

Former teen mom shares journey from deep loneliness to a life of possibilities

The following was written by Sarah Heeke, a Dodge City attorney and one of the first to attend the Teen Mom's Program, when it was introduced by Catholic Social Service social worker Amy Falcon in 2002.

My path in life was not the one I imagined for myself. In fact, if you had asked me 12 years ago to write out a life plan, the course I have taken would not have even been on my radar.

I dreamed of something exciting and glamorous. I dreamed of travel and adventure. I dreamed of possibilities. But after high school, instead of picking out items to decorate a dorm room, I was buying items to decorate a nursery. At 18, I was a mom.

I was lost. I was a mother, but I was still a child. I suddenly became too old for my friends, but too young for the other mothers. There is no deeper feeling of loneliness than to be surrounded by people, but feeling utterly alone. While drowning in my sea of isolation, a life raft came into my world. And it saved me.

I joined the Catholic Social Service's Teen Mom Program in September 2002. It was the first year of the program. When I walked into the first meeting, it was an instant relief. It didn't matter that we came from different backgrounds. It didn't matter that some of us had never met. It didn't matter that some had one child, two children, three children. It mattered that we were no longer alone. And we all felt it.

So much of being a teenage mom is not just carrying the responsibilities of being a young parent, but carrying around that heavy burden of shame: the shame when you hand over your food stamps, and you feel the eyes of the people in line burning into the back of you, judging you and examining the contents of your cart; that shame when you walk down the street with your baby, and you hear a stranger remark about how you are way too young to have a child—"babies having babies"; the shame when you finally take a night off to relax and remember that you are a person too—that you have an identity outside of being a parent—all the while there being the assumption that you are a bad mom or neglect your child.

With this group, that shame was set aside, even if only temporarily.

Each week became my oasis. The content didn't matter. We learned about budgeting, healthy eating, educational opportunities. We had Halloween parties and Christmas parties. We made crafts and took pictures.

We made a sisterhood. And each week, that loneliness dissipated a little more. I was no longer an outsider. Through the Teen Mom's Program, I found my place.

Eventually, I left Dodge City to attend college at Kansas State University. Although leaving town meant leaving the program, my time as part of the Teen Mom's Program changed me forever. Because of the work Amy Falcon [Director of the Teen Mom's Program] was able to do in my life, I wanted to attempt to provide that to others as well. I changed my major and became a social worker. I married my wonderful husband, Justin, the father of my daughter, Rileigh. We had another beautiful girl. Following a year of working in the social work field, I attended law school at Washington University in St. Louis. Following law school, my family and I decided to make the move back to Dodge City.

Moving back allowed for me to once again become a part of the program, this time as a mentor. The program has grown and changed since its initial year, and the things it has to offer young moms is incredible.

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"Exciting" became watching my child take her first steps and "glamour" involved anything that sparkled and could be worn with plastic high heels. "Travel" meant following my children around to their various activities as their biggest cheerleader, and the greatest "adventures" came from things like attempting to potty train a two-year-old.

And the possibilities—oh, the possibilities. I see them daily in the faces of my three children. I never lost those dreams—they became my everyday life.

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