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Against All Odds

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Against All Odds”

written by

Britta Stamps

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Kevin Motl, thesis director

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April 16, 2012

Against All Odds

Carl Goodson Honors Program Senior Thesis 2012

Britta Stamps

ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the stories of five successful women who became pregnant before turning 20 years old. The in-depth stories of these women and the conclusions that follow can be used by teen parents today to encourage teen parents to persevere towards their dreams, against all odds.

With the popularity of television shows such as MTV's "Teen Mom" and "16 and Pregnant," teenage pregnancy became a phenomenon of national attention. The show premiered shortly after I completed my freshman year of college, in 2009. Suddenly, the public became more comfortable talking about teenage pregnancy. Unfortunately, the subject is inevitably discussed negatively and hopelessly; most people assume all young women who become pregnant will live in poverty, drop out of school, and give up on their dreams.

Such negative discussions of teen pregnancy would not be entirely incorrect, given the statistics of teen mothers. Each year in the United States, about 820,000 teens become pregnant. Of these teen pregnancies, eighty percent are unintended and seventy-nine percent of the pregnant teens are unmarried. The United States in particular stands out against other developed countries in teen pregnancy: The U.S. has double the teen pregnancy rate as Canada, quadruple the teen pregnancy rate of Germany and France, and eight times Japan's teen pregnancy rate.¹

These teenage pregnancies spawn from unbelievable statistics on teen sexual behavior. According to The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 46% of all high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse in 2009. This means nearly eight million high school students in the United States have had sexual intercourse. Of those teens who are sexually active, nearly 20% of them did not use contraceptives the last time they had sex.²

While the sheer number of teen pregnancies in the United States is alarming, the effects of this epidemic are absolutely shocking. Only thirty-eight percent of mothers who had a child before they turned eighteen have earned their high school diploma. Of women who had child before turning twenty, only fifty-one percent have graduated high school. Thirty percent of teen girls dropping out of high school cite pregnancy as a reason. Regarding higher education, less than two percent of women who had a baby before age eighteen graduate college by age thirty.³

Teenpregnancystatistics.com cites several factors influencing teen moms' decision to continue their education or not. Several social factors make returning to school difficult for teen parents, including: feeling embarrassed at school, being behind in school work, and safety concerns. Financial and logistical factors, including the need to work and finding daycare or childcare, are also cited as reasons teens do not return to school. Health concerns for the mother or her child could also make school more difficult for the new mother. The two factors I find most interesting are a lack of support and a

¹ <http://www.teenhelp.com/teen-pregnancy/teen-pregnancy-statistics.html>

² http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/FastFacts_YRBS2009.pdf

³ Perper, K., Peterson, K., & Manlove, J., Diploma Attachment Among Teen Mothers, 2010. Child Trends, Fact Sheet: Washington, DC. Retrieved March, 2010 from http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2010_01_22_FS_DiplomaAttainment.pdf

lack of knowledge about her options. “Without some kind of adult support it is very difficult for a teen mom to succeed at school,” the article says ⁴

Across the United States, several options are available for teen parents who want to continue their education. Options include special school for pregnant or parent teens, schools with day care centers, regular schools with outside daycare, homeschool, GED, night school, community college, and online education. Finding an education option that fits the needs of the teen parent is crucial and should be taken seriously by school guidance counselors. Related to finding an appropriate school setting is the issue of other circumstances that affect teen mothers in school. Classes that teach teens about budgeting, finding a job, and raising a child can increase the parents’ likelihood of finishing school. Simple things such as discussing long term goals with a supportive adult, joining support groups for pregnant teens, and having a breast pump can also help teens complete their education. ⁵

Education levels directly correlate with earnings potential and employment according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Naturally, high school dropouts have the lowest earning potential. In 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau reported teens who can find jobs to accommodate their parenting schedules earn an average income of only \$19,169 ⁶. This low income traps the young parents in a vicious cycle of poverty as they are forced to live paycheck to paycheck, unable to afford to save money.

These statistics predict a grim future for teen parents. Despite all odds, some teen parents create a positive, flourishing life for themselves and their children. Admittedly, these bright spots are rare; but they are also hidden. Society is quick to point out and publicize stories of teen parents who fit the stereotype. Rarely does society put successful teen parents on a pedestal, however. Teen parents lack a role model who has lived through their situation and still reached their dreams.

After viewing MTV’s “Teen Mom” and “16 and Pregnant,” I became curious about successful teen parents. “There must be inspiring teen mothers out there instead of the low education, broken hearts, and outright bad attitudes on the television in front of me,” I thought. Thus, I decided to find women who were now over thirty years old, became pregnant before they were twenty, and are successful by most definitions.

Defining “success” is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Many people society would call “successful” have not been to college, or do not earn a six figure income, or are not married, or do not meet other specified standards of success. Therefore, I chose to look for women who considered themselves successful and most others would consider successful as well.

The method of selection of the women was through personal connections. I first obtained approval from Ouachita Baptist University’s Institutional Review Board,

⁴ <http://www.teenpregnancystatistics.org/content/finishing-school-as-a-mom.html>

⁵ <http://www.teenpregnancystatistics.org/content/finishing-school-as-a-mom.html>

⁶ <http://www.modernmom.com/article/how-teen-pregnancy-affects-job-opportunities>

Reference Number 201112-41. I then asked friends, family members, co-workers, classmates, and professors for contacts to women who fit the criteria. After searching for women to interview for several months, I met five remarkable women: Danielle, Tracy, Nancy, Heather, and Sarah.

Danielle and Sarah are the mothers of two of my friends. Mutual friends referred me to Tracy and Nancy. On a road trip with a non-profit group I volunteer with, I was talking about my thesis when one of the women, Heather, told me she fit the criteria and would enjoy sharing her story with me. I interviewed Danielle, Tracy, and Heather in person and interviewed Nancy and Sarah via email because they live in different states. All of the women's names have been changed and identifying details omitted to protect their anonymity, but all five women were eager to share their story with me.

Because the sample size is small and the women were not randomly selected, the conclusions in this paper are not statistically significant. However, I chose to study this topic and interview these women to learn what set them apart from other teen mothers. The individual characteristics within these women are certainly worth studying and learning from, even if they are not quantified and analyzed statistically, because their stories can encourage teen parents today. I hope these women's stories will inspire teen parents and encourage them to pursue their dreams despite their new life circumstances.

Loneliness aside, Danielle was blessed to have a healthy pregnancy. Less than a year after their wedding and the day before her twentieth birthday, Danielle, with Tyler by her side, gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Jake. Their first night home, Tyler stayed up all night with their son. The military allowed Tyler to stay home with his newborn for one week, but then he had to return to work. Danielle was left alone with Jake. She did not work during this time because fulfilling the role of a full-time mom demanded all of her time. Tyler was home on the weekends and enjoyed spending time with the family, but his job kept him from being home most weekdays.

As a child, Danielle was taken by her mother to the Catholic church. Growing up, her dad was not a Christian whatsoever. Her mom always took the children to Catholic service by herself. During her pregnancy, Danielle did not attend church regularly, but did consider herself a Christian. Danielle wanted a church family during that time in her life, but Tyler resisted going to church. Rather than attend church alone, Danielle chose to have a personal relationship with God despite not being a member at a local church.

When Jake turned two years old, Danielle and Tyler moved back to their hometown. Before having Jake, Tyler's income was around \$10,000 per year and had not increased significantly over the few years of their marriage. When the family moved back to their hometown, they purchased a small house for \$37,000 and soon, Danielle began to work. She briefly worked as a nurse's assistant before leaving that job to work at a furniture factory. Even while working, Danielle still clung to her goal of returning to college.

Five years after having Jake, Danielle gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, Chelsea. Danielle expressed that while she loved being a mother, she needed time to be prepared for a second child. At the arrival of Chelsea, she again felt very excited and blessed.

