got their wish and had a baby boy, Ronald Beaux "RonBo" Ricci IV, in summer 2018. Then and now, Leslie Ricci has been a vocal advocate for those struggling with fertility.



CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

BY GIA MAZUR
STAFF WRITER

Finally family

Years of fertility struggles pay off with baby boy

Two pink lines. Leslie Ricci noticed the pregnancy test in the bathroom garbage. She had taken it that morning — one of the estimated 150 tests she took over the preceding 10 years — and, just like the others, had thrown it away when she thought it was negative.

That night though — Oct. 25, 2017 — was different. The test displayed two solid pink lines.

Ricci stared at the results she had waited to see for years. All the doctors appointments, specialist visits,

medications, blood work, ultrasounds, hours of research, tears shed and time spent wondering if she would ever be a mom came down to those two pink lines. She took eight more tests that night to be sure, and each test returned a positive result.

"I thought I was going crazy," Ricci, 37, said on a spring afternoon in the Old Forge home she shares with her husband and high school sweetheart, Ron, 35. "So much went into that moment, and it almost didn't feel real."

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That afternoon, their then-9-month-old son, Ronald Beaux Ricci IV, played with all kinds of toys while climbing and crawling from his mom's lap to his dad's. "RonBo," as he's affectionately called by those close to him, held on to his "Muppets" Animal toy, his favorite stuffed plush to snuggle with, while YouTube songs played in the background.

"Down by the Bay" is his jam," Leslie Ricci said.

The boy took a bottle while his dad rocked him, and Leslie Ricci watched her son's big blue eyes start to sleepily close.

"It's still sometimes unbelievable to me. ... I'm still in awe when I look at him," she said. "He was worth every year, month, week, day, hour, minute, second waiting for him. He was totally worth it."

Sharing the journey

The couple's romance began almost 20 years ago at Mid Valley Secondary Center, where Ron Ricci caught the eye of then-Leslie Kaczmarek in a general business class. By 2003, they officially were a couple, and by 2006, they had married.

As young newlyweds — Leslie Ricci was 24, and Ron Ricci was 22 — they weren't concerned with trying to start a family. Around 2009, that had changed, but the years went by, and a baby never came.

"I did all the things they say to do to increase your fertility," Leslie Ricci said. "I quit smoking. I lost that magic percentage of weight that they say (you need) to regain your fertility. I did that several times. And just nothing was working."

Dozens of trial-and-error methods as well as emotional and financial stress dotted the couple's long journey. While they weren't alone, Leslie Ricci saw a stigma



CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Leslie Ricci, pictured with her then 9-month-old son, RonBo, above, researched, advocated for herself and turned to other women experiencing infertility throughout her own journey. At right, the couple continued to share their pregnancy journey on social media with snapshots from a maternity photo shoot.

around infertility, so, in 2015, she shared her story through social media. Her first Facebook post detailing their struggles garnered messages from women sharing their own woes. She kept documenting every part of her story — from each devastating failed treatment to the joyful maternity photos from when their baby boy finally was on the way — and joined online communities filled with those experiencing the same things as her.

"It was really therapeutic for me, and it made the experience as bearable as it could be," Leslie Ricci said. "We

thought it was really important because not everyone could be as open, and I just wanted to be brave with my story so other women could feel free to be brave with theirs."

Leslie Ricci said her doctors believe she has polycystic ovarian syndrome, or PCOS, a hormonal imbalance that can interfere with normal ovulation. In 2016, her gynecologist had her try Clomid, a fertility drug that helps the brain produce more follicle-stimulating hormone, or FSH, which increases the chance of ovulation.

After four or five rounds of

that failed, Leslie Ricci was referred to a reproductive endocrinologist, Dr. Jennifer Gell, who put her on a few more rounds of the drug. They didn't work either, and so her doctor suggested trying intrauterine insemination, or IUI, which required Follistim, an at-home shot administered into her stomach that pumped FSH right into the system. All three rounds of IUIs failed.

Gell wasn't willing to try any more rounds, and the Riccis' insurance coverage was exhausted. Follistim cost \$600 per vial, and the couple was going through one vial



ED KRISIAK / STEEL CITY PHOTOGRAPHY

about every three days.

The final effort would be in vitro fertilization, or IVF, which can cost up to \$25,000 per cycle altogether. Their insurance would not cover IVF, and the Riccis couldn't afford it.

"I was feeling pretty sad and depressed at that point," Leslie Ricci said.

Her husband was crushed, too, especially since he couldn't do anything more to help her.

"There's not too much you can do besides offering support," Ron Ricci said. "That's kind of the hardest part of the whole thing ... seeing

(her) suffer, and besides offering a shoulder to cry on, there's nothing you can really do. It's tough to watch someone you love go through that. You just have to keep going."

Friends and family were there for them as well. Ashley Salerno and her fiancé, Phil Scavo, have known the Riccis for almost a decade, and Leslie Ricci confided in Salerno each step of the way.

"We would always say no one deserves to be parents more than Leslie and Ron," Salerno said. "They're the most giving people and have so much love to give. They

would make the best parents. It just wasn't fair."

Last chance

The Riccis began looking at other avenues, such as adoption — which came with its own set of challenges — before Leslie Ricci decided to try to lose more weight. Both she and her husband went on the ketogenic diet, a high-fat, adequate-protein and low-carbohydrate plan that forces the body to burn fats rather than carbs.

This helped her drop several pounds, and she called Gell to try something new. This was the last possible effort the couple could afford, financially and emotionally.

She completed two rounds of Letrozole, a breast cancer drug also used for fertility treatments that boosts FSH production, and neither round worked. But the third one did.

"It was completely surreal," Leslie Ricci said. "We had waited for it for so long, and it was finally here."

