

Program helps woman adjust to maternal life

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A little more than two years ago, Tamela Van Gelder, 21, was faced with a terrible dilemma. She could abort the fetus growing inside her, as her mother wished, or she could have the baby and face being kicked out of her parents' home in Georgia.

She chose the latter, and hit the road for upstate New York, taking up residence in the Travelers' Motel on Monroe Avenue. Today she lives in an apartment on Dewey Avenue with her son Jared, who is 19 months old.

Once a month, Tamela goes back to a place she called home for two months while she was pregnant — Melita House, a residence for pregnant women operated on the grounds of St. Michael's Parish by the Sisters of Mercy.

Currently living on public assistance, Van Gelder noted that she has come a long way from the first moment she learned she was pregnant. One of the first blows she suffered was being abandoned by the child's father.

"He's done everything to dodge the law," she said, noting that her former boyfriend has since married and is living in the southern United States. Jared's paternal grandfather willed that a sizable inheritance be left to his first grandchild, but Van Gelder's ex-boyfriend has already fathered another son with his wife, ruling out any chance of Jared ever seeing the inheritance.

"The men I get involved with are the worst kind," she said. "His father is a good example." Fortunately, her involvement with Melita House has had a more positive effect on Van Gelder's life. "They'd give you the shirt off your back," Van Gelder said of the Melita House staff.

After staying at the Travelers' Motel for a time, Van Gelder ran out of money and was considering moving to a Salvation Army shelter. But then an acquaintance told her about Melita House and, five months pregnant, she applied for residence there. Although she was accepted to stay at Melita until she gave birth, Van Gelder — unlike most of the women who stay there — decided to move out early and, with the house staff's help, obtained an apartment two months before Jared was born.

Despite her early departure, Van Gelder



Van Gelder reads "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer" to son Jared on a sunny morning.

maintains contact with Melita House and is one of 75 mothers participating in the facility's After Care Program. According to Sister Joan Bringley, program coordinator, the program is designed to help former residents of Melita House adjust to the maternal life.

After Care sponsors monthly sessions on crafts, cooking, budgeting, and parenting skills. The program also sends new mothers a monthly newsletter filled with parenting tips and upbeat advice, and participants can call Melita House any time to ask for a ride or a listening ear.

Van Gelder noted that she generally tries not to use After Care services any more than she really needs. "I looked at the crafts session more as just a break of the everyday routine," she said.

She values those breaks because she has no man to lean on when she's taking care of Jared. "I feel I have to play the role of two parents," she said. "Melita House is there to break that tension."

The young mother faces the future with hope, especially since reconciling with her family. "Now that (Jared's) been born, he's the gem of their eye," she said. "My dad said, 'We're proud of you. We've seen that you've done good with him. He's not suffering.'"

Van Gelder also receives regular help from her grandmother, who helped furnish her apartment.

But she credits the After Care program for helping her stay in touch with the people who kept her afloat during a stormy period in her life. "It's hard to forget the people you were involved with," she concluded.



Tamela Van Gelder holds 19-month-old Jared, as they gaze out the window of their Dewey Avenue apartment.



Van Gelder joins other members of the After Care Program at Melita House for arts and crafts on Wednesday, Nov. 29.

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Clarification

An article on the Nov. 18 Diocesan Pastoral Council Meeting (*Courier*, Nov. 23: "DPC meeting focuses on bishop's pastoral visits") reported that Deacon Stephen Graff said deacons are now required to complete master's degrees in theology.

Deacon candidates must take graduate level courses in theology, but are not required to complete the master's degree. Those candidates who have college degrees may complete the master's if they choose to, however.

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