Although they had returned to their hometown, Danielle remained isolated from her few friends and from family. She spent even less time with her family than before moving to Georgia. She also started attending local Baptist church where she felt comfortable; she took Jake and Chelsea to church with her. Tyler, however, did not attend church and became angry whenever Danielle went to church. While she did not realize the reason for the isolation at the time, she now says her husband kept her from socializing with friends and spending time with her family. Tyler dominated their relationship with his controlling personality.

This isolation turned to violent anger as Tyler began to abuse Danielle and later their children as well. Danielle's dream at this point was to raise her kids well and finish her education. She endured Tyler's abuse for herself, but could not tolerate when he abused their children. She intervened when he hurt the children and tried to convince him to stop abusing them during his angry bouts. When she witnessed Tyler throw six-year-old Jake against a wall, Danielle knew she had to make a change in her life.

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Danielle that divorce was the right option. Danielle did not want to suffer the abuse anymore, but as is common among abused women, she felt closed off from other options. Her sister kept her focused on doing what was best for herself, Jake, and Chelsea. Jake was six years old and Chelsea was only eighteen months old when Danielle officially divorced Tyler.

Perhaps the saddest part of Danielle's story is that the pain did not end when the divorce was official. Tyler later threatened to kill Danielle, which resulted in his arrest. Over time, Tyler stopped paying child support and relinquished all ties with Danielle, Jake, and Chelsea.

During the divorce and for a short time afterwards, Danielle and her children lived with her mother. Her mom gave her financial support and her life turned toward the positive. Danielle still longed to return to college, so she began to work part-time and attend college classes again.

According to Danielle, the most positive aspect of the divorce may also be the most surprising. Danielle's sister had worked for an attorney in their hometown before Danielle's divorce. Naturally, then, when Danielle needed a divorce attorney, she turned to her sister's former employer. Shortly after the divorce was finalized, Danielle's car broke down in front of her attorney's office. Being the kind man that he was, the attorney took Danielle to a car repair shop. During the short time they spent together while her car was being repaired, they developed a bond beyond that of an attorney and client. The broken-down car led to several dates and eventually, marriage.

Nick was a well-respected man in the community and shortly after her divorce, Danielle and Nick married. Danielle's sister approved of him and his character; and most importantly, he was very loving to Jake and Chelsea. Jake and Chelsea never cried for their biological father, and were always happy to be around Nick. Tyler stopped paying child support and allowed Nick to adopt Jake and Chelsea. As with her first marriage, Danielle got pregnant soon after the wedding.

Jake was now eight years old, Chelsea three, and baby Claire was a newborn. Chelsea was very helpful around the house; she enjoyed being a "mommy" just like Danielle. When Claire was seventeen months old, Danielle gave birth to her fourth child, Libby. Her four beautiful children were her priority, but Danielle still contemplated the possibility of returning to college. Nick and Danielle even had several conversations about Danielle's education, but she had yet to finish the degree she started twenty-seven years ago.

With young children to care for and a husband with a stable, well-paying job, Danielle was a stay-at-home mom for several years after marrying Nick. When her youngest child entered second grade, however, she realized she was bored with her stay-at-home duties. She had led Girl Scouts Troops, participated in the Parent Teachers Association at school, involved herself with church groups, and done other activities to

give herself a sense of responsibility. Nonetheless, these activities were no longer fulfilling when her children were all in school, so Danielle returned to the workforce.

She began her new career in marketing for a nursing home. Through this position, she was able to continue making career advances in the nursing home field. Within a few years, Danielle completed work for her nursing home directors license as well as an orthotics license.

Jake is now twenty-seven years old; he was a Marine for several years and is now in college. He is married without children. Chelsea is now happily married with two children and works as a teacher.

Chelsea is a teacher. She is happily married with two children. Danielle thinks Chelsea's motherly instincts from her childhood probably contributed to Chelsea's decision to marry and become a mother in her early twenties.

Claire is a high school student learning how to drive. Libby is fourteen years old now. Both Libby and Claire maintain good grades and participate in extracurricular activities.

Danielle and Nick remain blissfully married, live in a beautiful house, and lead successful careers. Nick continues to practice law. Currently, Danielle works as an administrator for an assisted living facility. The couple earns over \$150,000 per year. Danielle enjoys spending time with her grandchildren.

Looking back, Danielle says she sometimes wishes she had done things differently in life, namely leaving Tyler sooner. She never resented her children or regretted having them so young. She enjoyed being a young mom because she was energetic enough to keep up with her several children. "Wanting good things for my kids drove me," she says.

Danielle always made her children her priority and recommends all young mothers use that as a guiding factor for all decisions and situations. She encourages young mothers to "surround yourself with good people who can help you and will be positive influences on you." She also urges young mothers to trust God and let God work in their lives. Making the children a priority and placing all faith in God are the keys to turning a confusing, sometimes negative situation into a blessing.

Tracy was a freshman student at a small, private Christian college when she found out she was pregnant. This situation was a true surprise to those who knew Tracy. She was considered by friends and family to be "the good kid," never getting in trouble. She had been with her boyfriend, Roger, the majority of the school year when and during Spring Break took a pregnancy test; results were positive.

Her parents were divorced before Tracy began college and she was very close to her mom, who lived only a couple of hours away from her college. Tracy's relationship with her father was distant after the divorce. Her mother's response to the news was, "I thought you would have known to use birth control." Tracy's mother was very disappointed with the news of the pregnancy. Tracy and Roger had not used birth control, however.

Roger's parents were shocked by the news of the pregnancy. They were a very strict, proper family and never expected their son to ever be in such a situation. Tracy felt Roger's mother believed Tracy became pregnant to trap Roger in their relationship and Tracy never felt welcomed by her in-laws.

Before the couple married, Roger discussed abortion as an option, but Tracy dismissed the idea and Roger did not pursue it further. Both parents did not consider adoption for their child, so planning began for the family of three.

Before becoming pregnant, Tracy had been fairly social. She went out to eat with friends often, always including Roger in her social group. She was not a member of a formal social club because her grades did not qualify her after her first semester. She had already turned her grades around and began to improve her GPA significantly before finding out she was pregnant, but knew she would not have time for a social club after having her baby.

Roger and Tracy married two months after finding out Tracy was pregnant. They did not necessarily want to get married at that point, but they did not want their parents to feel responsible for their child. Neither was particularly excited about the wedding, but neither objected or expressed a negative opinion about the marriage either. At the time, it seemed like the compulsory next step in their relationship. Thus, Roger and Tracy married less than a year after meeting each other.

Both newlyweds arranged summer jobs at their college, but they were in a serious car accident soon after their wedding. Tracy and Roger both suffered injuries, the most serious being Roger's broken leg. The young parents-to-be were once again dependent on their own parents the majority of the summer as they recovered.

Tracy was lucky enough to have several small baby showers, including one at her college and one at her church. She borrowed most of the big items, such as the crib, changing table, and other furniture. Between the showers and borrowing large items, the young couple did not have to buy a lot of baby supplies before the baby was born.

Tracy and Roger returned to college for the fall semester and rented a small apartment near campus. Tracy was very excited about the baby but felt unwelcome and

shunned by students who were not already her friends. Most of her friends from her freshman year maintained their friendships with her.

She never considered quitting school or not finishing her degree. With her mom and Roger in the delivery room, Tracy gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Jeff. Both families and their best friends came to hospital for Jeff's birth. Tracy's mother stayed with them at their apartment for the first week to help the new parents.

When Tracy's mother left them to return to her job, Tracy cried. She missed her family, but her mom visited frequently to help care for Jeff. Roger attended class and worked at a flexible job. Tracy returned to spring classes in January as scheduled and her daily routine included only caring for Jeff and attending classes. Tracy studied by herself and does not recall ever having to miss class to take care of Jeff. On Sundays, the family attended church, but lacked close friends at their church.

