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from the May 19, 2004 edition

They change diapers and perceptions

By Marilyn Gardner | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

Jennifer Lind was 18 and the president of her senior class when a little plastic square in a home pregnancy test turned pink, changing her life forever. It confirmed her suspicions that she was pregnant.

Goodbye, college plans. Hello, brave new world of teenage motherhood.

Officials at her school stripped her of her post as class president on grounds that she was not an appropriate role model. A guidance counselor told her she would never be able to go to college. "I believed him," recalls Ms. Lind, of Peterborough, N.H. Even her parents turned their backs on her until several months after her son, Jonathan, was born.

Yet Lind, like many other young women in her situation, is proving the skeptics and naysayers wrong. She is one of 35 teenage mothers, all of them now adults, who share their trials and triumphs in "You Look Too Young to be a Mom," a new anthology edited by Deborah Davis.



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By giving teen mothers a rare chance to speak for themselves, Ms. Davis hopes to break a longstanding silence and challenge negative stereotypes.

In 2002, 425,000 babies were born to teenage mothers. That represents a 30 percent decline since 1991 - a drop that reflects lower rates for all births. Experts also attribute it to less teenage sex and more contraception.

Yet despite greater acceptance in some circles, these young mothers find that the scarlet letter still exists. In their case, the A stands for adolescent pregnancy.

"Many young moms comment about the dirty looks they get in supermarkets and on the street," Ms. Davis says. Their parents are often hurt and angry. Teachers may doubt their chances for success. Even doctors and nurses are sometimes less patient with teens in labor than they are with other women during childbirth, Davis finds.

When she solicited essays from teenage mothers across the United States and Canada, she received nearly 200 submissions from girls in all economic backgrounds. A majority were white, mirroring the fact that most teen mothers in the US are Caucasian. Latinas and blacks also sent stories. Almost all graduated from high school, and some have gone on to college.

No one pretends the journey has been easy.

"I went from being a strong, intelligent class president to having nobody around," Lind says, explaining her initial anger and bitterness eight years ago. She never had a baby shower. That first year after their son was born, her husband even forgot to wish her a happy Mother's Day.

"I realized I needed to take control," she says. "The only one who could make our situation better was me. I needed to forgive my parents and to get my parents to forgive me. Once I learned to forgive the world for the prejudice against young moms, I was able to say, You know what, I'm not a bad person."

Today Lind's son is 8, and she has a 4-year-old daughter. Divorced, she has held a patchwork of jobs to support her children, ranging from

TOUGH EARLY DAYS:

Jennifer Lind was a teenager when she gave birth to son, Jonathan. She has held a patchwork of jobs in the eight years since.

COURTESY OF JENNIFER LIND

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data analyst and real estate agent to waitress, art model, and landscape gardener. She is also studying for a bachelor's degree in health science. Lind and her mother now enjoy a close relationship, and she and her father are "a lot closer than we were." But, she adds, "it's been a long road to get there."

For Samantha Lucas, the long road began when she was a high school junior. Like other teens expecting babies, she was saddened by her friends' lack of support. "You say 'pregnant' when you're 17 and they gasp," says Mrs. Lucas, of Easley, S.C. "It's like you tell someone there's a fire. After that first second of shock, they're gone."

With her dreams of going to art school in New York and being a "single independent girl" dashed, Lucas and her boyfriend - now her husband - settled into youthful domesticity with the birth of their daughter.

"After about two weeks of having her home, it all fell in place for me," she says. Now she and her husband are approaching their seventh wedding anniversary. She works at home as a medical transcriptionist and is attending college part time.

Still, despite her success and stability, Lucas sometimes envies her unencumbered contemporaries. "There are days when I'd just love to hang out with a friend, and not think about buying groceries or paying the mortgage," she says. "I still wake up and say, Oh my gosh, I can't believe I'm doing this. It's so hard."

Hard is also the word Jackie Lanni uses to describe her foray into motherhood at 18. Determined to succeed on her own, she refused to accept welfare or food stamps following the birth of her son.

Instead, after attending high school classes every day, she hurried to two part-time jobs. She felt "obligated to do it the hard way, so no one could point an accusing finger at me."

Although many young women share Ms. Lanni's reluctance to rely on public assistance, nearly 80 percent of unmarried teen mothers receive welfare at some point, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. In 2001, the monthly cash payment to families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families averaged \$288 for one child and \$362 for two children.

"For single mothers in general, you have only two choices - take a handout forever or take a handout for a while," says Elizabeth Slater of Toronto, whose daughter was born three years ago when she was 19. "You have to have an education to support a child."

But getting an education means surmounting many obstacles, from a lack of money and time to a

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lack of student housing for single parents. Katherine Arnoldi of New York, once a teenage mother herself, is writing a book about how the top 300 colleges and universities in the US accommodate single parents. She calls her findings "dismal." Many schools require freshmen to live on campus but provide no on-campus housing for families.

"The top schools are the worst offenders," says Ms. Arnoldi, author of "The Amazing True Story of a Single Teenage Mom." She finds large state schools to be the best, offering more housing and more day care. Pointing to other bright spots, she lauds the University of California, Davis, for accepting vouchers for federally subsidized housing. And Indiana State University at Bloomington has a sorority for single mothers.

Latisha Boyd, who grew up in a housing project in the Bronx, gave birth to a son when she was 19. For the first six months, she and her baby were homeless, bouncing from one relative's home to another. Finally, her son's great-aunt helped her to get an apartment.

She began attending church, and her renewed faith helped to turn her life around. Eventually, Ms. Boyd received a master's degree from Adelphi University. She is a social worker in Maryland.

One common thread running through the richly colored tapestry of these women's lives is a determination to defy stereotypes that portray young mothers as lazy, dependent, and irresponsible.

Some mothers receive emotional or financial support from their parents. Others credit mentors and sympathetic employers. Slowly, success has come, one day, one feeding, one diaper change, one paycheck, one college course at a time. In the process, recrimination and doubt gradually give way to growing confidence.

Whatever challenges teen parents face, Davis says, their situation doesn't have to be a disaster.

"Studies show that while young mothers have a hard time in the first years, they do come through it. There's a limited period of time when things are rough, but most teen mothers and their children turn out fine."

Ms. Lanni, whose son is now 10, looks forward to graduating from law school at the University of Arizona in December. Summing up the challenge of young parenthood, she says, "Being a teenage mom is like being a woman in corporate America. You have to work twice as hard to get half the credit."

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