

An opportunity for self-reflection

By Jeannette Pai-Espinosa

We'll never really know for sure whether there was a pact between high school girls at Gloucester High School to get pregnant. In the end the answer to the "pact" question is less important than what we can learn from looking at how the nation (that includes all of us) reacted to the idea that a group of young women might have made the choice to intentionally get pregnant.

Reactions have ranged from horror and outrage to sadness to compassion—all from our position as spectators of young women we do not know, in a community where most of us have never visited. It's so easy to judge; easy to give advice; the condemnations flow freely; and so do the declarations about what the girls, their families and the community could have (or should have) done.

We all think we know what we would do in their situation. We attribute motives to actions we've only read about in the paper or online or seen on television. Spend a bit of time online and you can read the ugly, judgmental and demeaning characterization of the young women that flows like water, and I quote, these girls are "parasites, sluts, idiots, harlots, stupid and should go to jail." It's time to leave the people of Gloucester alone and ask why the United States has double the adolescent pregnancy and birth rates of any other industrialized country in the world—and then do something about it.

The truth is none of us, including me, knows for sure why 15 percent of teens who get pregnant do it intentionally. Even if we asked them, we still might not know. Given their young age they may not be able to tell us why, and certainly not in complex psychological or sociological terms. Nor can they answer in quick sound bites blaming the media, the lack of sex education and contraception, or celebrities. What they might tell us, however, is how having babies fills a void in their young lives. They might tell us about the serious issues they faced in their life before becoming pregnant: sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect; substance abuse; domestic violence; poverty and homelessness. They might tell us that they are the child of a teen parent and finally, they might tell us that more than anything they want to be a good parent. Not all pregnant teens share a history of trauma and isolation—but in our work, we find that many do.

Those of us (and I include myself here) who live in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods most likely see a world filled with choices we can make and opportunities that help us to grow—unless we make a "bad" decision. It makes sense that we would look at the actions of others through this lens. We judge the choices made by others as "good" or "bad" without considering the options open to them. Intellectually we know that the world is a very different place for those who live close to, at, or below the poverty line. We are aware that for someone living in poverty, choice, opportunity, respect and success look very different than they do to you or I—but sometimes, we rush to judgment rather than take the time to listen and see the world from a different perspective.

In their insightful book, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas challenge us to understand how a middle-class perspective impacts and shapes our judgment of single mothers. Edin and Kefalas talked with 162 single mothers living in poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia's urban core. Their interviews reveal a world view that sees having a child as an opportunity, not a burden. Being a mother means giving and receiving unconditional love and intimacy; eliminating social isolation; proving one's maturity and high moral stature by being a good parent; and gaining control over the direction one's life.

Edin and Kefalas write: "Putting motherhood first makes sense in a social context where the achievements that middle-class youth see as their birthright are little more than pipe dreams: children

offer a tangible source of meaning, while other avenues for gaining social esteem and personal satisfaction appear vague and tenuous.” (page 48)

From this perspective, it is possible to see how adolescents who intentionally get pregnant might see their decision as a supreme act of empowerment, of hope for a better future and of taking control and building a new life. We don't have to agree, but if we want to support their efforts to break the destructive cycles that may have claimed many generations, then we should set aside our judgment and listen to their voices.

Let's be clear: adolescent pregnancy is a symptom of deep and profound social, economic and political issues that find their root cause in the economic disparity between classes, racism, sexism and a society that puts more emphasis on possessions than relationships. All young mothers should not be seen as victims, and we should hold them accountable for their choices, but we need to understand the limited range of options open to these young women. We also need to hold ourselves accountable for allowing them to live in a world where there are so few options available.

We know that children of teen parents face very long odds throughout their lives. Nevertheless, despite these odds, many young parents and their children have healthy relationships, strong bonds and go on to succeed and excel personally and professionally. But like all parents, they need support and assistance to overcome and thrive. So rather than judge, let's provide the support young adults need to be good parents and to break intergenerational cycles of destructive attitudes, behaviors and relationships.

We don't need to agree or support the decision these young women make, but we might be a better society if we stepped outside of our circles of comfort to understand that choice, opportunity, respect and success are relative terms, and that these terms can be perceived and achieved in very different ways. Despite the many obstacles they face, during the 125 years the Crittenton family of agencies has worked with single mothers, our experience shows us that they can succeed if provided adequate support and by utilizing their tremendous strength and resilience.

Unfortunately, our country's system—for supporting the young women and men who find themselves as young parents—is frayed and patched like an old blanket. The holes are big, and too many fall through. But you can do something about it: get engaged in your local community and invest time, money and talent in agencies that provide services and advocate for policy changes at the national, state and local level. So, rather than wasting energy reacting to what may or may not have happened in Gloucester let's channel that into action and make a positive difference for all young families, who need support in order to be healthy and economically self-sufficient.

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