

Features

A family's aid helps young, unwed mother to choose life

By Lee Strong

In 1987, 3,264 abortions were performed in Monroe County.

If the women who obtained those abortions fit patterns established in previous years, more than a quarter of them were teenagers.

But 16-year-old Tina was not among them.

Having already had an abortion at age 14, Tina chose to carry her baby to term when she became pregnant a second time. Now 17, she has a year-old daughter, a husband, a general-equivalency diploma and an uncertain future.

Tina is typical of many young women who become pregnant, according to Sue Delmege of the Open Home Ministry.

"In so many of the girls, you have a potent combination of a teenager who's looking for love, but you also have this attitude of invincibility, that it can't happen to me," Delmege noted. "So many of them come from broken homes, homes where they've been rejected."

Tina had lived in a home where she felt unloved. That feeling led her to seek love elsewhere. She became pregnant at 14 and, under pressure from her family, had an abortion. At 16, suspecting that she was once again pregnant, Tina went to the Crisis Pregnancy Center for a pregnancy test. Before she learned the results of the test, she watched a videotape about abortion.

"I found out what abortions really were and how they killed babies," Tina recalled. She immediately thought of her own earlier abortion. "It was hard for me to deal with," she said. "At first, I had a hard time even looking at babies."

Although her parents pressured her to have another abortion, Tina refused. "I stood up for my baby, and was forced to leave the house," she said.

For a time, she lived on the streets and with friends. When she was five months pregnant, she began calling pregnancy counseling services to find maternity clothing. She then discovered the Open Home Ministry.

Open Home Ministry is an off-shoot of Project Life, which has been directing anti-abortion protests in Rochester. The ministry was created in May, 1987, to offer housing to unwed mothers while they carry their babies to term. Volunteer families take in the mothers, and provide them with support, encouragement and acceptance.

Currently, six families are involved with the Open Home Ministry. Seven women have gone through the program, and one is currently living with a family. Financial support for the ministry itself comes through donations. Meanwhile, the expectant mothers are supported through money from their own families, welfare, jobs, Open Home Ministry, and the families with whom they are living. Medical bills are covered by the parents of the girls who are minors; other bills are paid by Medicaid.

Open Home Ministry placed Tina with Carlos and Mary Cruz and their three children on May 1, 1987. The Cruz's had become involved with the ministry through volunteering at the Project Life-sponsored Problem Pregnancy Center.

"At the center we tried to tell the (pregnant) women that we could meet every need," Mary Cruz explained. "But girls would say if they



Tina and her 14-month-old daughter, Rachel, spend some precious playtime together at the end of the day.

told their parents they would be kicked out. My husband and I were challenged. If we're going to tell a girl to have the baby, we'd better put our money where our mouth is."

Although convinced that what they were doing was right, the Cruz's were unsure what to expect when Tina arrived.

"We were a little nervous in the beginning," Carlos Cruz acknowledged. "It's not something one does out of a whim."

According to Mary Cruz, however, the problems that they'd imagined didn't surface. "The ten months she was with us, because God's grace was there, it was joyful," she said, adding "not to say it was a bed of roses."

The only area of conflict was in terms of Tina obeying house rules while living with the Cruz's. She had to limit her use of the telephone, not smoke or use drugs, control the amount of television she watched and the kind of music she listened to, keep her room clean and help with household chores.

Mary Cruz said that although Tina was not happy about the rules at first, she never rebelled, and even came to accept them.

"I think most teenage girls want that kind of thing," she observed. "They want to feel that somebody cares about them, loves them, is concerned about them. Teens want to know what their limitations are: it's too scary to be unbridled."

When Tina first arrived, she was quiet and withdrawn, Carlos Cruz said. Once she got to know the family, however, "she really blessed us with her bubbly spirit," he said.

She became a part of the family, playing with the children, and talking with Mary Cruz about what it was like to have a baby. When Rachel was born on September 5, 1987, Mary Cruz was Tina's labor coach.

During the pregnancy, the Cruz's, Delmege, and even Tina's mother urged her to put the baby up for adoption. "It grieves me to see the girls keep their kids," Delmege said. "There's so much they could do, so much they need to work through. But I can understand them not wanting to give up their babies."

Tina considered giving her baby up for adoption, but decided against it when she felt the baby move inside her. She looked upon the baby as a gift from God — especially in light of the abortion she had.

"I feel sorry that I did that, but I was unaware of a lot of things," Tina said. "But I know that God has forgiven me and blessed me with a beautiful baby."

According to Delmege, Tina's attitude is typical of expectant mothers who have had earlier abortions. "When you have an abortion, the woman is told that it's not a baby, it's a lump of tissue, so you shouldn't grieve," she explained. "But your body knows differ-

ently. The grief comes out in other ways. So many of the women we see get pregnant again to replace the child they lost."

Nevertheless, Tina is not blind to the difficulties she faces because she has kept Rachel. She has had to stay home to be with her daughter instead of going out with friends. She works a full-time job to support herself and Rachel, and she has had to face the responsibilities of being a mother while remaining in many ways a child herself. "It's hard," she acknowledged. "I'll be the first to admit to others that it's not easy."

Part of what has helped her survive is the support that the Cruz's gave her. "They were behind me 100% in everything I did and everything that I tried to do," Tina said. "Going back to school, getting a job, getting a license — they were with me all the way."