Roger worked as much as he could, but school responsibilities did not allow time for work full time during the semester. His income was under \$20,000, which qualified them for Medicaid and Women, Infants, Child (WIC) assistance. Tracy was never particularly materialistic, but they could not afford any luxuries whatsoever while they were in college. Their families bought several clothes for Jeff. When her mom visited, she cooked for them and bought additional groceries although Tracy never asked her to do so. Her mom was simply the type of person who enjoys caring for others so naturally supported Tracy, Roger, and Jeff.

Tracy remembers Jeff being the perfect baby; he slept well and hardly cried. Tracy said, "I guess God knew I couldn't handle more." Jeff was never a problem for babysitters or his parents. Even between work and school, Roger helped care for Jeff extensively. The relationship between Tracy and Roger, however, was not always smooth. Tracy says she talked mean to him often, although she didn't realize her negative attitude or the impact of her words at the time. She even said, "Roger is a much better person than I am."

During the first year, Tracy believes she matured quickly as she learned her new role as wife and mother. She became a much better student after becoming pregnant and having Jeff; she attributes this partly to her sense of needing to graduate so she could provide for Jeff and partly because she could no longer spend her nights socializing instead of completing homework.

Roger graduated a semester early so he could begin to work full time. Roger was always motivated by money and he focused on making more money. Tracy graduated on schedule with a degree in dietetics and worked a year before beginning graduate school. Jeff was two years old when Tracy graduated and started working and he began daycare.

By the time Jeff turned five, Tracy and Roger's relationship had improved. Tracy does not know any specific reason for the improvement in their relationship, but she does remember Roger being a very loving parent and a good person in general, which she

thinks made her love him more. Although they had never discussed it, both Roger and Tracy still wished they had not gotten married so soon due to pressure from others.

Tracy did not have close friends after having Jeff, but she was very close to her mom and relied on her for support. Tracy said she could not relate to friends her age because they were “all single, with no babies to hold them down, and no responsibilities.” She also had difficulty relating to Jeff’s friends’ parents because they were in a different life stage than Tracy. She couldn’t relate to people who were ten years older. Tracy became depressed at one point. She even began seeing a counselor regularly to deal with her depression. Her relationship with Roger continued to be up and down throughout the years. As time progressed, the relationship began to deteriorate although Tracy still believed Roger was a “better person” than she was.

Tracy and Roger had their second child, Max, eight years after Jeff was born. Tracy remembers thinking “If I have another child, it will be a girl, then I can focus on my little girl instead of my marriage.” Her second child was not a girl.

When Max was three years old, Tracy and Roger separated. After a year of separating, their efforts toward reconciliation failed and they divorced. Throughout the separation and divorce, Jeff and Max had a very difficult time.

Shortly after the divorce was finalized, the couple realized they did not want to be apart. Divorce was not what either had really wanted, but because they had never verbalized their feelings about their marriage in the first place, sorting out their true feelings and desires had been extremely difficult. They decided to have their divorce annulled and to focus on improving their marriage.

Their first step in their new relationship was to move out of the small town they had lived in for the past thirteen years. Throughout the separation and divorce process, Tracy’s friends and Roger’s friends had “taken sides” with one spouse or the other, making it very difficult to continue their relationships with their friends and co-workers while trying to fully reconcile their own marriage. They moved to a city approximately an hour away from their home to begin a new start for their family.

When Tracy began college, she had originally planned on being a pre-med major. She still believes she could have succeeded as a pre-med major and gone on to medical school, but having Jeff changed her plans. Dietetics was a related field that interested her, but she felt more confident in her ability to succeed in that field rather than be pre-med considering her new circumstances.

Since moving, Tracy has gone back to nursing school and now works as a nurse. Once classes are completed, she will be a nurse practitioner. She is excited about working in a career closer to her original “dream job.” Her husband maintained his focus on earning a large income and now works in the insurance industry. Between Tracy and Roger, the couple earns approximately \$450,000 per year.

Tracy considers herself content in life and happy with her career. Her oldest son, Jeff, is in his senior year of high school. He participates in sports and does well in class.

Her younger son, Max, is a happy, normal pre-teen who is also interested in sports and makes fairly good grades. Roger travels frequently for his job, and the couple enjoys a healthy relationship now.

Tracy believes the hardest part of having Jeff at such a young age was the eventual divorce. Tracy wishes they had waited until later to get married. She trusts that waiting to marry would have saved heartache later on in their relationship. The divorce was very difficult for Tracy, Roger, Jeff, and Max to cope with; fortunately, the family reconciled this issue to the happiness of all involved.

Tracy credits much of her success to the continual support from her mom throughout the past nineteen years. Tracy's determination and focus helped her see the pregnancy as an obstacle, not an end. Her dream of becoming a successful career woman guided her throughout life.

The strongest piece of advice to girls in similar situations as hers is to not feel pressured to get married. In the end, the marriage and all of its associated issues have to be dealt with by the woman and man, not their parents or friends. Therefore, the couple should make the decision for themselves, without considering pressure from external parties, says Tracy.

Nancy describes herself as a seventeen year old “kid” back in 1990. A recent high school graduate, Nancy still lived at home with her parents. Because college was not necessarily the normal step immediately after high school for girls at that time, she had not planned on going to college. She had often considered attending Cal Poly’s veterinarian program, but had not taken action towards that potential career yet.

In high school, Nancy was a “tough-chic,” or at least portrayed herself that way. She enjoyed being the ringleader of her social group. Her boyfriend was four years older than she was, which was a fact she frequently bragged about to her friends. He had already been in the Navy, which impressed her friends. During high school, Nancy spent most of her free time partying or riding her horse. With her friends, she drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes often.

Nancy and her boyfriend, Brian, had been in a relationship for eight months and engaged for five months when she got pregnant. Brian proposed shortly after Nancy’s high school graduation. Her pregnancy was unplanned. Although they were already engaged, they did not want to rush the wedding simply because of the baby. The couple decided to keep the pregnancy a secret for several months. Nancy supposes that her immaturity made her nervous to tell her parents, but when she finally revealed the news to her parents, they had already figured she was pregnant and embraced it.

Both Brian and Nancy felt nervous when they discovered she was pregnant. The culture they grew up in openly encouraged abortion; abortion or keeping the baby were the only options the couple saw as viable. Adoption was not promoted in her area and although she had very little idea about how to be a parent, she had even less of an idea about how to begin the adoption process. The couple considered abortion “for about five minutes,” mainly because it was so prominent in their culture, not because it was an option they personally wanted to pursue. Nancy and Brian chose to have their baby and to raise their baby together. Brian had moved out of his parents’ house after he graduated high school, years before he met Nancy. He maintained a distant relationship with them; they reacted ambivalently to the news.

Nancy’s family was an average middle class household who had a Christian faith, but church was not part of her upbringing. She grew up in California, a very different culture from the Bible Belt where she now lives. She has three older sisters and one younger sister, who is fairly close to Nancy in age. While Nancy lived with her parents, she did not work and was not responsible for furnishing her own needs. She remembers babysitting for a friend for two hours once, but that was the extent of her care for children before having her baby.

Nancy maintained a solid relationship with her family, but chose to move in with her fiancé. Early in the pregnancy, Nancy and Brian both worked to support themselves. However, they both had minimum wage jobs, which in 1990 meant \$4.25 per hour. “Funds were limited to say the least,” recalls Nancy.

Nancy did not have any idea what supplies, equipment, or furniture she would need for the baby. Her family had a large baby shower and everything they needed was provided through the baby shower. Her family helped the young couple find everything they needed to add to their shower registry. There was not a theme or serious thought process behind most of the shower, Nancy was simply grateful for whatever she received.

