

## FOCUS

# Hangging on to Hope

After losing her first child unexpectedly in late pregnancy, Sally Heppleston has realised her dream of becoming a mother to a living child. She tells BRIGID O'CONNELL how her lost daughter, Hope, will always be part of the family

It would be a callous thing to tell a widow that going out to get a new husband would make everything all right.

Yet Melbourne's Sally Heppleston has been told "countless times" over the past 18 months that having another baby would cure her of the overwhelming grief she carried after losing her first-born during labour.

Since the 30-year-old first told her story to *Sunday Herald Sun* readers in August last year, her silent nights and empty nursery have been replaced by the cries and gurgles of her now five-month-old son.

But the taboos and stereotypes that prompted her and husband Simon to initially tell their story remain — and she says the well-meaning still want to push the stillbirth issue under the carpet.

The couple are learning that you can never replace a human loss.

Grief has become part of the Heppleston family since Hope Angel was stillborn on August 19, 2008 — five days past her due date — when a "lightning strike" hit during early labour after a healthy pregnancy.

And while they are living, loving and growing as a family, their pain will be felt even more this Mother's Day.

They now know that the grief, and the yearning for what could have been, doesn't diminish.

Life, instead, grows around it. "A lot of people will think this is my first Mother's Day, but I was still a mother last year. It was just an invisible motherhood that not a lot of people recognise," Sally says.

"Hope still has a mother and that's me. It's just that she's not here any more."

It was six months after Hope's passing that Sally became pregnant again.

"It got worse for me after the funeral. For others it was a chance to say hello and goodbye, some closure, but I fell into a very deep black hole," she says.

"It was only the hope of another pregnancy that kept me going."

She was met with constant reminders of her loss — when mixing with child-bearing friends, bumping into people who had last seen her with a bulging belly and even when walking past the nursery so meticulously and dotingly set up by her and Simon.

"I couldn't bear to take it down, plus we knew we were going to have another baby," she says.

"We packed a few things away to stop them getting dusty, which was sad enough in itself.

"People think life goes on, but you come home to constant reminders of what could have been."

When Sally returned home



from hospital without her child, and to 12 months' maternity leave in a silent house, she allowed her instincts to direct her path.

"A lot of people questioned why I still took the maternity leave, but I really used that time to make sure I was grieving, almost taking it upon myself as a full-time job," she says.

"I think having done that has been very healthy for me. I

don't think anything's going to come back down the track.

"I'm not over it, but I've processed it thoroughly."

Being around little girls was also especially hard for Sally for quite a while.

"I cut myself off from a lot of people. Being the age that I am, all our friends are having kids and I found it really hard being around pregnant people.

"I made it clear I couldn't see

their babies, that I felt awful for it and that one day I hope I'd be able to.

"Having Angus here now, I don't have much of a choice, but mixing with mother's groups and babies has been nice.

"It's brought that joy back and reminded me that pregnancy and childbirth can be a happy, joyous thing."

The statistics on stillbirth are shocking and they swirled



**Tears and joy:** Clockwise from left — Sally and Simon Heppleston when pregnant with Angus; the *Sunday Herald Sun*'s story last August; Sally with Angus during the week; Sally holds Hope's hand.

Bottom picture by Gavin Blue, of the Australian Community of Child Photographers ([www.acocp.org.au](http://www.acocp.org.au)). These photographers donate their services to families with children who are stillborn, premature and ill.



around in Sally's head as she spent those second nine months "terrified".

About 2000 babies from 20 weeks' gestation die each year in Australia.

The second time around, Sally made sure she was as prepared as she could be, with extra medical check-ups and monitoring.

"There were no increased risks of anything going wrong

again, but I lived those nine months in fear thinking it was going to happen again," she says.

**A**NGUS'S birth was everything Hope's was supposed to be.

But even up to the final minutes before holding her son for the first time, Sally could not enjoy the moment.

"I remember lying on the table for the caesarean, waiting for