

Breaking the cycle

Resources in Hamilton

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There weren't any of the usual signs. No morning sickness or breast tenderness. No hint of a swollen belly. So naturally, Racheal was shocked when a Hamilton doctor told her she was seven months pregnant.

It was the summer she graduated from Grade 8. She was 14 years old.

"I didn't know what to do," she recalls.

At that stage, she felt it was too late for an abortion and Racheal didn't feel comfortable with the notion of putting her newborn up for adoption.

Her mom, while disappointed, supported Racheal's decision to keep the baby. In a sense, she had to — she was also a teenager when she had her first child.

"She tried not to be hypocritical because she had us young," explains Racheal, now 16.

There was one condition, though.

"My mom said if I didn't go to school, she'd kick me out."

But for Racheal and others like her, many regular schools have difficulty accommodating the evolving needs of pregnant and parenting teens.

Enter the Young Parent Network, established about seven years ago by Grace Haven, St. Martin's Manor and Good Shepherd Services to offer support and identify barriers and gaps in the services available to pregnant teens and young moms.

Racheal, who had her son Jerimiah last year, is one of about 600 young women from Hamilton and surrounding area who access the network's services each year. With high school classes, day care, counselling and support, Grace Haven was a good fit for her.

It was also a good fit for her mother, who turned to Grace Haven when she was a pregnant teen 15 years earlier. In all, the agency has reached out to Hamilton's young moms and pregnant teens for more than a century.

Most girls in need hear about the Young Parent Network from a friend or neighbour, former residents or graduates. Others are referred by child welfare or public health.

Racheal and her son still live with her mom and stepdad in a home in east Hamilton. She travels to Grace Haven daily for classes and workshops on such things as nutrition or breastfeeding.

For Julia, Grace Haven's residence was a better fit. The 17-year-old was about four months pregnant when she moved in last July.

"I'd rather be in a less stressful environment," Julia said. "It just seemed like a good idea at the time to get away from my regular routine and living at my house.

"I was kind of drinking and stuff like that a lot. I thought, if I move out of the house and out of this habit, I could start fresh and do it over again."

Funded by the Salvation Army, Grace Haven can accommodate 10 residents and four babies. Young women can apply to reside at the home — free of cost — the moment they find out they're pregnant. They're eligible to stay until their baby is 18 months old.

At any given time, about 30 young women use Grace Haven's programs, including high school classes taught by Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board teachers, day care and prenatal classes.

Few understand the need for an integrated approach to teen motherhood as well as Grace Haven's program manager, Jo-Anne Rochon. She's been with the agency for 23 years.

"They need education, they need jobs, they need to feel good about themselves, they need to feel empowered, they need to be accepted, they need not to be judged — like anyone — and they need to be people who make good decisions," Rochon says. "Teen pregnancy isn't just about being pregnant and having a baby."

Meet Carolynn Green.

For a decade, she's taught everything from geography to career studies at Grace Haven.

Over the years, Green has watched hundreds of teens work toward high school diplomas. Despite her best efforts, however, it doesn't always work

out for these girls.

Some don't stay long enough to earn the credits they need — Julia, for instance, withdrew from the program in October. For others, attendance is the problem.

As a mom herself, Green understands it's easy to be overwhelmed by such obstacles as a long commute to the quiet, three-storey Herkimer Street facility. Sometimes it's simply the absence of a good night's sleep — having to get up in the middle of the night to tend to a crying baby — that gets in the way.

Yet, Green maintains a sunny optimism.

“We have a lot of success stories,” she says. “There have definitely been a number of them who have gone on to college and finished.”

Rochon, too, revels in the girls' accomplishments.

“We have young women that take three buses to come here,” she says. “That's a pretty big challenge — getting up at seven in the morning, getting on the bus with a buggy, with all the things they need.”

Both women understand there's more to it than just getting these girls into the classroom, though. At Grace Haven, it's about changing attitudes toward education.

It's an essential part of breaking the teen mom cycle and improving prospects for the next generation.

“We're giving a more positive experience and they're feeling more successful and they can pass that on to their children,” Green says. “Because, again, that's the whole cycle.

“If they hate school, they're going to pass that on to their kids. They're not going to meet-the-teacher night, they're not going to be involved in that stuff.”

Meanwhile, St. Martin's Manor, established in 1954 by Catholic Family Services, can house 12 pregnant teens or young moms and their babies on an ability-to-pay basis. Hundreds more access high school classes and other programs at the Mohawk Road West agency each year, and participation is only expected to climb now that a day-care centre recently opened at the site.

“These programs are really stellar because teens can come and actually live there if, for whatever reason, their home situation is not going to meet

their needs,” says Debbie Sheehan, director of family services in Hamilton's public health department.

And with extensive programming and in-house educational opportunities, “It's really a one-stop shopping approach.”

Meet Carly

Angela's Place became a lifeline for her and others taking classes at St. Martin's Manor and Grace Haven.

The 18-year-old was just five weeks from her due date when she found out she was pregnant. Not surprisingly, her first reaction was panic.

“I have no clothes, I have no diapers, I have no bed. Oh my God, I need to get all this stuff,” Carly recalled. “Am I ready if it happens anytime? Because at 35 weeks, it really can happen anytime. I could have had him two days after that.

“It was really difficult — the unknown.”

She was also up against personal pressures.

“Me and my boyfriend were having some issues,” she recalls. “We've been together for a long time — almost four years — and we lived together for a lot of it, so we just needed some space.”

As a solution, a staff member at St. Martin's Manor directed Carly to Angela's Place — Good Shepherd Services' subsidized housing complex for young moms — where she and her son Carter could live on their own as she tried to work through her problems.

Established in 2008 in a boxy, three-floor walk-up at the corner of Tragina Avenue North and Barton Street East, Angela's Place has 15 furnished apartments where women and their babies can stay for up to two years.

A community room in the basement hosts programs such as cooking and nutrition classes and educational sessions about infant development and parental bonding.

Similar to Grace Haven and St. Martin's Manor, there is staff on hand to guide the girls back into the community once their stay at the complex is up.

The residents at Angela's Place are often not ready to be independent.

They all receive government assistance cheques, says program manager

Chris Maleta, and many have turned to prostitution at some point as a means of supporting themselves.

There are rules at Angela's Place. The building has a secure entrance, there's no alcohol allowed and participation in some programs, such as holistic nutrition, is mandatory.

“We try to help them get back to school or find employment, to try to break that cycle of poverty,” Maleta says. “It's in demand. I have a waiting list all the time.”

One of the more unique programs at Angela's Place caters to young dads — an often overlooked or neglected aspect of teen parenthood. “Being a dad is very different than being a mom,” Maleta explains. “They do feel misplaced. They feel they don't have the same choices or role with their children.”

One of these soon-to-be dads is Dylan, who just turned 20.

When Dylan learned his girlfriend Brandy, 17, was pregnant, he urged her to get an abortion.

He was “pissed off,” and so were his parents — as a well-to-do family, they'd wanted better for their son.

But he's come a long way to accepting their situation. Though he makes good money in construction, he sold his car and bought a house for the couple to live together in the east end, near the former Centre Mall.

Dylan has also started attending prenatal classes with Brandy at Angela's Place on Tuesday nights.

“I've got it all under control,” he says.