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Infertility struggles emotional as well as physical

Infertility can leave couples emotionally and financially exhausted, but treatment options and support can help.

About 9% of men and about 11% of women of reproductive age in the United States have experienced fertility problems, according to the National Survey of Family Growth. Infertility means being unable to

conceive after one year of trying, or after six months of trying if the woman is 35 or older, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. After a year of trying to conceive, a couple should contact an obstetrician and gynecologist, said Sonam Patel, a second-year medical resident at the Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education, Scranton. From there, both partners might be tested before being referred to a reproductive endocrinologist who specializes in fertility.



PATEL



WILCOX

Of couples trying to conceive, one-third will need intervention for the female partner, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office on Women's Health. Polycystic ovarian syndrome, or PCOS, a hormonal disorder that can interfere with normal ovulation, is the most common cause of female infertility, the office noted. Other causes include primary ovarian insufficiency, blocked fallopian tubes, physical problems with the uterus and uterine fibroids.

Another third of infertility cases occur because of the male partner, according to the women's health office. In men, infertility can result from having too few sperm, no sperm, problems with sperm movement or varicocele, a vein enlargement that affects the number or shape of sperm.

A mixture of male and female problems and unknown problems cause the other cases of infertility, the women's health office noted.

While fertility declines with age in both sexes, the effects of age are much greater in women, according to a committee study by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and Society for Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility. Women in their 30s are about half as fertile as they were in their early 20s, and their chance of conception declines significantly after age 35.

In both sexes, infertility can be treated by medicine, surgery, artificial insemination or assisted reproductive technology, and most of the time, these methods are combined.

While some methods — such as in vitro fertilization, or IVF, in which an egg is fertilized by sperm outside the body — can cost up to \$25,000, Patel said, couples first should explore more affordable options or ones their insurance covers, such as medications or intrauterine insemination.

"I think people think 'fertility' and think 'IVF. That's too expensive,'" Patel said. "There are more options that can be more feasible. It's not just IVF."

Dr. Brian Wilcox, an obstetrician and gynecologist with Physicians Health Alliance, sees couples facing fertility issues in his practice but also lived it. He and his wife adopted their two children 20 years ago after years of trying different methods to conceive. Also an associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Wilcox said infertility is devastating and isolating. Frustratingly, many cases of infertility are caused by reasons doctors cannot pinpoint.

"The emotional part is huge because (pregnancy is) a huge desire for most women," he said. "It's an incredible desire that so many women have, that maternal instinct. ... For women who are trying and cannot get pregnant, it's devastating. I've had so many patients use that word: devastating."

Many times, couples find solace in sharing their stories with others with similar experiences, Wilcox said, noting that society still has trouble taking about fertility issues.

"There's this grieving process when couples are trying to get pregnant and can't," he said. "When someone dies in a family, there's these societal things we do to all come together. ... When someone can't conceive, there's this huge loss, and we don't treat that in the same way."

While many support groups focus on women, Patel said, men struggle with fertility issues, too.

"There's this myth (that) infertility is a woman's issue, but even if the man is not the one with fertility problems, that emotional part is still there," she said. "He is right there, going through it all, too. I think we expect men to be strong and not feel emotional, but it's just as devastating."

When couples who have fought to conceive finally become pregnant, it's a joyful moment for everyone involved — including the doctors and specialists.

"It feels gratifying to be part of that happiness," Wilcox said. "You start wanting it for them as much as they want it for themselves. You know how much it means to them, how they would do anything. It's just a happy moment to be a part of."

— GIA MAZUR



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



Leslie Ricci sought to tear down the stigma surrounding infertility and documented every part of her story on social media — from each devastating failed treatment to the joyful "bump" photos when their baby boy finally was on the way to his arrival on June 12.

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On Christmas Day, the Riccis shared their pregnancy announcement with the help of their favorite band, Patent Pending. They posed with the band members, who have become their friends over the years, holding a banner with lyrics to the group's song, "Another Day" — with a twist: "Lived for love. Never gave in. Never gave up. Now our little punk is pending. July 2018."

"Our phones blew up for the next like 24 hours," Leslie Ricci said, laughing.

While one journey ended, another had just begun. Already classified with a geriatric pregnancy since Leslie Ricci was older than 35, doctors noticed her blood pressure also was high. By 36 weeks, she was diagnosed with preeclampsia and had to have an emergency C-section. On June 12 at 11:22 p.m., their baby boy was born. The whole time, Leslie Ricci focused on the thought that

the two must make it out alive.

"I went through all of this and, at the end, I have this problem that could have killed him or I or both of us," she said. "So when I heard him cry, it was like the best feeling in the world."

RonBo spent five days in the neonatal intensive care unit to even out his glucose levels before the Riccis were cleared to take him home.

From patient to advocate

Within the struggle, Leslie Ricci learned about herself and the strength of her marriage. After years spent talking about wanting to be parents, everything they've gone through ended up making the Riccis into the parents they always wanted to be.

Leslie Ricci wants to continue her advocacy about infertility. When she needed it, she turned to a community of women she met online. They swapped information about the drugs they were

trying as well as what worked and what didn't.

"It helped to have other women," she said. "I think until you're going through something like that, people could sympathize with you, but they can't really empathize with you until you've stood in those shoes."

Leslie Ricci also did her own research — she believes the ketogenic diet played a role in her pregnancy — and learned the importance of advocating for herself as a patient. She hopes to translate those experiences into face-to-face connections and start a local or regional support group for those struggling to get pregnant or who cannot stay pregnant.

"If my story can help one person, one couple, that's all that matters to me," Leslie Ricci said. "I look at (my son), and I know we're so fortunate. I want to help as many women as I can."

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