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Army Admits Bandage Shortage, Vows Action

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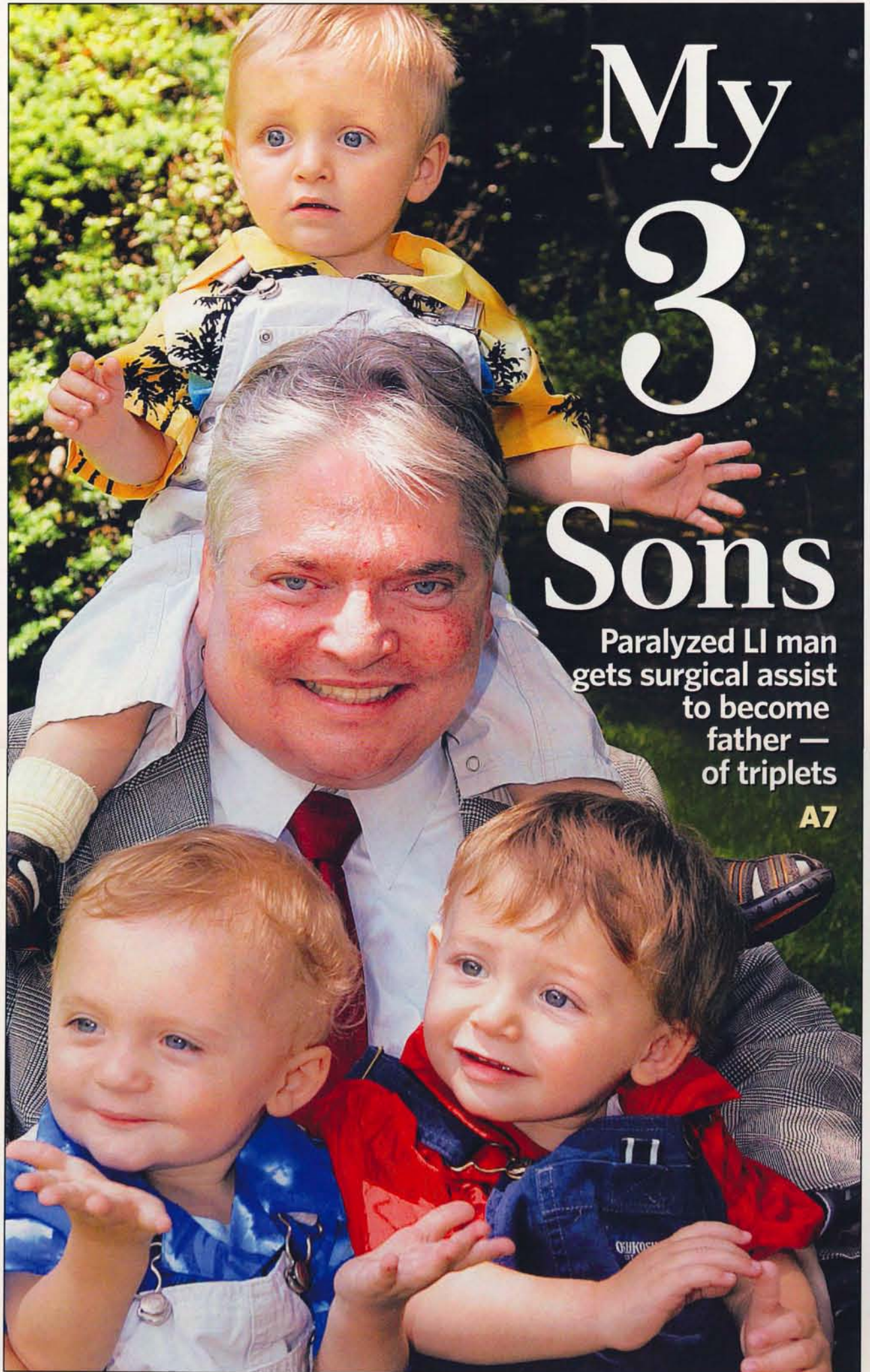
NEWSDAY PHOTO COMPOSITE

Can This Saint Sell Your House?

A3



NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRUCE GILBERT



My 3 Sons

Paralyzed LI man gets surgical assist to become father — of triplets

A7

Ken Kunken of Rockville Centre with 16-month-old triplets: clockwise from top, Timmy, Joey and Jimmy



Anna and Ken Kunken with Jimmy, left, Joey, and Timmy, conceived by sperm retrieval and in-vitro fertilization.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / AUDREY C. TIERNAN

Paralyzed 35 years ago, he's a dad of triplets now

Finally, fatherhood

BY JENNIFER MALONEY
STAFF WRITER

Ken Kunken almost said the wrong words when he introduced himself to his newborn sons 16 months ago. For years, he had greeted children by saying, "It's Uncle Ken!" But as he peered that day into three incubators at North Shore University Hospital's neonatal ward, he said, "It's Daddy."

