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**I Was a Teenage Mother**

**By GLORIA MALONE**

“EVERYTHING’S going to be O.K., mamita,” my mother said, before walking into her bedroom and crying her eyes out.

I was 15, and I was pregnant.

Today I have a 6-year-old daughter, and I’m not a teenager anymore. But I can’t help but be affected by New York City’s controversial [new anti-teenage pregnancy campaign](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/nyregion/city-campaign-targeting-teenage-pregnancy-draws-criticism.html?_r=0). The posters, which appear on subways, walls and buses, feature toddlers in states of despair or discontent because they were born to teenage mothers. One ad [shows a crying child](http://tinyurl.com/btsffx5) with the text “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen.” Many posters ask: “Think being a teen parent won’t cost you?”

Some people argue that these ads are a fresh approach to dealing with the problem of teenage pregnancy. But I can tell you that there’s nothing innovative about them. All they do is take the insults and stereotypes directed at teenage parents every day, and post them up around the city.

At 15, I was a good student and determined to apply to college. But after I had my daughter, my high school guidance counselor refused to see me and help me with my applications. She never expected me to graduate. Most people, even within my family, assumed I wouldn’t amount to anything and would be dependent on government assistance for the rest of my life.

But I wanted to be someone my daughter could be proud of. So every day, I woke up before the sun, drove my daughter’s father to work, my daughter to day care, and still managed to be in class at 7:50 a.m. before the bell rang. I also worked 35 hours a week at a cellphone store. I would leave school early through a co-op program that allowed graduating seniors to work and go to school at the same time. After getting out of work I would pick my daughter up from day care and go home. I was always tired, but more than anything I was determined.

I also had a few people who encouraged me not to listen to the stereotypes. People like my chorus teacher, who allowed me to show up a few minutes late to class, so I could pump breast milk first; my economics teacher, who congratulated me on having a healthy child and reminded me that he was proud of me for not giving up; and the nurse at my daughter’s doctor’s office, who told me I was doing a great job and to keep it up.

These bits of encouragement are what kept me going. Thanks to them, I graduated with honors and went on to community college. Today I am a student, an advocate for young parents and, above all, a proud mom.

The blame, shame and stereotypes expressed by so many others simply told me to give up. Stereotypes and blame do not stop teenagers from engaging in unprotected sex or discourage teenage pregnancy. They simply keep teenage parents from seeking the help and support they need. The only tools that have been proven to prevent teenage pregnancy are comprehensive sex education, birth control and abstinence.

These ads do not explain why New York City, which thankfully makes birth control accessible to youth, has only recently begun requiring that comprehensive sex education be taught in all its public schools. Nor do they offer teenage parents any support for how to get out of poverty and provide their children with a more stable upbringing. Until that happens, there will always be teenage pregnancy and teenage parents.

The least we can do is let them ride public transportation in peace.

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