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Recognition of Maternal Heroism: A Case Report

by

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In our society we often admire the bravery of those young men who fought and died to preserve our nation's freedom. We rarely hear of the courage and self-sacrifice of young girls who keep their accidental or unplanned pregnancies. They give up the lives they previously had for the sake of their babies. The following case report concerns the maternal heroism of a young girl who kept her baby. It is unique because she received public recognition for her maternal heroism.

Case Report

A 14-year-old Filipino-American woman on her first pregnancy presented at eight weeks gestation. She had recently completed the eighth grade. She felt that keeping the pregnancy was the right thing to do, but she was distraught at "losing her childhood." Whether the 15-year-old boyfriend would be supportive was uncertain. She feared that she would be excluded from Catholic high school, her goal. She feared that the future would find her penniless, jobless, without an education, a vagrant on the streets, and her life in ruins.

At about 12 weeks gestation, I received a call from the patient after she got into an argument with her mother. She wanted to visit her classmate in the hospital who had been admitted for a respiratory illness. Her mother was opposed to visitation of the classmate as she felt that it might endanger the pregnancy. After review of the clinical situation, I decided that she could visit her classmate as long as she wore a mask and gloves.

The girl persuaded me to overrule her mother, yet her mother's instincts were correct. If the 14-year-old were to doctor-shop, she could find one who would give her whatever answer she wanted. If the advice turned out to be mistaken, she and the child would bear the consequences. The long-lasting nature of these consequences suggested a difference between life as a child and life as an adult. In the life of a child, one may get shot in imaginary battles but at the end of the game, one is always completely intact. In adult life, however, the bullets are real and some injuries may leave permanent effects. A cardinal example would be the pregnancy in which she now found herself.

Later, the young pregnant mother was bemoaning her momentous responsibilities and her lack of control over her life. I suggested that she was the "general" of this pregnancy. Some generals have no subordinates assigned to them. In order to perform their mission, they must persuade others to do their bidding. As a young girl, she had no job, no driver's license, no education, and no money. She had to use her moral authority as a mother to compel everyone in her life to give the baby whatever it would need.

At 14 weeks gestation, I received an urgent call stating that she was having contractions and was in premature labor. In physical education class at her Catholic high school, she had run over a mile. After the contractions resolved with rest, I suggest that there was a lesson in this. While she may be obliged to obey her teacher, it was more important to be the responsible general of her pregnancy.

At 18 weeks gestation, she called me after-hours with signs of a urinary tract infection. I prescribed an antibiotic. I noted that she was being a good general: she identified the problem, called the person who could remedy it, and then persuaded him to do so.

At 20 weeks gestation, I discussed breast-feeding, as I do with all my patients. I didn't know whether breast-feeding would be acceptable for a freshman at a Catholic high school. I suggested that if our society truly had respect and equality for women, they should be able to breast-feed whenever and wherever it was necessary. The school allowed her to do so.

I instruct my patients to read several books on breast-feeding because problems often arise. Later in the pregnancy, I was very gratified that she had read five books. I could then urge my other patients to emulate the example of a 14-year-old woman, who had made such vigorous efforts to be a good mother.

The boyfriend was very supportive and came to most of the prenatal visits. When absent, he was helping in some other way. At age 15, he became a man for me to admire. Over the course of the pregnancy, a spiritual transformation occurred. He had never seen the inside of a church. The 14-year-old mother and her boyfriend realized that they must

stop having sexual intercourse, which they did at about 20 weeks. They began to go to church together and religion became important to them. Several months later, they committed themselves to each other in holy matrimony. The accidental teenage pregnancy had not been a disaster. It had become a profound and unlimited blessing, a delight to our Creator.

In recognition of her courage and self-sacrifice, the patient was honored by the Creighton University Students for Life. They honored her as their Mother of the Year for valor, heroism and devotion above and beyond the call of duty in the service of her son. Notice of the award appeared in the Creighton University school newspaper, *The Creightonian*. The award was described in a letter to the editor by the President of Creighton University Students for Life, Katie St. Peters.¹ According to President St. Peters, a number of students said they were touched by her letter.²

Discussion

Society is often unkind to pregnant women. This is particularly true of unwed teenagers. They are viewed as immature, selfish, and irresponsible. These adjectives might describe unchaste behavior. They do not describe a young woman who lays down her life for her child.

They do not describe a heroine who risks her marriage prospects, her education, and her future financial stability for her child. They do not describe a teenager who stares down the whole society, with its opprobrium, to do what is right. They do not describe a woman who gives up the things she enjoys, the ability to sit and stand comfortably, and even her sleep pattern, for her child. These maternal heroines should know we appreciate and admire their courage.

In this case the Creighton University Students for Life have recognized the bravery and self-sacrifice of a mother. The stories of other brave young mothers should be told. Their bravery, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty should be honored. The sacrifice and devotion to duty of every mother should be recognized, appreciated, and honored.

References

1. Katie St. Peters, "CSFL Recognizes Young Mother," *The Creightonian* May 1, 1998, p. 7.
2. Katie St. Peters. Personal Communication, Omaha, NE May 15, 1998.