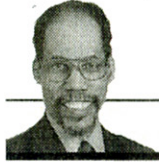


The judgment of unwed teen mothers

I struggled to write this column. I have no idea what it is like to be a pregnant teen. I have no understanding of the pressures that young expectant mothers face today. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced a few weeks ago that a steady 14-year decline of teen pregnancies has been reversed and that the teen birth rate has shown an upswing during the last 2 years. The CDC said that teen pregnancies rose 1% for women ages 15-17 and that 40% were unwed. In 2006, 435,000 of the nation's 4.3 million births were to women 15-19.

Today, a young unwed woman having a baby is headline news. Bristol Palin (Alaska governor Sarah Palin's daughter) and the infamous "Octomom" Nadiya Suleman, have served to divert our attention from more pressing matters. Perhaps, unwed mothers are more acceptable today. Have our attitudes of unwed pregnant women changed? Has the



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stigma of an unwed mother been erased? Have families become more understanding and compassionate? Have our institutions, such as churches and schools, become more tolerant and more supportive? Have we, as a society, become less judgmental?

On a beautiful summer afternoon last year, I witnessed a strange event. I was walking across the parking lot of a supermarket when a young woman hurriedly whipped her car into a parking stall. She got out of the car and opened it's backdoor. She was arguing with someone on her cell phone. She was clearly agitated.

The young woman had removed a baby carrier from the rear seat of her car and placed it on the sidewalk then got in her car and drove away! I stood

motionless in the parking lot unable to believe my eyes. I had witnessed child abandonment! I tried to memorize the license plate. Seeing me in her rear view mirror, she stopped and backed up. With a guilty and embarrassed look on her face, she got out of her car. She picked up the child carrier with the infant still asleep. She apologetically explained to me, "I can't do it all! He has to take responsibility for his kid! I gotta' go to work and I'm gonna' be late!" With the child safely secured in the car, she drove away. She was a woman on the edge. Clearly, this woman had no support mechanisms to help her. She felt alone and overwhelmed. She was in crisis with nowhere to turn. In her mind, leaving the child at the entrance to a supermarket where, evidently, the father was employed, was an acceptable option.

"But there are places for people like her!" you say. Yes, there are, or I should say, there was. Recently, I visited the residential maternity home, Provi-

dence House. The staff was packing up. The small house that had served as a sanctuary for young women since 1995, located just north of the Divine Providence Hospital, had finally closed its doors. The residents had been placed in other homes and the staff had been reassigned to other duties.

Debbie Lamos, Executive Director of The Pregnancy Care Center, said that the decision to cease the residential program did not come easily. "We deliberated and prayed over it for a year," she said. PCC has served 66 pregnant women since adopting the 4-year old program in 2000.

Ms. Lamos said that operation of the program, in partnership with Susquehanna Health Systems, needed an additional \$100,000 to keep the home open. Although the building was a lovely facility, it was too small to adequately provide the programming and staffing needs of PCC. "Like a plate of spaghetti" there were entanglements that hindered the evangelical Christian ministry,

causing PCC to close the maternity home. "We must keep our eyes clearly and steadfastly on our mission and not let anything pull us off course." PCC said in its newsletter. The group seeks better use of its resources to help young people and innocent babies in Central Pennsylvania.

Those in need of Providence House services will be referred to one of the other 25 maternity programs across Pennsylvania. Debbie Lamos said that PCC offers "no pressure, non-judgmental" counseling for expectant mothers and fathers.

Trying to understand the issues, I asked a teen mother of an inquisitive and robust 2-year old about unwed pregnant girls. She advised, "Don't judge. I have my own place, a job and I am going to college. I just have a son." Her son smiled happily, as if in approval.

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