When Nancy had her baby, Lance, her fiancé was in the delivery room and her family waited anxiously just outside the room. While Nancy and Brian had attended childbirth class, she believes she was too young to really absorb the information or understand what was being said. Nancy's immediate family visited the hospital to welcome Lance into the world, but no friends visited her at the hospital. Nancy's pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum health were all normal.

When Nancy and Brian were able to take Lance home, they were excited. However, Nancy says she was "like a fish out of water" with her newborn. Nancy stayed home for a year with Lance to care for him while Brian worked full-time. Brian still worked for only minimum wage, so the couple used state Medicaid for medical insurance for Lance.

Brian helped Nancy as much as he could despite working nights at the time. Brian fed, changed, and played with Lance often. Nancy even thinks Brian was more comfortable with Lance at first than she was. Nancy and Brian's relationship also grew stronger. Nancy's relationships with her friends from high school tapered off as she focused on caring for Lance, improving her relationship with Brian, and surviving financially. Nancy quickly changed her focus from partying to being a young adult and young mother. The couple's goal was to "be a family."

Nancy still had a relationship with God, but did not attend church at this point. She had grown accustomed to not allowing herself to be bothered by other's opinions, but one opinion did concern her. Nancy and Brian were engaged before she got pregnant, meaning that Lance would not be the reason for their marriage. Other people, of course, tended to believe that Nancy and Brian were getting married solely because they had a baby together. This opinion bothered Nancy, but she coped with it knowing her true feelings for Brian, regardless of whether or not they had a child together.

Shortly before Lance's first birthday, Nancy and Brian married. After the wedding, Nancy returned to work part-time in the kitchen at a hospital. While Nancy worked, her parents kept Lance. They enjoyed having Lance and it allowed Nancy to save money on daycare. Lance now worked as a truck driver. Finances were still extremely tight and the new family lived in a small one-bedroom apartment. Looking back, Nancy says she didn't realize they were missing the luxuries they have today. Their hope was always to get a better car.

Nancy felt she had lost her independence having moved straight from her parent's house to living with her fiancé. While some of her friends were away at college, some were off travelling, and others were living with other girl friends, she was forced to

develop a stable environment for her new family. Their social time now centered around family events. They entertained friends on occasion but their friends were a completely different group than she had spent time with in high school. Her new group of friends consisted of other parents. Lance's toddler years were the most difficult years in Nancy's experience because she and her husband were both still immature, lacking life experience.

By the time Lance turned five years old, the family had moved to another state. They sought a safer, higher quality way of life to raise their son. Nancy's parents also moved near them to be closer to their grandson. Nancy and Brian also had a second son, Colin, and bought their own home. Lance and Colin were both very well behaved boys with no problems. They played well together and preferred playing with toys instead of watching television. Lance attended Head Start state pre-school and Colin went to daycare while Nancy and Brian worked. Her friendships with friends from her hometown faded with the move and over time, but she made new friends in their new town.

Also by this point, the family's income increased significantly. Nancy worked several jobs during the first five years of Lance's life, but settled into a job at a bank and explored opportunities there. Because she focused more on partying than her future during high school, she had never set career goals for herself. Therefore, she cannot measure how successful she was at this point compared to the success she thought she would have. However, her career was very successful by any standard. She took advantage of being interested in areas of the job that others disregarded and taught herself a great deal of material on the job.

When Lance turned ten, Nancy gave birth to her first daughter, Cecilia. Lance was a good brother to both Colin and Cecilia and tended to their needs as well as he could. When Cecilia was two, Nancy had her youngest child, Meredith. Nancy continued to get promotions at her job and watched her income grow significantly. Their family still lived in the home they had purchased when moving from their hometown. Nancy and Brian no longer kept up with friends from their hometown. They were not church members, but did send their children to Vacation Bible Schools and youth events at local churches. Nancy and Brian's marriage experienced ups and downs common among married couples, but they never experienced serious problems in their relationship.

Today, Nancy is the Information Technology Director for a bank, earning a substantial income and enjoying her job. In her younger years, Nancy often regretted not going to college and recalls feeling as though she had missed out on that life experience. Now, she realizes she did not miss anything; rather, she could have focused on more positive things. She credits her family's success to their determination to be successful. She is a successful career woman because she "believed she could do a job she didn't have any experience at and with that confidence, convinced her employers to give her a chance." She sought out opportunities at work, allowing her to enjoy a luxurious income

today that is as high as the income she would earn from most careers with a college degree. She sums up her life as "continuing to grow."

Nancy encourages teen girls considering entering a sexual relationship to realize that respect comes from themselves. "Self-respect is the greatest gift you can give yourself and you should be first on your list," she says. "Having sex with a boy will not make him respect you, love you, or treat you better," she urges. Nancy insists that respect and love from a boy will come if girls demand respect from those around her. She believes girls are deserving of respect and should not accept anything less from boys. Despite a change in the path, girls can still reach the same destination they originally wanted if they are dedicated to making themselves successful. She closed with, "Having a child, planned or unplanned, can be the greatest gift from God."

At nineteen years of age, Heather was in the middle of her sophomore year at college when she found out she was pregnant. She had dated Dylan a few times during college, but they had known each other their whole lives. Heather's and Dylan's families were close friends so the two had grown up together. Although they knew each other well and had been on a few dates together, they were not in a romantic relationship. Partially because they were not in a relationship and partially because Heather's parents never thoroughly discussed the issue, Heather and Dylan never planned on using birth control.

Heather drove home from college in February of her sophomore year to break the news to her parents. Heather's parents were both prominent leaders in their small community and coincidentally worked with Dylan's parents through business deals occasionally. Heather had always been extremely close to her parents so she dreaded disappointing them with the news. Her parents were expecting some sort of negative news since they could tell something was wrong when Heather visited them this time. Heather's mom later told her she thought Heather had cheated on a test and gotten kicked out of college. After telling her parents she was pregnant, they called their Pastor as well as Dylan and asked both of them to come over. Her family was extremely supportive; her immediate family never said a negative word to her about the pregnancy. She recalls them telling her that night, "We'll take care of you. Everything is going to be all right." Her Pastor told her "Your worst days are until your baby gets here." Dylan's parents reacted similarly.

Heather returned to college and finished the semester there. She was in a sorority, although she had joined mainly because of pressure from her older sister's friends. Heather also knew Dylan would not actively help raise their baby, so her family helped to seclude her from him and other negativity. Heather's family was upper middle class with an income of approximately \$100,000 per year. While Heather was not attending church at college, she did visit her parents most weekends and continued to attend church with them. Growing up in church, she participated in many church programs. She was never "away from God," even while at college. Heather was a free spirit who wanted everyone to like her; in hindsight, this desire for people to like her caused many problems.

As soon as Heather found out about the pregnancy, she felt secretly excited to be a mother. She knew the pregnancy would disappoint her parents, but she had always wanted to be a mother. Heather babysat often in high school and loved babies. Dylan, on the other hand, wanted her to give their baby up for adoption. Heather adamantly refused, but Dylan even had someone from an adoption agency call her about adoption. His persistence about adoption infuriated Heather. Their relationship was very contentious during her pregnancy.

In preparing for the birth of the baby, Heather's parents and sister took care of all of her needs. Heather's sister surprised her with several baby gifts one visit; it was the first time Heather got to enjoy being pregnant. Heather never had an ultrasound to

determine the gender, but her doctor assured the family it was a girl. Heather's mom hired an interior decorator to decorate the nursery at their home; the room was filled with pink, French lace, antique baby dresses, and other girly things. Upon the baby's arrival, however, Heather gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

Nineteen days after her due date, Heather gave birth to Aaron. Her mom, dad, and Pastor were all at the hospital, although Heather requested no one be in the delivery room with her. Her sister had spent two weeks with Heather waiting on her to deliver, but had to return home to another state the day before Heather delivered. Heather's Pastor called Dylan once Heather had Aaron to let him know the baby was born. Dylan's parents came, but Heather did not see them. His sister-in-law also visited the hospital and brought gifts from a baby store she owned.

