



Eileen lies down for a quiet time with Aaron after watching his favorite afternoon television program with him.



Eileen washes Aaron's hands after a messy lunch.



Bob says goodbye to Aaron before returning to SUNY Brockport to study for a final exam after a lunch visit at the Meyers' home Dec. 16.



Aaron plays with a necklace of grandmother Peg Meyers, left, Eileen's mother.

but I just couldn't do that. It was murder to me," Eileen stated.

Adoption was another option quickly dismissed.

"I just knew, when I delivered, I wasn't going to hand my baby to someone else," Eileen said.

Bob and Eileen agreed to keep the baby, and they said their parents gradually came to accept the situation. Eileen dropped out of St. Bonaventure to prepare for Aaron's birth. As it became visually apparent that Eileen was pregnant, she said, she received a mixed reaction when she went out in public.

"I did see eyes in the back of my head; I heard the whispering,

Maybe I didn't see it as much as I felt it, but I knew it was going on," Eileen said. "My attitude was, 'This is who I am and this is how I look, and people are going to have to deal with it.'"

Bob said that he, also, was subject to silent scrutiny. The experience, he remarked, "will show you who your true friends are."

Eileen said that her parish community was mostly supportive; some parishioners threw her a shower two months before Aaron was born.

"At first they didn't know whether to say 'I'm sorry' or 'congratulations,'" she re-

marked. "I said, no, you can say 'congratulations.'"

Although Eileen was still scared that her life was changing so rapidly, she also felt "happy since I was getting a wonderful baby. Since I was 5 years old, I'd wanted to be a mother."

Bob, for his part, remained strong in his commitment to Eileen and the baby.

"I didn't think it was right to leave her. This wasn't her fault or my fault, it was both our fault," Bob said. "And just because she was pregnant didn't mean I would love her any less."

Aaron was born May 21, 1997, and Bob was in the delivery room at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital when Eileen gave birth.

"I was so happy. I think I might have cried a little," Bob recalled. "It was great to see a little baby in the doctor's arms."

Since the birth, Eileen and Aaron have lived at her parents' house. Bob recently completed the first semester of his junior year at SUNY College at Brockport. He, also, lives at home after spending his freshman and sophomore years living on campus. He works part-time, he said, so that he can pay his own school tuition. Because of his schedule, Bob usually

only gets to spend time with Aaron on evenings and weekends.

Eileen and Bob got engaged a year ago and plan to get married in August of 2000, shortly after Bob graduates from college. Bob, who majors in computer science, hopes to find a full-time job quickly so that he, Eileen and Aaron can live on their own.

Eileen also works part-time but said she relies on her parents' support to handle housing, insurance, transportation and food expenses. A return to college is at least a few years off in the distance, and her paychecks don't provide much more than "diaper money and Christmas money," she said.

"Some days are good and some days are bad. I get upset because I'm raising my son in my parents' home," she said.

The constant commitment to raising a child has also been difficult, she added.

"When we got home (from the hospital), it was like a reality check. I had to wake up every four hours and feed him. I was just kind of his little slave," Eileen said semi-jokingly.

"Some days I wouldn't even get a shower in. It's very selfless work. Some days I would not know if I could do it the next day. I was very lucky I had a large support system; I can't imagine what it would have been like if all those people hadn't been there."

Yet having Aaron, she said, makes all these struggles worthwhile.

"I wouldn't trade him for a normal life," she emphasized.

Where to turn in times of crisis

Although Eileen and Bob are faced with challenging issues, they are still better off than most teen parents, according to Marlene Beghini, director of the Problem Pregnancy Help Center.

"I would say, on the average, theirs is the best-case scenario because they have family intact," Beghini explained. "We deal with the worst-case scenarios. In many cases, there is no support within the family."

Financial crisis and fear are major issues for the center's clients, she said.

"We have many who are in very difficult situations. They need housing, they need insurance," Beghini remarked. "Many who come to us don't have very large financial resources."

According to Beghini, the center gave material aid to more than 550 people in 1997 — and that number rose by about 100 in 1998.

The help center, located at 3252 Lake Ave. in Rochester, serves all of Monroe County. The Catholic lay ministry offers pregnancy tests as well as counseling, financial assistance and such supplies as baby clothing and cribs. In addition, the center provides brochures, videos and lectures on pregnancy-related issues.

Beghini said that 22 percent of the help center's clients are under 18 years old. Many unwed teens who become pregnant, she said, are deserted by the baby's father and/or shunned by their family members. To make matters worse, she added, most teen

mothers have not finished high school and can't find work that pays well enough to support themselves and their baby.

To help clients cope emotionally with these struggles, the center provides volunteer "partners" for one-on-one support throughout the pregnancy. Beghini added that the center is developing a "shepherding" program where a client would live at the home of a trained volunteer throughout the pregnancy.

To contact Problem Pregnancy Help Center, call 716/865-0360. A number of other outreaches are available in the Rochester Diocese as well. They include:

Birthing of Rochester, 716/385-2100 (eastern Monroe County) and 716/328-8700 (western Monroe County). Check the phone book in your area for other Birthing agencies.

Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes, 315/789-2686.

Catholic Charities of Livingston County, 716/658-4466.

Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, 607/734-9784.

Catholic Family Center, 716/262-7100.

Corpus Christi Center, 716/288-2634.

Crisis Pregnancy Center, 716/232-2350.

Faith Haven, 716/374-5659.

Loving Arms of Steuben County, 607/776-8004.

Melita House, 716/232-3656.

St. Mary's Healthy Moms Project, 716/464-5810.

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