

## RUGBY PLAYER DEAN MUMM AND WIFE SARAH LOST TWO OF THEIR BABIES TO PREMATURE BIRTH. NOW HAPPILY RAISING SON ALFIE, THEY RETRACE THEIR HEARTBREAKING ROAD TO PARENTHOOD

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# OUT OF THE



It's a drizzly winter afternoon, but Sarah Mumm is radiating light as she teases her rugby player husband about his awkward attempts to woo her when they first met. Dean Mumm, a team member of the Wallabies and the New South Wales Waratahs, is next to her at the kitchen table inside his parents' home on Sydney's North Shore. The couple are staying here while they renovate their house nearby; as such, he is surrounded by visual reminders of his ungainly youth.

Sheepishly, he points out a family portrait from his teenage years. The shot is dominated by hair. Hair with a

lot of product. And its liberal use helps paint a picture of a different Dean. "Twenty-year-old boys and their pick-up attempts are always amusing," Sarah says with a laugh. "Though clearly, it worked!"

The two first met as teenagers when Sarah, 32, went to a formal with a mate of Dean's. But it took a few years for Dean, 33, to work his magic. "Two of our friends got married when they were 20, so that brought us back together," he says as he looks at Sarah. "Then I tried to sweep you off your feet... awkwardly."

YOU MIGHT SAY rugby - more than bad flirting - brought the two together. New Zealand-born Dean has played the game

since he was five; corporate lawyer Sarah grew up in a family of Waratahs supporters, which came in handy when Dean made his debut for the club in 2004.

The two did not marry until January 2012; eight months later, they moved to England so Dean could play for the Exeter Chiefs. It was an exciting time for the newlyweds, who planned for the new chapter in Dean's career to coincide with the start of a family. By the time they left Australia, Sarah was just over three months pregnant.

Then, as the pregnancy progressed, so did the signs that something was terribly wrong. At 21 weeks, she began bleeding. "I went to hospital," Sarah



# DARKNESS

says, “and it became apparent we were in a pretty serious position. We were potentially going to lose the baby.” Despite all efforts to salvage what had quickly become a dangerous

“your lungs aren’t going to be able to develop. A baby can’t survive. There was nothing we could do.” What should have been one of a young couple’s happiest milestones had turned into a nightmare.

The period that followed - spent in shock, recovering in an unfamiliar home with a limited network of friends and family to offer support - was tough. “For a while that was the darkest I’ve seen Sarah,” Dean says.

Ultimately, though, their shared grief brought them closer. “It can make or break a lot of couples and we were really lucky,” Sarah says. “It united us. I wouldn’t have made it through without the support Dean gave me.”

The complications around Sophie’s birth were caused by what is known as an incompetent cervix, which caused Sarah’s cervix to dilate too early. When she fell pregnant again the following ▶

## “IT CAN MAKE OR BREAK A COUPLE”

pregnancy, Sarah’s waters broke. She had to deliver the baby.

Apart from the early labour, the baby - a girl named Sophie - was otherwise healthy. “But at 21 weeks,” Sarah says,

“I will always remember that phone call from Sarah,” Dean says. “I was at training and she was on her way to the hospital - she basically told me over the line that we were going to lose her.

year, doctors put in a suture to prevent it happening again. But once more, problems occurred. The first suture pulled through at 19 weeks; when a second was put in, Sarah was placed on bed rest. By 28 weeks, she had a placental bleed that again sent her into premature labour. After what each of them calls a “high-stress” labour that lasted seven hours, a son named Henry was born on January 17, 2014.

“For all intents and purposes,” Dean says, “he was doing pretty well on the first day. [But with] a premature birth there are no moments of happiness and joy, because the baby’s straight out and within a minute they put a tube down his throat. You don’t get to hold him.”

Immediately after his delivery, Sarah asked the doctors if Henry was alive. “He was about one and a half kilos, so in the scheme of premature babies, that’s actually quite a good weight,” she says. “[But] it became apparent by the end of the second or third day that he had contracted an infection during labour. He was fighting, but unfortunately he just got sicker and sicker.”

Once more, the Mumms were faced with the death of a newborn. Henry’s organs began to shut down, his heart weakened and, as Sarah puts it, “the infection just took over”. When the pair finally did get to hold their son shortly before he died, it was bittersweet. Sarah’s recollection is wrenching in its empathy and detail.

“It was a really special moment,” she tells *Stellar*, her voice filling with emotion. “Because we’d obviously been waiting for it. He’d been waiting for it. But when we held him, his eyes opened. And he knew who I was, that I was his mum.

“HE KNEW WHEN HE DIED HE WAS LOVED”

And his heart rate settled for a while, his breathing relaxed and he stared at me and looked happy for the first time in nine days.”