Heather had been prepared to have a C-section, but went into labor at the hospital and delivered Aaron vaginally. This led to Heather staying four days in the hospital, with her mother stayed by her side. Because the baby was a boy, her family also changed the nursery to fit a boy as much as possible. Shortly after the birth, Heather's church threw a shower for her. She felt too embarrassed by having Aaron out of wedlock, so she did not attend the shower, but the church delivered several gifts to her home.

Heather was due in April, but finished college that semester and delivered Aaron in May. She did not work that summer; her job was to take care of Aaron. Her relationship with Dylan improved slightly, although he never cared for Aaron. He never spent time alone with Aaron for the first two and half years of Aaron's life. Aaron was also born with Heather's maiden name for his last name, Bailey. Dylan's parents resented that decision; they voiced their opinion that Aaron should take his father's name.

Heather lived at home with her parents, but they maintained a traditional grandparent's role. They supported her wholly, but Heather exclusively cared for Aaron. Heather told her parents while she was pregnant that she would flip burgers or do whatever job she could find to support herself and the baby; her parents did not want her to be burdened by school, her baby, and work. They financially supported Heather and Aaron happily.

In the fall, Heather began college again. She chose to transfer to a college approximately an hour away from home rather than return to her original college, that was four hours from home. She also changed her major. Before being pregnant, Heather lacked focus in school. Her grades were mediocre, partially due to her lack of care and partially due to her dislike for her major. After switching to an education major and having Aaron, Heather's maintained a 4.0 GPA. Heather's mom watched Aaron at home for the first year, but then Heather found a home sitter to watch Aaron. Heather had lost her brother to brain cancer when he was only ten years old. Heather's mom knew that Heather and Aaron would move away at some point in the future and knew the separation would be exponentially more difficult if she continued to watch Aaron constantly given the tragic loss of her own son.

During the first year, Heather wrote in Aaron's baby book every day. She loved being a mother and enjoyed the fact that she could focus on being a mother and student. She had one lifelong friend who went to college with her; this friend had also had a baby at a young age, so the two bonded well. Before becoming pregnant, Heather partied often. After having Aaron, she no longer partied but did spend time with friends, many from her classes. Changing her major and transferring to a college where she could live at home set Heather on a positive course.

By the time Aaron turned one, Heather's life differed completely from how it had been a year and a half earlier. Her relationship with Dylan's parents became ugly, especially with his mom. Heather and Dylan's parents disagreed over Aaron's last name and Dylan's role in Aaron's life. Her relationship with Dylan had not changed significantly; he went to the park and shopping with Heather and Aaron, but still did not provide care for Aaron or support him financially. They worked together to host a circus tent 1st birthday for Aaron, but did not spend time together otherwise. They agreed to not talk badly about each other, especially in front of Aaron. They never contemplated dating, and both got what they wanted out of the situation. Heather describes the situation as "very easy." Heather continued to live with her parents, who supported her but maintained their role as traditional grandparents.

Heather made many adjustments to her lifestyle during her first year. She felt guilt no matter what she was doing. If she studied, she felt guilty for not watching Aaron grow up. If she played with Aaron, she felt guilty for not studying. This created a major struggle for her the entire time she was in school. Despite her guilt, she knew her education would provide a better life for Aaron eventually. She remained closer to her family than to her friends, but kept her vibrant, resilient personality. She admits she did not have to make large sacrifices because of her pregnancy.

Aaron was a very happy, content baby. He slept well and hardly cried. Twenty-five years later, Aaron has never talked back to Heather or had an argument with her. Fortunately, Heather never had to endure health problems with Aaron. She describes Aaron as her first love. She kept her resolve to never speak negatively about Dylan in front of Aaron but wanted Aaron to know who truly loved him. The truth absolutely bore out over Aaron's life as he learned that Dylan only cared for him when it was convenient.

One day during Heather's student teaching, she was confronted with her first major negative situation relating to being a young mother. Her parents brought Aaron to the playground at school where Heather worked. A mother of one of her students asked, "Is your husband at work? Is that why your parents have Aaron?" Heather laughed about it and explained briefly that she was a single mother. The other mother responded by saying she hoped the students did not and she should not be a role model for students since Aaron came from a broken home. Heather, clearly offended, replied, "Aaron does not come from a broken home. There is nothing broken about our home." Heather recalls

the cruel words vividly and is still appalled at the woman's comments. Heather's parents were proud of her boldness and maturity in the situation.

Because Heather changed her major so late, graduation was delayed by one semester. Having Aaron did not impact her timeline for graduation. Heather was scheduled to graduate in December and wanted to move out of the small town she lived in. She did not want the community to think she was running away, but knew it may appear that way. Her sister lived in a bordering state, where Heather applied for a teaching job. She was elated to obtain a teaching job in her sister's town and planned to move there immediately after Christmas. Against her Pastor's and attorney's advice, she told Dylan she was moving to her sister's town after Christmas. The day before Christmas Eve, Heather and Aaron visited Dylan and his family. The family showered them with Christmas gifts and failed to mention the move. The next day, on Christmas Eve, court officials served Heather papers that stated she could not leave Arkansas with Aaron and that Dylan's family wanted Aaron's last name changed.

At the court date, Heather's plans of easily moving were destroyed. Although Dylan never disputed paternity and had signed Aaron's birth certificate, paternity had to be established in court. By establishing paternity, the court required Aaron's last name to be changed to Dylan's last name, Tuggle. While Heather believes Dylan would not have caused a fight over her moving, she knew his parents would be furious. They were happy when Aaron was issued a new birth certificate. Dylan was ordered by the court to fly every fifth week to Heather's new city, pick up Aaron, and fly home. Dylan was to keep Aaron one week and then fly back with him to return him to Heather. The court also granted one day of each week Aaron was with Dylan to be spent with Heather's parents. The separation was grueling for both Heather and Aaron, who had never been apart for even one day before the move. Aaron never considered himself a Tuggle; even at age two and a half, he said "My name Aaron Bailey."

Three months after moving to the new city, Heather met a wonderful man, Bryan. Bryan began to take Aaron to the airport to drop him off with Dylan since it was so difficult for Heather and Aaron to separate. Bryan treated Aaron very well; Aaron enjoyed being around Bryan equally. Nine months after meeting Bryan, Heather married him, changing her name to Heather Grant. The three lived together as a family. Although Aaron had always slept with Heather, he had no problems adjusting to sleeping by himself after the marriage. Aaron welcomed new adjustments with open arms. Bryan always knew he loved Heather and knew they would have a wonderful relationship, but worried if he would be the dad Aaron needed. Heather believes Bryan was a perfect role model for Aaron and provided the father figure Aaron needed. He coached Aaron's sports teams and participated in all of the typical father-son activities with Aaron over the years. Heather provided all of the motherly and household duties, but she would have had the same duties at home whether or not Aaron was Bryan's biological child.

Travelling back and forth every five weeks continued for Aaron until he was five. At that time, he began kindergarten, which naturally dissolved the visitation. He never had to travel between states for visitation again. Dylan married another woman six months after Heather and Bryan were married. Dylan and his new wife travelled to Heather's city once per sport season to watch Aaron play sports and when Heather visited her parents, she ensured that Aaron saw Dylan.

At the time of their marriage, Heather earned approximately \$23,000 in her teaching job while Bryan made approximately \$30,000 in his job. Heather got pregnant shortly after their marriage with another baby boy, Brandon. When Heather returned to work, Brandon went to a home babysitter. Brandon was healthy and Aaron enjoyed being a big brother.

While living away from home, Heather did not keep in touch with friends back home. She was very close to her sister and her sister's family. Heather and her family attended church and made new friends. Church and the personal relationship with God played a large role in their family. Heather's parents no longer financially supported her, but Heather remained close to them and they continued to be very loving parents and grandparents.

