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Breaking the cycle

YOU program teaches teen mothers responsibility and job skills needed to forge a productive family future

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WORCESTER— Tracy Rivera from New York City and Jamie L. Burnham from Worcester somehow ended up in the same YOU Inc. social program on Boylston Street, albeit five years apart.

They wouldn't appear to have much else in common.

Ms. Burnham, now 26, started a 40-hour-per-week job paying \$8.75 per hour, her first day after graduating from North High School. That fall she started taking courses at Quinsigamond Community College while still holding down her full-time job as a personal care attendant.

Ms. Rivera, now 18, took a bus ride from New York City to visit her boyfriend in Worcester for a week. That was a year ago, and she hasn't been back to New York since. That's because her money and luggage were stolen and, she said, she couldn't raise the \$78 for a bus ticket back to the city, where she lived with her aunt. In her aunt's family, she said, if your money gets stolen, it's up to you to figure out how to get it back.

The one thing they had in common — unplanned teenage pregnancy — resulted in both girls living in Youth Opportunities Upheld's Teen Parent Apartment program at 23-33 Boylston St.

While Ms. Burnham graduated from the program in 2001 after two years and Ms. Rivera is still in the program after joining in October, both say it has grounded their lives in important values.

The two women are part of a shrinking but still devastating problem affecting teenage mothers, their children and all taxpayers.

Nationwide and in Massachusetts, the incidence of teenage motherhood is falling. In Massachusetts, it has dropped from 38 births per 1,000 teens ages 15 to 19 in 1992 to 21.7 births in 2005, the most recent year for which the state Department of Public Health has published figures. That is a little more than half the national rate of 40.4 births per 1,000, down from 61.8 when the teen birth rate peaked in 1991.



Tracy Rivera feeds her 3-month-old daughter, Sanaii Diaz, in her Worcester home. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

Similarly, Worcester's rate went down from 56.2 births per 1,000 teens in 1995 to 37.2 a decade later.

The Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit research organization specializing in sexual and reproductive health issues, credits a more cautious approach to sex by teens.

"A growing body of research suggests that both increased abstinence and changes in contraceptive practice are responsible for recent declines in teenage pregnancy," the institute's 2006 report on teen pregnancy statistics states.

YOU Inc.'s 10-bed Teen Apartment Program is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. That and its Teen Living Program at 321 Burncoat St. are open to young women from throughout Central Massachusetts. The agency, as well as others that run teen living programs, on George and Cambridge streets, know that statistics show that children of families headed by teenage mothers suffer twice as many incidents of neglect and abuse as those with mothers who wait until their early 20s to bear children.

"The growth in single-parent families remains the single most important reason for increased poverty among children over the last 20 years," according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization in Washington, D.C. It points out that out-of-wedlock birth, rather than divorce, is the main force behind that growth.

Kelly G. Sullivan, director of the Teen Parent Apartment program, said the 20 teens per year who go through the program work hard to break down the stereotypes surrounding teenage mothers and the program works hard to help them succeed.

The 19-year-old program sets curfews for the teens, provides twice-weekly groups where they talk about problems, helps them find child care, and makes sure they are enrolled in school or in job training.

"I can absolutely tell you, my girls work harder than anyone," Ms. Sullivan said.

The goal for the young women, who are allowed to stay in the program for up to two years, is to move into permanent housing and provide for themselves, Ms. Sullivan said. They might enter the program as teenagers who sleep late and are used to coming and going as they please, but YOU Inc. considers it a success if they leave as "confident and loving parents and can support themselves and sustain themselves. We give them a chance," she said.

It's not an easy task, as "many of us learn from our parents. They've not been given that same opportunity,"

Ms. Sullivan said.

"You'd be shocked by the lack of investment that the parents or families (of the teens) have in them," she said. "So that's why we work so hard to give them the opportunity."

Top 15 teen birth rates

Rankings of 2005 Massachusetts municipalities rates of births per 1,000 teens, ages 15 to 19, compared with 1995

City	1995	2005
Holyoke	126.3	96.8
Chelsea	83.7	75
Lawrence	115.4	71.7
Springfield	83	71.6
Southbridge	78.2	64.5
New Bedford	66.9	58.9
Pittsfield	44.8	52.7
Lowell	84.7	51.4
Fall River	61.2	49.5
Lynn	75.7	47.3
Revere	42	45.6
Chicopee	34	41.4
Brockton	67.3	40.7
Fitchburg	57.8	39.6
Worcester	56.2	37.2
Statewide	30.3	21.7

Source: Massachusetts Department of Public Health
T&G Staff



Ms. Rivera, who has been in the program for six months, has such a story. She had lived in Worcester with her mother for three or four years until the Department of Social Services removed her and her siblings from their home. She chose to move in with her aunt in New York City.

When she got stuck in Worcester while visiting her boyfriend, she lived with him, his mother and his numerous siblings for about a month. Soon, though, she found that the house was too small for her to stay.

That sent her on an odyssey of staying with friends for a night or two at a time, moving from house to house probably 60 times, she said. Finally, she was referred to the Teen Parent Apartment program in October by a sympathetic adjustment counselor at North High School, where she had enrolled in September. She gave birth to her daughter in December.

The high school junior was ecstatic about getting into the program. It gave her what she felt was missing from her family life. It "gives me a chance to be a parent," she said, adding that it wouldn't have been possible while she was a nomad.

Ms. Rivera said she wants to go to college in Worcester or Boston to become a social worker. "I'm determined," she said, adding that she will keep at her studies until she becomes a child psychologist.

Ms. Burnham, a graduate of the program, said she was living in an apartment taking care of her younger sister when she learned she was pregnant. She had been apart from her boyfriend and by the time they got together again, he had fallen in with "the wrong people."

She dropped out of Quinsigamond Community College before the end of the first semester and her boyfriend ended up in jail, first for assaulting her and then for selling drugs. He was deported to Haiti four years ago, Ms. Burnham said.

With acceptance into the Teen Parent Apartment program and the birth of her son, Ms. Burnham said, things started looking up. She said program participants get housing and other benefits while "learning how to be independent, learning to raise your children with morals and respect."

Her own experiences got her better paying counseling jobs: \$11 an hour at YOU Inc.'s Burncoat Family Center and then \$13.75 an hour at the behavioral intensive residential treatment center in Westboro, run by UMass Memorial Health Care Inc. After giving up that job in December for health reasons, she said, she just got hired by Lutheran Family Services to work part time at a program similar to the Teen Parent Apartment program. She plans to interview soon for another job at YOU Inc.'s Wetzell Center.