The Cruz family also helped Tina discover faith. Born in a Catholic family, Tina was not raised Catholic, nor did she have any real contact with religion until she moved in with the family. "They spoke of God, they shared God with me, but they never pressured me," she remarked. "I respected them and they respected me."

Eventually, Tina began to go to church and pray. "I don't think I would have gotten this far if I didn't have God," she declared.

Tina also began to speak about her experiences to help other teenage girls. She wrote an article for the "Pro-Life Action Report," and addressed the Project Life annual banquet on March 19, 1988.

"I wish someone would have spoken to me," Tina explained. "I wish someone would have been there for me. I feel like this is something I can do. Even if this changes only one girl's mind not to have an abortion, that's okay. I'll do it for that girl!"

Tina also praised the Open Home Ministry and the people who have supported her. "There's a lot of things they offer unwed mothers," she said. "When you go into something like that, you can't do for yourself. You need encouraging, you need support. You have doubts about having a baby, especially when you're alone."

Tina moved out of the Cruz's house in March, 1988, and was married November 23. She's working as a nurse's aide, and looking forward to having a family.

Although Delmege believes Tina is a responsible person, she has worries about the teen's plans.

"I don't think marriage solves anything at this age, I think it compounds the problems," Delmege observed. "Put being 17, having a baby and a marriage on top of it, it makes it worse. If I were counseling her, I'd counsel her to wait."

The Cruz's are more optimistic about the girl they now think of as almost another daughter and with whom they keep in touch.

"We know that Tina's a fighter," Carlos Cruz declared. "We know there's going to be a struggle, but we really believe she's going to overcome it. And we'll be there. Whenever she reaches out there are people to help her."

Advent challenges us to renew our experience of Christ's Incarnation



EDITOR'S NOTE: In conjunction with the diocesan Liturgical Commission, the Courier-Journal is pleased to present the following Advent-Christmastide liturgical series, which will continue in successive C-J issues.

The days of November bring colder winds, shorter days, longer nights, falling leaves, dying flowers, graying skies, a dying of the world around us. People begin to pack away the summer clothes and unpack the clothing necessary for the winter days ahead. Talk begins to concern changing weather patterns and the snow that will soon arrive. Change is in the air. Dy-

ing seems to surround everyone. One cannot escape the reality of a world in transition and a world in flux.

The readings which conclude the liturgical year focus on the transitory nature of human life. Dwelling on "end things," Christians are invited to reflect on immortality, the banquet which awaits us, and Christ reigning as Savior, Good Shepherd and King. The final days of the Church year warn listeners to "be ready, be watchful, wait in hope."

Dramatically and subtly, Advent enters the life of a Christian. One candle is lighted to signal the first week. Evergreen fragrance fills homes and churches. The vestment green is set aside as purples become the color of the liturgical setting. The season of waiting has arrived. Advent is not celebrated as an isolated season. Its spirit can only be experienced in relation to Christmas and Epiphany. The Church encourages her members to view Advent-Christmas-Epiphany as a whole. Encapsulating the richness of human experience, this unity invites participants to prayerfully reflect on the deep relationship which is shared with their Creator. As the world around us changes, so do our human lives. As the reality of death looms before us, so does the promise of eternal life. The days become shorter; our lives become shorter. The flowers and trees appear to die, but spring, we know, will come again, bringing new life. Christians are invited to be-

come part of the paschal mystery and participate in the dying and rising of the Savior. The focus on a future season invites further reflection on the coming eternal season. Advent's joyful waiting opens to the miracle of the Incarnation, which is Jesus born in Bethlehem. The secret of Bethlehem begins its revelation in the Epiphany manifestation.

Christians do not live their lives in isolation. They find hope in the transitory nature of human life, which gives way to the ultimate transformation: eternal life. The readings of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season call Christians to a deep reflection of time beginning with the past as envisioned by prophets such as Barush, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. The figures of the nativity narratives — Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, and Elizabeth — speak of a summary of past prophetic events and the inauguration of a new dispensation. The present can only be realized in the reality of the past. It was in waiting, in trial and challenge, in prophetic words of hope, that the chosen people found strength.

The faithful of today are challenged to find hope in those same prophetic utterances. Today's world is rich with symbols. Our bishops challenge us to read the signs of the time in order to recognize the hand of God and direction of our Creator. Advent becomes a time for that challenge. It also gently guides us into the renewed experience of the Incarnation.

Christmas cannot be isolated into a sentimental moment when one "pretends" that Jesus is a baby again. It is a reality that we are followers of an adult Christ, and our Christmas celebrations must reflect this reality. Christmas overwhelms the faithful with the realism of salvation as today's Christian lives in the light of that dignity and salvation.

Epiphany, the festival of lights, is the commemoration of the Christ's manifestation to the world. There is no difference between Gentile or Jew — all are one in Christ. Challenged to be a "living light," our community today continues to proclaim that the light is revealed to a people living in darkness. The preciousness of human life is distinguished because God has created us and Jesus has come to redeem us. The manifestation of life becomes a clear sign of the ongoing blessing of the Creator and the Redeemer. To lose this sign would be to lose the central message of the mystery of the Incarnation.

In the coming weeks, we will invite readers to meditate on the changing world that surrounds us. The readings from Scripture, which are at once ancient and contemporary, will stir the memory of a Christian people who can be overwhelmed by modern-day frustrations. The central, incarnational themes, such as time, waiting, light, darkness and community, will be discussed.