When Aaron turned ten, the family moved back closer to Heather's family. Aaron had used Heather and Bryan's last name, Grant, after their marriage although his last name was still legally Tuggle. Dylan knew about Aaron going by "Grant," but never raised questions until "pitching a fit" at the school when Aaron turned ten. Dylan's father in particular wanted to force Aaron to go by Tuggle. Court officials once again served papers to Heather. Aaron, by now old enough to understand the situation on some levels, became angry with Dylan for forcing the issue. Heather was pregnant with her third son, Mark, at this point and Court was postponed because she gave birth to Mark the day before the court date. Eventually, the court decided Aaron had to go by the last name "Tuggle." The court also set visitation but Dylan never forced it because Aaron did not want to go.

Of course, Heather was upset by the entire naming situation, but one incident in particular broke her heart. Aaron's basketball jersey said "Grant" on the back, but Dylan would not allow him to wear that jersey. Dylan had another jersey made with "Tuggle" on the back, but Aaron refused to wear that jersey. He instead found an old jersey from the team without a name on the back and wore that jersey to avoid wearing the name "Tuggle" on his back. Heather's heart was broken for Aaron because there was nothing she could do to change the situation.

Aaron was always an athlete and a good student. Brandon was also an athlete and a good student. Unfortunately, Mark was born with a low immune system. Because of his medical conditions, Heather did not return to teaching after moving back home. Heather and Bryan bought a convenience store and earned approximately \$115,000, giving

Heather the luxury of being a stay-at-home mom while assisting with the bookkeeping for the store.

After moving closer to home, Heather reconnected with some old friends and easily made new friends. Heather's best friend was always her sister, who had moved back to her parent's town before Heather and Bryan moved again. Heather and Bryan attended a new church her parents assisted establishing. Bryan's parents were Assembly of God ministers, which was Heather's home church before meeting Bryan. Their new church was non-denominational, which Heather, Bryan, and their children all enjoyed.

On his eighteenth birthday, Aaron went to a lawyer and changed his last name to Grant. Finally, he could legally make the decision for himself. Not only did his name represent his family, but Heather also felt like he was told he could not be comfortable being who he wanted to be when he was forced to use the name Tuggle. The truth of who sincerely loved him bore out as he changed his name to Grant, signifying who he considered to be his real family. Heather was indescribably proud of Aaron for changing his name without any pressure from herself or Bryan.

Looking back, Heather would not change most major decisions. She wishes Aaron never had to suffer because of her decisions. She feels as though he had to endure a lot because of her selfish decisions, such as visiting Dylan when he did not want to. Aaron would say she has more than made up for it, but she still wishes he did not have to endure it. Heather believes the hardest part of her life was not the pregnancy, or even being separated from Aaron every fifth week while she lived far away, but rather when she moved back and Dylan brought up the name issue again. By this point, Aaron could understand everything and there was nothing Heather could do to make the situation better for him.

Heather believes she was able to avoid poverty and other hardships associated with being a young mother because she realized that God is her source, not other people. Her family support was invaluable, both from her parents in the first years and also from her sister, who furnished an apartment when she moved near her. God has met all of her needs along the way.

To girls contemplating entering a sexual relationship, Heather says simply "Don't do it." She continues, "You've got to love yourself enough to realize he doesn't love you. This is a time where you should be happy. Ask yourself the questions about what makes you happy. You will live to love again."

Heather advises young parents to get their lives worked out with Christ. "There are too many big things we can't do on our own," she says. "Put God first and put your child second. If you always do that, you can't go wrong." She always put Aaron ahead of her own issues, which is why she did not talk bad about Dylan to Aaron. Dylan was part of Aaron and it would not accomplish anything for her to portray his father poorly. Heather finally figured out who she was and what she wanted shortly before her marriage

to Bryan. She always made God and Aaron her priorities. She believes many young parents make mistakes because they aren't acting in their child's best interest.

Sarah had just graduated high school a few months before finding out she was pregnant. Sarah graduated high school with honors, took advanced courses throughout high school, and even attended college courses at night during her senior year. She was in a relationship with Landon, but still lived at home. Her parents had a long marriage and the family lived comfortably monetarily. She was close to her brother and sister, along with other extended family members. When she announced her pregnancy to her family, they supported and encouraged her but she believes they were somewhat disappointed in the overall situation.

Sarah did not work or support herself financially at the point when she found out about her pregnancy. Due in April of the following year, Sarah attended college in the fall semester following her high school graduation. She was easy going and fun, always ready to have fun with others at a party. Sarah was popular among a myriad of social groups. She describes her eighteen-year-old self as “committed to education, committed to family, and committed to having a productive future of some sort.”

Because of the productive future she envisioned for herself, her pregnancy made her nervous and troubled. She could not believe she had let it happen. Yet, she never considered adoption or abortion and neither her family nor Landon encouraged those two options either. The two married in October, while Sarah was three months pregnant.

Sarah stayed with her two young nieces often and babysat her twin cousins during the summers, so she was comfortable around children. Her family was close, so her nieces visited her and her parents often, providing lots of time for Sarah to gain experience with small children. When the time for a baby shower arrived, Sarah picked out most items for her gift registry on her own. Her sister advised her on some items since she already had children. Landon and Sarah paid for very few items because family and friends hosted a large shower for them. The new family was blessed with almost all of the necessary items.

When the baby’s delivery day arrived, Sarah felt extremely nervous because she had to have an emergency C-section for life threatening health reasons. She was excited for the birth and could not wait to meet her new daughter. Landon, Sarah’s parents, numerous aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and Landon’s family were present at the hospital for delivery day. The atmosphere was a mixture of nervousness for Sarah’s health and excitement about the baby’s arrival to the world. During Sarah’s stay in the hospital, several family members and friends visited her. Fortunately, after Megan’s birth, neither Sarah nor Megan experienced related health problems.

Landon and Sarah had their own two-bedroom home by this point, so when their hospital stay was over, the three of them lived together in their home. Sarah’s mother came to help each night for approximately two weeks. Landon offered help in every aspect of caring for their new daughter. He bathed Megan, fed her, dressed her, packed her diaper bags, and more. Landon worked in a factory and had to report to work by 6:00 am, so Sarah took care of most of Megan’s middle of the night needs. Occasionally,

Landon woke up with Megan in the middle of the night if he knew Sarah was lacking sleep.

Before having Megan, Sarah attended church with her family. The church members did not voice an opinion on her pregnancy, although a few felt sorry or pity for Sarah, which soon faded. After Megan's birth, the family did not attend church often. Women in the church assisted Sarah's mom with babysitting Megan and her cousins. None of the church members said or did anything hateful or negative related to the situation. Sarah feels certain peers outside of church made negative comments, but none were memorable enough for Sarah to recall now.

Landon was the sole financial provider for the new family. Sarah's parents financially assisted them by paying a portion of their rent while Landon's parents often bought groceries and baby food when needed. Sarah gave birth to Megan in April but did not return to college until the following Spring semester, so she cared for Megan during the day while Landon worked. When Megan was nine months old, Sarah returned to college. Sarah's parents and Landon's step-mother took turns watching Megan while Sarah was in class. If Sarah was not attending class, she was with Megan.

Sarah enjoyed being a mom and kept an upbeat attitude. She especially enjoyed returning to college. Growing up, Sarah aspired to be a doctor; she took classes and worked to make good grades all in an attempt to reach that goal. When she became a mom, she decided she did not want to spend eight or more years working to reach the surgeon level. She changed her goal to graduate college and provide a future for her family.

Several of her friends moved away to college, so those friendships naturally faded over time. Sarah does not remember truly missing any of those friends or longing for her friends to be closer to her. Her best friend lived nearby; Sarah has maintained her close friendship with that friend over twenty years. Landon and Sarah spent time with other couples, some from high school and other co-workers of Landon's. Both sets of grandparents were willing to babysit as often as needed, but they did not abuse this privilege. They usually took Megan along with them on outings.