Kunken never imagined himself a husband, much less a parent. Paralyzed for 35 years, he can move only his head, right shoulder and left arm. But Kunken, 55, who despite his paralysis completed degrees at Cornell, Columbia and Hofstra universities, has achieved what he had believed impossible.

This weekend, the Rockville Centre resident will celebrate his second Father's Day with his wife, Anna, and their triplets, Timmy, Jimmy and Joey.

"I still have to pinch myself every day," Ken Kunken said. "It's the best. The absolute best."

Ken and Anna conceived thanks to a technique called sperm retrieval, in which sperm is taken from a man's testis to be used in in-vitro fertilization.

For men with spinal cord injuries and normal sperm counts, the procedure's success rate is 90 to 100 percent, said Dr. Bruce Gilbert, who said he

is one of three Long Island urologists who perform sperm retrievals. The success rate of in-vitro fertilization depends on a woman's age and health.

Ken Kunken, a Levittown native, was 20 years old when, playing for Cornell's lightweight football team, he tackled an opponent and couldn't get up. He had broken his neck.

"We went into a chapel and someone there said the chances of survival are very slim. So, of course, we all wept," recalled Lorraine Danis, 77, of Oceanside, an aunt who helped raise Kunken. His mother died of polio when he was a few months old.

But Kunken lived and, defying expectations of family and friends, returned to Cornell 10 months later, where he completed his undergraduate engineering degree in 1973 and later obtained a master's. He then earned a second master's in psy-

chological counseling and rehabilitation from Columbia University's Teachers College. After working at a center as a vocational rehabilitation counselor for a few years, he enrolled at Hofstra University School of Law in 1979.

He is now an assistant district attorney for Nassau County.

Seven years ago, Kunken met Anna Blazejczyk, a native of Poland. The two were married in 2003. Anna, who is 36, said she wanted children, and he agreed to try.

They consulted with Gilbert, a Great Neck urologist, who was optimistic. He performed minor surgery, retrieving sperm from Kunken's testis. And on June 13, 2004, a year and a day after their wedding, Anna underwent in-vitro fertilization.

Ken Kunken was with Anna when their obstetrician showed them for the first time a sonogram of the embryos inside Anna.

Very calmly, the doctor pointed them out.

"This is the first one," he said.

"This is the second one," he continued.

"Great, twins!" Anna Kunken thought.

"This is the third one," the doctor said.

The couple was stunned. But thrilled.

On Jan. 25, 2005, Ken Kunken sat near his wife as their fraternal triplets — Joseph Benjamin, James Lawrence and Timothy Francis — were delivered by Caesarian section.

A few weeks later, all three came home.

Now, in the backyard of the Kunkens' new ranch house, they climb on their father's wheelchair and play with its buttons.

Timmy is thoughtful, studying toys with rapt attention. Joey is "the CEO," Danis says, and will snatch a pacifier out of a brother's mouth. Jimmy is an imp who loves to cuddle. All three take turns sitting on their father's lap when the family goes for walks around the neighborhood.

Presiding over the happy, tumbling chaos, Anna Kunken reins in wanderers, comforts criers and helps her husband with the tasks he cannot perform himself.

"It's a miracle," a teary Danis said. "I still weep when I tell this story."

Sperm retrieval, a procedure with promise

Sperm retrieval is a technique for collecting sperm from the testis or epididymis — the tube where sperm collect after leaving the testis. There are several forms of sperm retrieval, some of which can be performed in a doctor's office. The procedures cost between \$2,000 and \$5,000, said Dr. Bruce Gilbert, of Great Neck. The method used for men with spinal cord injuries is usually performed in an operating room because of these patients' particular medical needs, Gilbert said.

A doctor makes a small incision in the outer

covering of the testis and removes a pea-sized piece of testicular tissue. The tissue is processed to remove sperm found in tiny tubules inside the tissue.

For men whose infertility is caused by paralysis and who have normal sperm counts, the procedure's success rate ranges from 90 to 100 percent, Gilbert said. The retrieved sperm can be frozen or used immediately for in-vitro fertilization. The success rate of in-vitro fertilization varies depending on a woman's age and health.

— JENNIFER MALONEY