

Building Healthy Children starts with mom

MARK HARE • OCTOBER 26, 2010

When she was 16 and pregnant, Michielia Phillips was getting lots of advice from family and friends. Advice she felt was just wrong. "They told me to have an abortion," says Phillips, now 20. Only her grandmother supported her decision to have the baby.

She was a straight-A student at Wilson Commencement Academy, aiming for college. She met a guy who told her he was 21 (he was 30). When she gave birth to Olivia, now 3, "I tried to make it work with her father, but, of course, it didn't work," Phillips says.

After Olivia came the depression. "I thought she was my downfall," Phillips says. "I hated her." Fortunately, the teenager was referred to Building Healthy Children, a program run by the Mt. Hope Family Center, in collaboration with Strong Pediatrics and the Society for the Protection and Care of Children.

BHC provides young women with a number of supports, including therapy to treat depression. "Michielia came to us with a lot of strengths," says her therapist, Bree Scribner, "but because of her depression, we had to pull them out and help her understand how it was affecting Olivia." And they did just that.

Phillips today has her own apartment and a car, works part time for an in-home licensed daycare provider, and has begun to think again about college — perhaps a business degree and then a law degree. "I see myself as a TV judge someday," she says.

Phillips has tasted success, but she has a long road ahead of her. She keeps close by the phone numbers of the five case workers who've helped her and she's not hesitant to call for advice. She has graduated from BHC, but is a member of a support group and offers her own experience to help young moms new to the program.

The supply of young moms at risk is large and growing in Monroe County, where the teen pregnancy rate is off the charts, nearly double the statewide average. BHC was launched in 2007 with funding from the United Way and Monroe County, says Sheree Toth, executive director of Mt. Hope Family Center, "We spend a lot of money repairing damage" that results often from young moms raising children on their own. BHC is designed to prevent that damage, helping vulnerable young women deal with depression, form healthy attachments to their babies, acquire parenting skills, and take advantage of existing housing, food and transportation services.

BHC is unique, but works on the same principle as other programs, such as the county's Nurse Family Partnership, that surround participants with services and interactions that point them toward stability and success. So far, 300 women have participated in BHC, Toth says, and all its strategies are being methodically evaluated.

The program, at more than \$1 million annually, is not cheap. But breaking this destructive cycle is essential, not just for the participating families, but for the larger community — which needs healthy, smart, capable workers and citizens.

The more stressed the economy, however, the more me-centered we become, the less compassion we have for those in even worse predicaments than our own. That's the danger here. None of us can afford to give up on the rest of us.

When Michielia Phillips smiles her big smile, talking about the future she wants to build, that reality is crystal clear