Adds Dean, “I think that importantly, he knew when he died that he was loved. It was one of the most special moments of my life. It always will be – we’ll never forget it. It’s incredible what you learn about life from someone who lived for nine days.”



**GRIT & GLORY** (clockwise from top) Dean Mumm during 2016’s Argentina vs Australia match in London; the rugby star (middle) with his NSW Waratahs teammates; the couple on their wedding day; an ecstatic Dean with newborn Alfie.



**EACH YEAR**, 15 million babies are born prematurely worldwide; of those, one million die. Professor Mark Johnson is a world-leading obstetrician and expert in the issue based at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London. He is also the founder of Borne, a research organisation committed to bringing those numbers down dramatically.

Despite their heartache, Sarah and Dean refused to give up on their dream of starting a family. When they decided to try for a third time, they were put in touch with Johnson, who helped them develop a strategy. Across regular appointments with Johnson, Sarah had different sutures put into place.

3.45am, and says he was in “a flap” trying to pack his bag. “I had my phone torch on, trying to find things,” he says, laughing at the memory. “And then my roommate goes, ‘Mate, you’re having a kid, just turn the lights on!’”

Alfie’s birth was not totally drama-free: he had some breathing difficulties and went into intensive care for 24 hours. But he remained stable, and soon the Mumms were able to take him home. For Sarah, that first step – one they never got to take with Sophie or Henry – provided overwhelming peace. “Getting to wake up every two hours to feed him was awesome,” she says. “I wasn’t having to express through a tube before he got fed, or speak to a nurse before I could touch him. I could pick him up, feed him and change him. I could just be a mum.”

Twelve weeks after Alfie was born, the Mumms returned to Australia. They are now the proud parents of a healthy, cheeky 21-month-old who loves *Thomas The Tank Engine* and playing with balls of any kind. “We were walking down the street holding hands with him between us the other day and that’s all you want,” Dean says. “You just want little, intimate moments; that’s the stuff you never want to take for granted.”

In 2016, due to career commitments, roughly half of Dean’s life was spent



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birth. “It’s really hard,” says Sarah, “[but] when people ask me how many children I have, I say one because it’s not appropriate to say to someone you don’t know, ‘Oh, I have three children but two of them are dead.’ I’m a mother of three, I just unfortunately only get to raise one. But my other two children are my children; they are not replaced by Alfie. We will always grieve for the two children that have died.”

Do they mark the dates Sophie and Henry passed away? “We absolutely mark and remember it every year,” Sarah says. “I remember them always. I don’t want [other] parents to have to spend the first 4-12 weeks staring at their child through a perspex box. It’s horrific when all you want to do is cuddle your baby to comfort it and you can’t - it’s nightmarish.”

Sarah and Dean remain optimistic as they discuss the possibility of trying to expand their family. But they’re also philosophical. “We found out

that life can be pretty rubbish,” Dean admits. “It will throw some really, really poor moments at you. But ultimately there’s a choice - I had to take Sarah’s hand so we could get through it together. There’s only one way through, and that’s to turn up to tomorrow and keep going. Because if we kept looking back, we wouldn’t have had Alfie.”

“Everyone has their own battles and this was ours. We had great moments and we had bad ones. Now we want to give back, to make sure that what happened to us happens to far less people in the future.” ★

For more information, visit [borne.org.uk](http://borne.org.uk), and [charitychallenge.com/challenge/90/north-pole-challenge](http://charitychallenge.com/challenge/90/north-pole-challenge).

on the road. Or, as he puts it, “half of a one-year-old’s life”. Time away from his son was a driver in his decision to retire from rugby at the end of this year. “I was pumped to play for Australia, let alone to play a number of times, and to captain the team was well beyond my scope of dreaming,” he says. “From that end, it’s very satisfying.”

Besides, Dean wants to give back, and next March he will trek to the North Pole on a 16-day expedition to raise money for Borne. Although, he admits, he wasn’t quick to agree as his experience is limited to a few treks in his school days. “[But] since having Alfie, I got so caught up in day-to-day life that I didn’t stop and think, ‘How

am I going to give something back?’ We desperately wanted to, and this presents a great opportunity.” He adds jokingly, “And if I have to give a toe to it, then hopefully it’s my pinkie.”

Johnson will be part of the 10-person team on the expedition, and tells *Stellar*, “We are delighted Dean will be joining [us] on our trek to the North Pole to raise funds for Borne’s life-saving research. Our vision is a world in which a child’s first day on Earth won’t have to be their hardest. Through our pioneering research, we can make that vision a reality.”

It is understandably difficult for the Mumms to relive their losses, but they believe it is more important to have an open, honest dialogue about premature

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