

Mentoring Young Mothers

Through Michael's Angels, an outreach of The Potter's House in Dallas, Mother Vieanna Rose helps teenage mothers during a critical time in their lives.

When Mother Vieanna Rose is asked to explain why she's drawn to a ministry for pregnant young women, she often responds by relating a story about a trembling teenage girl she once encountered at the altar. The young woman had been beaten and was weeping uncontrollably. She was also overwhelmed by fear, embarrassment and emotional pain. Before the young mother-to-be collapsed on the church's floor, she managed to whisper, "I'm scared, and I have no place to go."

Vieanna is the volunteer director of Michael's Angels, a Christian ministry operated in the youth church of The Potter's House in Dallas, where Bishop T.D. Jakes is the senior pastor. Michael's Angels aspires to mother, mentor and minister God's enduring love into the hearts and lives of teenage, unwed mothers. A simple hello, or a quiet expression of concern and encouragement are just a few of the powerful New Testament messages Michael's Angels mentors provide these young women.

"Jesus taught His followers," Vieanna says, "to work together with one heart and one mind and one purpose. Don't just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and in what they are doing and enduring" (see Phil. 2:1-4). Many times a word of praise or empathy will have a powerful effect and can represent the difference between a young girl finding the courage to make it through another day or succumbing to utter despair.

GOD'S PRECIOUS WORK

Many of the women volunteering their time and efforts as

Michael's Angels mentors were once themselves teenage mothers. Others are women who have the desire to serve young mothers during periods of crisis and struggle related to their unplanned pregnancies.

"It's frightening to see the teen mothers we help in so much pain and carrying such incredible sorrow because they are pregnant," Vieanna says. "They're in danger of dropping out of school. They lack the job skills necessary for finding decent jobs.

"They haven't developed good parenting skills, and they don't possess the social support system they need to help them deal with the stress of raising an infant. They really don't have anyone else to turn to except us, and as a result, many become vulnerable to depression, alcohol, substance abuse and even suicide."

Michael's Angels mentors believe they've been entrusted with the care of God's most precious work. They show respect for each young mother-to-be by responding to her with love and affection. Most of the time she just needs someone to hold her hand—literally or figuratively—while she tells her parents that she's expecting.

Mentors avoid making decisions for the young mothers, and instead, try to provide them with information related to educational and social service resources. "She must trust us because only then will she open up enough to allow us to help her," Vieanna says.

"Without trust, she will be defensive and introverted. She learns to trust us because we're there for her and with her in her struggle to grow through her crisis. We care for her by praying with her and for her. We help her to understand that God hates her sin, but He'll always love her and her baby."

LOVE, MINISTRY AND SUPPORT

Michael's Angels was established 1998 as a ministerial vehicle

for pregnant teenagers living in the area of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and/or attending The Potter's House. Vieanna says that just prior to hearing the Holy Spirit speak into her heart about the new ministry, she'd just lost a beloved brother.

"I was floundering," she remembers. "I loved my brother. We were very close, and I lost him very, very suddenly. I was grieving and on my knees in prayer when God spoke to me."

When she asked God why He wanted the ministry called Michael's Angels, He reminded her of Michael, the warrior angel referred to by the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament (see Dan. 12:1). "The Lord told me," Vieanna says, 'I want you to call the ministry Michael's Angels because I have to fight to make sure these young girls don't abort their babies.

"'I have to fight to make sure they receive prenatal care and their babies are born healthy. And I have to fight to make sure the mothers receive what they need to take care of their babies and themselves.'"

The good news, according to researchers and analysts, is that over the last half-century the overall rate of teen childbearing has declined significantly, and not as a result of abortions. Rather, the decrease in teen birthrates is attributed to a significant reduction in the number of teenagers in all population groups becoming pregnant in the first place.

Nonetheless, the proportion of all births to unmarried American teenagers remains the highest among industrialized nations as the numbers have dramatically increased from 13 percent of all births in 1950, to 79 percent in 2000. Researchers point to two primary reasons behind the increase.

In 1950, teenage marriage was commonplace, and by 2000, the practice was rare as men and women in general are much older on the occasion of their first marriage. Researchers point to

the disappearance of “shotgun weddings” for the increase as well.

In 2006, very few teenage mothers who become pregnant go on to marry before giving birth. It is to this group of young mothers that mentors working with Michael’s Angels concern themselves.

THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR

Michael’s Angels mentors are on hand during pregnancy or immediately after birth to minister to the mothers, their babies, and often, to their parents. Pregnant teenage mothers are at a greater risk of pregnancy-related complications such as premature labor, anemia, high blood pressure and placental problems.

It’s not uncommon for pregnant girls—babies having babies really—to exhibit poor eating habits, neglect to take their prescribed medications, and to smoke, drink alcohol and/or take drugs. This increases the risk that their babies will be born prematurely or at dangerously low birth weights.

Pregnant teens are less likely to get early and regular, if any, prenatal care. Far too many see a doctor for the first time when they are in labor and ready to deliver. Each year, millions of teens are affected by sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS and HIV.

It’s a logical assumption that the teenage mothers need encouragement and support. Vieanna says that their parents are often in need of the same.

“Our girls fall between the age of 13 and 19 years old,” she says, “and most all of them are either living with their parents, or another guardian of some sort who themselves are still raising younger brothers and sisters. When a teenager steps up and announces that she is pregnant, the news impacts the entire family.”

This places a heavy burden on the families of teenage moms, forcing many to drop out of school in favor of low-wage employment.

A WORD FOR PARENTS

A common assumption of parents is that if their daughters are raised in church, they won't become interested in sex. Although research conducted by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy indicates that teenagers who are busy with church-related activities are less likely to adopt premature sexual behavior, they are not immune to the temptation.

The teenagers Vieanna encounters are often active, born-again Christian girls who have spent much of their lives actively participating in church. And in The Potter's House youth church, the message they receive on a regular basis is that the only safe sex is no sex, abstain and save yourself for marriage.

It's a simple enough message, but many teenagers, unbeknownst to their parents, are engaging in unsafe sexual practices. In fact, their parents are usually the last to know, or even to suspect what their youngsters are doing.

"Many parents," Vieanna says, "mistakenly think that if they talk about sex with their teenagers, they'll encourage them to become active. Some of the boys and girls think that protected sex is safe sex, or that oral sex preserves their virginity.

"Parents have to let their kids know that the only safe sex is abstinence from sex, and that if they are promiscuous, pregnancy could happen to them, that in fact, pregnancy is the least of what could happen."

Many people may find it surprising that among the many reasons why teens become pregnant, there is simply the need for companionship. "I think many of them get pregnant because they're lonely," Vieanna says.

“They don’t feel they have anyone to talk to and to encourage them. Sometimes, but not all the time, their mothers were young when they gave birth the first time.

“The girls think that if they have a baby, they’ll have someone of their own to hold onto and to love. They think babies are cute, and when they see their friends with babies, they don’t realize that babysitting is miles apart from being responsible for raising one.”

Vieanna’s advice for parents begins with the importance of establishing open communication with their teenagers. She says: “Remember that knowledge is power. Encourage your children to save themselves for marriage and to give birth to children in the context of a healthy union.

“Pray with your children; actively listen, even when what they have to say makes you uncomfortable. By word and by example, teach them strong, moral values. It’s so important that our young people believe they can come to the most important people in their lives—their parents—and have a reasonable, sane discussion about this most important subject.”

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