

Young mom to share first Yule with daughter

Last January, when an unwed Tessa Armstrong discovered she was five months pregnant, she contemplated abortion.

As she talked about her experience in the Greece, N.Y., home she shares with her mother and brother, she touched upon many of the reasons some young women abort unplanned pregnancies — and many of the reasons others decide to have their babies.

Tessa's thoughts during this season of Christ's birth to a young, thoughtful woman named Mary, echo that event's miraculous unexpectedness.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

"I'm against abortion, but I was afraid of having her this early," said Tessa Armstrong, a 19-year-old graduate of Greece-Arcadia High School.

Armstrong's comment referred to her 8-month-old daughter, Samantha, born April 20 of this year.

The reaction among many of her friends didn't help to alleviate those fears of losing her teenage years — and her dreams for the future — to an unexpected child, she added.

"They felt I was going to be tied down," she said.

Armstrong explained that only one of her friends went out of her way to maintain a relationship with Tessa when her pregnancy was revealed. That particular friend even took her to doctors' appointments when necessary.

"It let me know who my real friends were," she said.

Armstrong had also broken up with the child's father before knowing she was pregnant. Although she said he knows about Samantha, Armstrong said he has not attempted to contact her.

Despite the lack of support from most of her peers and the absence of the baby's father, Armstrong decided to keep her baby after reflecting on her situation — one she knows often leads other women to choose abortion.

"In my situation, it would've been a form of birth control," she said. "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

Even at her young age, Armstrong foresaw regretting an abortion for another reason.

"If I didn't have her now, and I couldn't have kids later ...," she said, trailing off.

Once she made up her mind, either way, no one could have changed it, she asserted.

"I'm kind of stubborn," she said.

Yet, Armstrong acknowledged that the Problem Pregnancy Help Center at 3252 Lake Ave., Rochester, outlined options that helped her choose abortion.

The center is an incorporated lay Catholic ministry, according to Patricia Amato, director. In addition to promoting chastity through programs in schools



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Tessa Armstrong gives her 8-month-old daughter Samantha hugs and kisses in the Greece home she shares with her mother and brother.



Samantha plays with her toys on the living room floor before she takes an afternoon nap.

and churches, the center provides material and counseling assistance to pregnant women, Amato added.

A friend referred Armstrong to the agency where a counselor told her "if I needed anything, she'd be here for me," Armstrong recalled.

That counselor was Betty Gurak, who said she was ecstatic at the news that Armstrong had decided to keep the child. "My heart just floated with happiness," she said.

After deciding to keep her baby, Armstrong sought private tutoring through her high school because she felt uncom-

fortable attending classes there. She received the tutoring and earned her degree.

She also credited her mother for being supportive of her decision to bear Samantha.

"My mom and my family told me to do what I felt," she remembered.

Armstrong now feels like helping abused children. That's what is driving her to pursue a master's degree in social work — a goal she is striving to achieve at Monroe Community College's E. Kent Damon City Center.

She sees herself intervening in situations in which children are hurt by their parents and the parents can't handle their children's behavior.

"Someone needs to be a middle man, to get things under control," she said.

As for her own child, Armstrong is more than pleased that she made the decision to keep Samantha.

"She's here for a reason," the young mother said.

As for the friends who scattered when she told them she was pregnant?

"As soon as I had her, everyone came over," she said with a smile.

And it's a smile that crosses Gurak's face when she thinks of all the girls she has counseled who are struggling with unplanned pregnancies.

"When they come in and say they're keeping a baby — there's a Christmas present," she exclaimed.

EDITORS' NOTE — Problem Pregnancy Help Center is open daily from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., except Thursdays (6 to 8 p.m.). The center has evening hours on Mondays and Wednesdays as well. The center also makes appointments for material assistance. Call 716/865-0360 for information.

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