

Program helps teen mothers stay in school

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — "When I found out I was pregnant, I couldn't believe it. I was depressed because I had high goals of going to college and becoming a lawyer, maybe even Supreme Court Justice, and I didn't see how a baby would fit in."

That's how 17-year-old Stephanie, a Nazareth Academy senior, felt about becoming pregnant. Stephanie, who asked that her last name not be used for publication, decided to keep her daughter, Katelynd, who is now three years old. For the past three years, the young mother has participated in Nazareth's weekly support group that helps students juggle school and motherhood.

Nazareth hired nurse/counselor Donna DelSanto in 1984 to formally establish the school's pregnancy-counseling program, which includes counseling students once a week and conducting the support-group meeting. DelSanto is also a full-time health director at Corpus Christi Center and specializes in pre-natal care.

Ten girls — two expectant mothers and eight moms — currently participate in DelSanto's group. DelSanto said the program began with 10 students, so the number of pregnant teens at Nazareth has

remained consistent throughout the years.

"This does not mean that Nazareth girls become pregnant at a rate of 10 a year," the nurse emphasized, "because many expectant mothers transfer into Nazareth, for the academics as well as the support program, which is the only one among the Rochester Catholic high schools."

"It's not that students aren't pregnant in other schools, we're just up-front and honest about it through our programs," DelSanto continued. "We stress continuing education — I tell them, 'You may be pregnant, but I'm not letting you off the hook.'"

Even before DelSanto's program was established, Nazareth Academy had created a nurturing atmosphere for pregnant students, according to the assistant principal, Sister Magdalena Kellner.

"Back in the old days when a pregnant girl got 'mailed away' it used to be considered the secret. She would disappear for a while and then reappear as if nothing had happened," Sister Kellner said. "We have always tried to meet the Gospel challenge instead of ostracizing. But we are definitely not promoting young girls to go out and get pregnant."

Today, DelSanto runs her program in much the same way she did back in 1984.

She is in her Nazareth office every Thursday for counseling and conducts a weekly ninth-period group session for teen moms, in which the girls discuss such topics as infant safety and health, schoolwork and the babies' fathers.

Although she emphasizes the need for immediate counseling, DelSanto has to wait until a pregnant girl informs her of the situation, which may take several months. Then a meeting with the parents is scheduled — a talk which for some girls is the scariest part of their pregnancies, DelSanto said.

Tara, a 17-year-old senior who also asked that her last name not be revealed, had her son, Steven, almost a year ago. Although she kept her pregnancy a secret for five months, Tara recalled thinking about it constantly.

"At first I didn't accept it, and I acted like I wasn't pregnant," she said. "I left it on the backburner, but finally I let it come to the surface."

Tara said that her parents were upset when she finally told them about her pregnancy, but that they eventually came to terms with their daughter's situation. Tara lives with her grandmother, who was also upset when she found out, but now accepts her grandson and takes care of him while Tara is at school.

Nazareth encourages a student to return

to school as soon after delivery as her doctor will allow, often in less than a month. During "maternity leave," the student is assigned a tutor by the school. Sister Kellner said that all of Nazareth's teen moms have graduated with a degree, even if it took some of them a little longer than usual.

"Without an education, especially as a female, they will go nowhere in life. We encourage the young girls' gifts," Sister Kellner said.

Although Nazareth's theology classes teach sexual abstinence, DelSanto said it's not always realistic to believe that teens will abstain. The girls learn about human sexuality in their science classes and discuss the morality of decision making in religion courses, but DelSanto said many teens still believe pregnancy could never happen to them.

"One girl told me she became pregnant during her first sexual experience, and (the experience) wasn't even anything to speak of," the nurse remarked. "Now she has a child for the rest of her life."


DelSanto stresses that if a pregnant girl doesn't get counselling during her crisis she is more likely to abort the baby or drop out of school. Two out of three teens who get pregnant drop out of school, according to a report entitled "Reading, Writing and

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