Over the first year of Megan's life, Sarah developed more patience. Landon's grandmother told Sarah she had never seen anyone with more patience than Sarah, which comforted and encouraged Sarah. Sarah sees her patience as the biggest positive change in her life over the first year. The biggest negative change was the fact that Landon and Sarah could not go out on dates often or spend money on small luxuries; they had to ask for assistance from Sarah's family for financial needs often. Landon earned approximately \$25,000, which paid for most bills but did not allow for fringe spending. Both new parents worked various small odd jobs to afford gifts at Christmas for the first several years. Over the first year, Sarah was most surprised by the amount of help she received. Countless people offered to Sarah and Landon; they only had to remember to request help when they needed it.

Sarah and Landon's relationship was smooth. When Sarah returned to college, the family had to develop a new routine for taking care of Megan, housework, and schoolwork. The family still lived in their two-bedroom house and took full responsibility for it although they did ask for financial help occasionally over the first year. Sarah and Megan both endured emotionally difficult times when Sarah began classes because they had not been separated for that long before. Getting the routine of bedtime synced with schoolwork was difficult, even leading Sarah to sometimes read Megan a college textbook as a bedtime story.

Megan was a "super sleeper" according to Sarah. She began to sleep through the night when she was only one month old. Megan was a happy baby and easy going. Megan only caused a large fuss over trying to nap in a noisy place because she was accustomed to napping in their quiet home. Sarah still remembers the hassle of trying to find a place for Megan to nap if they were not at home.

Sarah remained a very driven young lady. She finished her four-year degree in only two and a half years, with all of the necessary internships and work cycles completed during that timeframe. Instead of letting Megan slow down her timeframe for graduation, she used Megan as motivation to speed through college. Sarah thinks her biggest sacrifice during this period of life was the trade-off of leaving Megan to attend school.

Sarah made friends at school easily, including some who had their own children. Often, those friends came to Sarah's house with their children so they could study together while the children played. Sarah and Landon gradually reduced the amount of time they spent at church, rarely attending services regularly.

When Megan was three and a half, Sarah and Landon separated. However, they reconciled their relationship quickly when they discovered she was pregnant again. Sarah gave birth to their twin boys when Megan was four and a half. The new babies drove the family to move to a larger three-bedroom home.

Megan proved to be a helpful older sister and never exhibited jealousy towards the twins. Sarah and Landon had their hands full at this point, but always made sure Megan had time with each of them without the twin boys present. Megan eventually attended private pre-school part-time and easily made friends. "She was great in any situation," recalls Sarah. She enjoyed playing with friends and her cousins who visited often. Megan played independently and hardly whined.

Sarah graduated with a degree in elementary education, but did not work immediately after graduating because she was extremely busy caring for Megan and the twins. Landon's income increased to approximately \$40,000 per year, allowing the family to pay all of their bills. None of the children attended daycare, as either Sarah or grandparents watched the children when they were young.

By the time Megan was five years old, Sarah had kept contact with only her best friend. Her best friend was the only constant except for her family during the first several

years of Megan's life. When Megan began pre-school, Sarah made friends with other parents. Sarah and Landon's friends consisted of other parents. Sarah's sister was her main supporter; she encouraged and advised Sarah several times while the children were young. Megan began to attend church with grandparents and Landon and Sarah attended occasionally.

As the years progressed, Sarah and Landon's relationship deteriorated. Sarah describes their marriage as "rocky, to say the least." They separated and reconciled several times. However, Sarah's parents both died at young ages while Megan was in elementary school; Landon comforted her during these times of loss. His support during her grieving periods met Sarah's need for family relationships. The family now lived in the home Sarah had grown up in and earned a combined income of approximately \$90,000 per year.

Misty was Sarah's best friend during this time in her life. Misty listened to Sarah talk about her issues with her marriage, the loss of her parents, and her children. Misty and Sarah enjoyed many trips and fun girl nights together; Sarah treasured this close friendship with Misty. Landon's grandmother babysat the children when the couple needed assistance. Megan was outgoing and energetic in her pre-teen years. She enjoyed going to slumber parties with her friends and her cousins. Both Megan and her brothers succeeded academically.

When Megan was sixteen, Landon and Sarah divorced. Landon became an alcoholic in Megan's early teenage years, causing the family to endure many rough nights. Sarah remembers "the last six years were miserable for both of us." The family suffered through unnecessary challenges while Landon and Sarah were married. Sarah kept her determination to provide for her children, despite the negative life events she endured.

Looking back, Sarah now says she would have ended her marriage to Landon before making it through sixteen years. However, she describes her life now as "hectic in a good way" and "filled with love from my new husband." Sarah married her new husband twenty-one years after having Megan. Megan is now twenty-three and pregnant with her own first child.

Sarah believes her personal key to success lies in her drive to succeed and make it on her own, coupled with the strong desire for her children to have a stable life filled with love and happiness. Even though she pushed herself through college in two and half years while mothering Megan, she says the hardest years were when her children were teenagers. "Raising kids that will make the right choices and become productive individuals in the future" was both important and difficult at times.

To teens contemplating entering a sexual relationship, Sarah advises them not to have sex because they believe others are having sex. Teens should "talk openly with the person about expectations, sexual messages, and use protection for pregnancy as well as STDs if the choice is made to have sex." While Sarah does not promote teen sexual

relationships, she recognizes it is a natural part of a relationship, although a part that is entered into carelessly by many teens. She tells her own children, "Do not have sex just to say you are; be respectful of others before, during, and after sex begins." Most importantly, she advises, be prepared to become a father or mother the first time you have sex.

Sarah encourages current teen parents to stay positive and ask for help. Family should not be the only people they ask for help; "ask neighbors, friends, church family, co-workers, and others," she encourages. She challenges teen parents not to stop dreaming and working towards their goals; persevere towards the goals set for yourself and your family.

By all rights, Danielle, Tracy, Nancy, Heather, and Sarah should not be the successful women they are today. Statistics overwhelmingly point to poverty, unemployment, and other depressing life situations for women who have a baby at such a young age. The great majority of women who became pregnant before they were twenty years old are not successful career women as these five women are; there is unmistakably something unique about these women. Maybe they have the same trait as women such as Condoleeza Rice, Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and other accomplished female public figures. Perhaps sheer determination to reach a goal existed in these women and is absent in other women. In talking to these women, that unspeakable confidence exuded from them as they told their stories. These women may have thought of themselves as immature when they had their babies, but they are strikingly confident, mature, and poised women today.

The stories of these five successful women beg the question, what sets them apart? What did they do different from other teen parents? Is there some characteristic shared by these women that can lead to success despite the circumstances? Most importantly, can current teen parents replicate this success?

Because the women interviewed were not chosen randomly and the sample size is not statistically large enough, the conclusions are not statistically significant.

