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Quality redo for women dropouts

Prep schools and colleges provide the model for a program that raises the expectations of teen moms seeking GED diplomas.

By Stacy A. Teicher.

HOLYOKE, MASS. – As Erica Villegas waits atop a hill for another turn to practice her golf swing, she surveys the vast green landscape of the Holyoke Country Club. She didn't know what to expect when she signed up for golf as part of her education plan at the Care Center, a nonprofit resource for teen and young-adult mothers. "I thought it was going to be mini golf," the petite but muscular 20-year-old says with a laugh. "I didn't think it was going to be *this*."

Then again, the center has surpassed her expectations before. The first surprise was how much the staff actually do care. In previous programs to prep for the GED, a high-school equivalency diploma, she says teachers sometimes just didn't bother to show up. In public school, "I had teachers, at 15, who encouraged me to get out. I was out of school four years and didn't regret it once until I came to the Care Center."

For the past year, Ms. Villegas's baby daughter has been cared for on-site from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. while she takes classes - everything from math to creative writing. This semester, she's also in a group auditing a criminal-justice class at Holyoke Community College (HCC).

The goal of college is constantly reinforced here. The other pervasive and radical message: that her vision for her life and her daughter's need not be hemmed in by the poverty and low education levels surrounding them.

"Society often puts teen mothers in a box," says executive director Anne Teschner. They tend to be steered toward low-paying jobs - working in a retail store or hospital - and perhaps that's a good fit for some, but "maybe they're the next Einstein or the next Georgia O'Keeffe," she says.

While various programs around the country provide education and counseling for parenting teens, what sets the Care Center apart is that it takes private high schools and colleges as its models. It gives the girls access to small classes and nearby labs, museums, art studios, and sports facilities, in addition to the health services and basic courses more typically provided to teen mothers. Underlying it all is the powerful assumption that the students can succeed.

While people occasionally question whether the center coddles students or spends more than necessary on them, Teschner replies that the stakes are high, and that her students deserve quality attention. She points to one reason she's convinced the model works: About 85 percent of Care Center graduates have gone on to higher education in recent years.

When the center started nearly 20 years ago, it focused more narrowly on GED prep and job training, but more education is essential now for a career that can support a family. More than a hundred young women receive services here each year, many of them referred through the welfare department. There's usually a waiting list.

On any given day, about 60 students hustle between classes in the converted brick house. The walls and stairways display their paintings, poetry, and photographs. Parenting articles and inspirational quotes hang in strategic spots. The young women sport the same gold jewelry and form-fitting shirts as their traditional school counterparts, but it's easy to see the difference when they pop into the day-care room during breaks and bring their babies out into the sun, snuggling them close or watching as they toddle on the lawn.

"It's like a family," says Roxanne Rodriguez, a poised 20-year-old with a 2-year-old daughter. "My counselors are the only people I can talk to." She says she's ready to take the GED soon. Counselors will help her decide on her next steps, but she can't quite face the thought of leaving. "I'm not a saint. I got into trouble with cops when I was young and naive. But now I really want to do whatever I can do to better myself and make things better for my daughter."

Along the way, the obstacles can loom large. Holyoke, a city in central Massachusetts, has some of the most dire socioeconomic statistics in the state. Just over 40 percent of Holyoke children live below the poverty line, nearly one-third of students drop out of high school, and teenagers account for about 20 percent of the city's births - almost four times the state average, Teschner says. Many of those caught in these cycles are from the large Puerto Rican community that grew as workers flocked to jobs at Holyoke's paper mills.

About half the Care Center students enroll in a Spanish-language program and take English classes simultaneously. But even for those who don't face language barriers, their hopes and self-esteem may have been stymied early on by domestic violence, substance abuse, or gang activity. Contrary to common assumptions, many of the participants dropped out of school *before* they became pregnant.

"One thing adolescent mothers face is the very low expectations that most people have for them," says Jill Taylor, an associate professor of education and women's studies at Simmons College in Boston. By exposing them to experiences normally found at elite schools, she says, the Care Center "has the mothers learn that they are capable of doing all sorts of things that they might not have thought they were capable of."

That's why rowing on the Connecticut River has become a tradition here. At first, when they go onto the nearby campus of Mt. Holyoke College to learn crew, "the girls look at you with disbelief when you tell them they're going to lift up this long boat and carry it on their shoulders," Teschner says. But they go on to compete in a regatta for young parents that evolved after other agencies in the Northeast picked up on the idea. "For many of them, it's their first time being cheered publicly in their lives. It's transformative."

Villegas agrees. "It's extremely hard work, but the stress that you have at home is gone. You're just thinking about moving that boat."

Some students arrive at the center grudgingly, in order to fulfill an educational requirement and receive welfare benefits. But when educators look beneath the hardened surfaces, they see girls who are still dreamers.

Tzivia Gover, the creative writing teacher, tells about a student whose T-shirt summarized her whole attitude: "Whatever," it read. She sat slumped in her chair and wrote in tiny, almost illegible print. "Everything she did seemed to be saying 'I'm not here,'" Ms. Gover says. But week by week, her writing got bigger, and she became a prolific writer of romantic poetry. Gover has also watched girls who had never used a thesaurus become very attached to it.

"When you've got a really good [teacher or] case manager, the kids learn to trust them, to really love them; they're starving for positive adult relationships," says Dennis McBride, a research director at the University

of Washington and an evaluation consultant to the federal Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP).

As part of the Department of Health and Human Services, the OAPP has given a modest demonstration grant to the Care Center, to help measure its effectiveness and potentially promote it as a model. Forty other private and public sources contribute to the center's yearly budget of about \$1.4 million.

The mission has broadened to include other women from the community, too. Since many of the young mothers will be the first in their family to contemplate college, Teschner says, it's helpful to bring their family members along. So the center offers the Clemente Course in the Humanities, a blend of history, moral philosophy, literature, and writing. It's taught by local professors, and students who attend can earn credits from Bard College in New York.

Some of the teen mothers have even taken the course with their own mothers. "There will be times when I go out to the parking lot and hear people arguing about Aristotle and I'll think, 'Someone needs to see this!'" Teschner says.

After her golf lesson, Villegas talks about her first week auditing the criminal-justice class at Holyoke Community College. "I was afraid to go for it at first," she says. But she's been able to keep up with the reading at night before she snags four or five hours of sleep. Already, she can envision herself studying the subject after she leaves the Care Center, and maybe even going on to study law. "Now it looks like it's in my reach," she says.