A Place for Pregnant Teenagers

by Lynda Crawford
Tuesday, August 01, 2000 12:00 AM -

Â

Sharron's room is small but filled with light. The bed is made, everything is clean and neat, a teddy bear the only sign that a teenager lives here. Sharron is 16 and soft-spoken. She only recently moved into this room at Inwood House on East 82nd, where she will stay until she has her baby.

Inwood House is a residence for pregnant teens, one of four in the city. But these young women are not here for a brief detour from their lives while they have their babies and then return back to their families. The girls in residence at Inwood House have themselves been in foster care for years, twenty percent of them for a decade or longer. Perhaps their parents died of AIDS, were incarcerated, lost custody or simply decided they couldn't cope.

As soon as the city finds out a teen in foster care is pregnant, they are transferred out of their foster homes and into a maternity residence, a requirement to insure that they are given the support they need during pregnancy. Indeed, a New York Presbyterian Hospital study in the 1980's found babies born at Inwood house were much healthier, with fewer pre-term births and low-weight births than babies of teen mothers seen at community clinics.

Nevertheless, it is yet another shift for these teens who finding themselves pregnant are then thrust into one more temporary home, living with 35 other young women.

"I thought it was going to be bad," admitted Kim, a 20-year old who has been at Inwood House since January. "But they help us a lot -- with placements and school and parenting classes." And, most important to Kim, she found the staff trustworthy. "When I have problems, I can speak to someone and I know it will stay with that person."

Sharron, was also fairly comfortable with her new surroundings. "I like the independence, " she said. "I like having my own room, and being able to come and go as I please."

Asked what the hardest part was in their present living situation, Tamara, 16 years old, spoke right up: "Being pregnant!"

PREVENTING TEEN PREGNANCY

The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any industrialized nation, according to a report by the Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy . Four out of ten young women become pregnant in the U.S. at least once before they reach the age of 20. While the teen birth rate has declined nationally by 18 percent since 1991, New York still ranks number 42 among the 50 states in teenage pregnancies.

Citywide, the figures for the last two years available from the New York City Department of Health show a 9 percent reduction (from 13,020 to 11,793 teen births), although the teen birth rate actually increased in Queens and Staten Island.

What can we do to prevent teen pregnancy? Plenty, thinks Gladys Carrion, Esq., Inwood House's Executive Director. "We need to prepare adolescents to be successful adults," she suggests. "They need job training, schools that work, and more mentoring to give them significant adults in their lives.

"We need more programs to help adolescents who have experienced violence become whole again," she continued. There is a correlation between adolescents who have witnessed violence and teen pregnancy.

"And we need to help families be whole so they don't have children going into foster care" she said. "Ninety percent of the children in foster care are not there because of abuse, but because of neglect, which translates into poverty. What are we doing to eliminate poverty?!"

INWOOD HOUSE

Inwood House, originally located in the Inwood section of the city, was founded in 1830 as The Magdelen Society with funding from church women, their friends, and a $100 contribution from the city. In addition to the maternity residence and a Mother/Baby Foster Care Program, Inwood House has a Young Father's Program that works with young men on what it means to be a father. "It's not just about child support," explained Ms. Carrion. "It's about becoming a

caring parent."

They also run Teen Choice, a coed pregnancy prevention program going into 14 junior high and high schools in the city, and Project Straight Talk which reac hes out to 5th grade boys about their responsibility with pregnancy prevention.

There is a school on the premises at Inwood House, a computer lab, parenting classes, writing workshops, an internship program, and just plain fun: on the day we visited, a trip was in the making to Virginia Beach.

"These girls hear over and over about being a parent now and having to be responsible," said Kathleen Clark, Development Director at Inwood House, "but they are also still teenagers, and they need recreation and art and music."

DETERMINED TO BE THE BEST MOTHERS

Although social workers at Inwood House explore all options with the young women, including terminating the pregnancy or putting their babies up for adoption, very few are interested in these alternatives.

"There is real peer pressure not to go with adoption or abortion," explained Ms. Carrion, "and that can make it difficult for any of the girls who may not want the baby." The predominant attitude is Ă"I'm going to be the best mother there is.' Coming out of foster care themselves, they tend to feel Ă"I'm not going to do to my baby what was done to me.'

Unfortunately, some of the young women do eventually lose their babies to the system and repeat that cycle.

Between 120 and 140 pregnant teenagers go through the Inwood House residence in the course of a year, having their babies and then, very often, waiting months for a new placement

in foster care.

At present there is a terrible shortage of foster homes that will take in a mother and her baby. While they wait, the young women return to Inwood House and leave their infants in a nursery at the hospital, visiting daily.

"It's not easy to find families to take in these girls," said Ms. Carrion.

One sign of improvement is a recent contract awarded Inwood House by the city's Administration for Children's Services to almost double the Mother/Baby Foster Care. Inwood House will also open up several Mother/Baby group homes, as part of this contract, and has already established an office in Jamaica, Queens, offering teen parents follow-up assistance including parenting classes and help with independent living skills.