The first and most prominent shared characteristic between the women is support. Danielle, Nancy, Tracy, and Sarah all had support from their baby's fathers during their pregnancies. Heather, however, did not have support from her baby's father. All five women had support from their parents, even though the pregnancy greatly disappointed most of their parents. Heather and Sarah both relied on their families for financial assistance and support as well as emotional support, but Danielle, Tracy, and Nancy did not need financial support from their parents. Instead, they felt encouraged by their parents' intangible support in the form of encouraging words and love. Both Heather and Sarah told me they valued the emotional support more than the financial support from their families. Heather in particular remembers feeling confident she could have found a way to financially support herself but doubts she could have finished college without her family's emotional support. While Nancy did not need financial support from her family, she treasured the open-minded acceptance her parents showed towards the situation. Her engagement to her baby's father also represented a significant source of support. Although neither Nancy nor Brian knew about caring for a baby, their mutual support for each other kept the couple on a positive path. Nancy now says her pregnancy and raising her first child would have been significantly more difficult without Brian's support. The most important difference Brian's support has made is the impact on Lance's life; if Brian did not support Nancy, Lance would not have had a solid father figure to look up to. Danielle had support from her husband, but not her immediate family at the time of her baby's birth. While she desperately needed her mother's and sister's encouragement

during her divorce, the support she received from her husband during her pregnancy was adequate. Because Danielle married Tyler before becoming pregnant, the question of whether or not her baby's father would support her and stay with her was null. Nevertheless, she needed Tyler's companionship and guidance during her pregnancy because she lived far from family and friends who could have provided her support. Tracy, on the other hand, needed large amounts of support from her mother as well as Roger. The car accident during the second trimester of Tracy's pregnancy disabled the couple from earning income before the baby was born. Because Tracy and Roger could not work during that time, they needed additional financial assistance from their parents. Beyond financial support, Tracy yearned for emotional support from her mother. Fortunately, Tracy found this through her mother's frequent visits. Tracy was perfectly capable of washing and folding her own laundry, but her mother's assistance in small tasks like the laundry made her feel loved and kept her from feeling overwhelmed. Sarah received financial and emotional support from her family as well as Landon's family, which allowed the couple to lay a foundation for their new family. Because of the support she received, Sarah was able to graduate college early and start her successful career.

Studies also prove that support is a crucial factor in teen pregnancies. Ninety three percent of all abortions occur because of social reasons, including the idea that the child is unwanted or inconvenient⁷. Further, eighty-three percent of women who had an abortion say they would not have terminated their pregnancy if they had support from the baby's father or other influential people in their lives⁸. While no large scale studies have been published on the likelihood of success in teen mothers' lives based on support, I believe it is no coincidence that these five women all had supportive environments and all succeeded enormously.

Another trait all five women shared was their sheer determination to succeed. While determination is not quantifiable, it is recognizable. As I interviewed each woman, I sensed something unique about each woman. None of the women expressed a negative attitude about their situation. Each woman actually improved their life or accelerated their goals because of their young pregnancy. Nancy could be described as unmotivated and lost before her pregnancy; her new responsibility to raise and provide for her son drove her to begin working and start on the path to a successful information technology career. Danielle postponed her education and eventually left college, but her marriage to Nick and his high income afforded her the luxury of staying home with her children, where she wanted to be. Tracy graduated from college on time, even though she gave birth during a school semester. She pushed herself to take summer classes in order to

⁷ The Center for Bio-Ethical Reform. <http://www.abortionno.org/Resources/fastfacts.html>

⁸ Rue, V.M. et al. "Induced abortion and traumatic stress: a preliminary comparison of American and Russian women." *Medical Science Monitor*. 2004; 10(10):SR5-16

graduate as originally planned. She continues to pursue her education and promotions within her nursing career. Heather, although she graduated later than originally planned, was much happier with her new major after giving birth to Dylan. Motherhood allowed her to attend college closer to home and gave her the sense of freedom to change her major, which she believes she would not have done otherwise despite being miserable with her original area of study. Her late graduation was due to the change in her major, not her pregnancy; her new educational direction turned out to be something she had wanted all along, but was never brave enough to pursue. Sarah thrived in college, finishing in fewer semesters than she originally intended in order to begin providing financially for her family sooner.

All of these women could have given up their education and careers easily rather than pursuing their goal with such intense effort. None of them did. They chose to fight for their goals, for their families, and for themselves. They did not know how to fail. When I asked Tracy if she considered dropping out of college, she stared at me as though she did not understand the question. She finally answered, "That thought never even crossed my mind; I never even considered that as an option. Finishing college on time was not just a goal, it was what was going to happen." Heather's response echoed Tracy's: "Giving up on my education was never a consideration. I changed my major to education, but never even thought about dropping out. That would have been crazy and would not have benefitted anyone." In these women's minds, their goals were never compromised. They may have changed their goals, but each woman is now exactly where she envisioned herself, or even in a better situation, before the pregnancy. The internal fire to succeed drove these women to do amazing things, yet they never thought of themselves as amazing. "I was a mom and I was a college student, at the same time. I didn't feel like anything special," says Sarah. "It is what it is. Being a mom is part of my life now. This is my goal, this is where I am, and this is what I need to do to get to my goal" was a common thought process for these five women. Sheer determination and drive to succeed motivated these women to find inside themselves the strength and endurance to become loving mothers and successful career women.

Beyond what the women verbally told me in the interviews, I sensed something unique about each woman. Some people exude confidence and determination naturally; all of these women exuded those traits. Their personalities overflowed with poise and self-assurance. The women believed in themselves. None of them told me their optimistic attitudes greatly influenced their outcomes, but their attitudes in fact played a major role.

I believe the support system and determination of these women were the two major contributing factors to their success. Without their support systems, they could not have afforded to complete their education or raise their children. Several of the women depended on their families to babysit while they attended school or returned to work, helping them save money on daycare. They also used the emotional support from their families and baby's fathers' to keep them motivated as they finished their education or

moved up in their career. Yet, even with the best support system imaginable, the women could not have succeeded without their determination. They made up their mind to fight for their goals and persevered towards those dreams relentlessly. Even with other young children, the women continued to pave an admirable path for themselves and their new families. They could have easily given up or decided to take an easier path, but they all chose to push through the late nights of studying, the long days of work, and the inevitable personal trials in their lives to reach their dreams. Their willpower and resolve to reach their dreams was truly remarkable. These women succeeded because they received support from their immediate families and/or their baby's fathers and decided they would do whatever it took to create a quality life for themselves and their families.

Beside support and determination, a few other factors impacted the success these five women have had. While none of the women lived in poverty at the time they became pregnant, they were generally middle class. Because they were raised in middle class families, the women expected a certain standard of living above the poverty levels many teen parents eventually live in. Perhaps this expectation of a high standard of living inspired the women to maintain their middle class lifestyles. Another factor contributing to the success of these five women was their age at the time of their pregnancy. All of the women graduated high school before becoming pregnant, although some of them became pregnant very soon after their high school graduation. Although these ladies were still younger than age 20 when they became pregnant, they were older than many teen parents. Conceivably then, their pregnancies began at a more stable time in their lives than if they had become pregnant when they were still in high school. As addressed in the introduction, teen parents struggle to graduate high school. Nevertheless, these women had to overcome many struggles to complete their college education or create a successful career without that post-secondary education. Finally, none of the women seriously considered adoption or abortion, signaling their early commitment to raising their child. Most of the women never considered adoption or abortion at all, but some were encourage by others to pursue one of these options. Although none of the women aspired to be young mothers, all of them felt the motherly instinct to construct a high quality of life for their children.

Finally, some factors were present in the women's lives, which seemingly would have discouraged success. One example of this is Nancy's lack of goals before becoming pregnant. While the other women had some idea of goals for their future, Nancy did not have these goals when she graduated high school and became pregnant. Yet, she worked diligently and creatively to pave a successful career for herself. She even had to convince her supervisors to trust her with particular jobs, but she toiled until she thrived. Another example is Heather's contentious relationship with Dylan. Her conflicts with Dylan and his family could have dissuaded her from moving away from home to pursue her career, but she persevered to create a prosperous life for herself and her baby.

Teen parents today can use the stories of Danielle, Tracy, Nancy, Heather, and Sarah to inspire them to endure the struggles of today for the promise of success tomorrow. These women succeeded despite domestic abuse, struggling relationships, demanding classes, and grueling jobs. All of these women advised teen parents to prioritize and keep their child's best interest foremost in their decisions. Many of the women also recommend teen mothers to trust God and find their meaning in God, not other's opinions. Young parents must make the decision to raise their child in a loving environment while pushing themselves to attain their goals. In God, young women can find hope and love, no matter what world circumstances exist. Through their faith, they can pass this love onto their children and find the strength to achieve their dreams.