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If You Build It, They May Not be Able to Get There

The Challenges of Mentoring Teenaged and Low-Income Single Mothers Through an Undergraduate Service-Learning Course

This essay grows out of the experience of teaching a Women's Studies service-learning seminar entitled "Single Motherhood in the Contemporary U.S.: Myths and Realities." It identifies the challenges that arose as the professor and her students sought to support the mission of the Family Development Research Program, a grant-funded program designed to provide a variety of mentoring services to teenaged mothers. The article identifies obstacles activist teachers and students are likely to encounter as they partner with social service workers to create ambitious, sustainable programs for young and low-income women. Among the topics discussed are the challenges of bridging class divides, addressing space and funding needs, and dealing with transportation and liability issues. The students designed and implemented a broad range of programs that were useful not only to the teen mothers, but also to several other groups of low-income single mothers, such as those residing at a local homeless shelter and those participating in a PA Department of Welfare-sponsored program. The essay concludes by noting how valuable partnerships between a college and multiple social service agencies can be when one is attempting to build and sustain programs that depend on grant funding. The closing words are given to two teenaged single moms, who speak of the important role these collaboratively designed support programs have played in their personal and academic development.

How can undergraduate students support the valuable work being done by dedicated social service workers and in so doing, get experience negotiating the obstacles one inevitably encounters when engaging in collaborative efforts to address issues of institutionalized injustice? How can twenty-year-old women who have never been mothers best support pregnant and parenting teenaged girls? How can women who attend a college where the yearly tuition is \$40,000 form meaningful bonds with the residents of a shelter for homeless women?

How can one best support mothers who have many responsibilities and little free time, mothers who are too poor to own a car and/or too young to drive one? How does one build—and sustain—a partnership between a small, private, “elite” college and several community service organizations that have no history of working together?

Establishing a college-community partnership

These are issues that arose as I planned and implemented Lafayette College’s first Women’s Studies service-learning course, an upper-level undergraduate seminar entitled “Single Motherhood in the Contemporary U.S.: Myths and Realities.” Because I wanted to stress the interconnectedness of class, race, and gender, and because I had arranged for my students to work with parenting and pregnant teenaged girls enrolled at a local high school, many readings focused on the cultural ideologies and institutions that most powerfully affect young and low-income single mothers. Early in the semester my students also read case histories of adolescent single mothers, the majority of whom are poor or near poor when they become pregnant.¹ These texts prepared the college students to interact thoughtfully and respectfully with the high school mothers, for the readings dispel the notion that the U.S. is a meritocracy, reveal the inaccuracy of the prevalent and demeaning stereotype of the lazy and self-indulgent “Welfare Queen,” and expose the falsity of the common belief that girls who become mothers as teenagers are sexually promiscuous, irresponsible individuals who inevitably do irreparable harm to themselves and their children.

In the initial offering of the course, I informed my students that their main project would be to find effective ways to support the Family Development Research Program, a grant-funded program designed to reduce the high dropout rate of pregnant girls at a local high school.² The physician who wrote the initial (2000) grant had convinced a local childcare organization to establish a daycare facility at the high school; FDRP grant monies pay for a bus that transports the girls and their children to and from school and for half the salary of the nurse/social worker who, along with the high school guidance counselor, mentors the young mothers. In addition to trying to ensure that a high percentage of the girls graduate from high school on time, then pursue schooling or training that will allow them to earn a living wage for themselves and their children, FDRP has the following goals: to ensure healthy pregnancies and deliveries, decrease the frequency of premature birth and low infant birth weight, teach parenting skills and provide other kinds of support that will reduce the incidence of child abuse, provide ongoing healthcare screening, and minimize the number of girls having a second, closely spaced pregnancy.³ Home visitation and mentoring services are provided to the young mothers until their child turns five, another goal being to ensure that the teenagers’ children are kindergarten-ready at the appropriate age.⁴

In 2000, six girls participated in FDRP; five years later the two staff members were mentoring 22 high school students and 17 recent graduates.

The nurse who works most closely with these young mothers was delighted that my students wanted to help the FDRP staff fulfill its goals, though initially we weren't sure exactly what form—other than tutoring—that assistance might take. At our first meeting with the high school students, my Women's Studies students distributed a survey, listing some of our ideas for programs and urging the teens to let us know which of these—and more importantly, what other activities—they would find enjoyable and/or useful. A few of the high school students were openly skeptical of the value of spending time with the college students. "Are any of *you* moms?" one teen (who ended up actively participating in our programs) pointedly asked, her tone clearly conveying her suspicion that she was unlikely to benefit from interaction with girls she (falsely) assumed were "spoiled rich kids."⁵ But most of the teens expressed interest in the proposed interaction, perhaps in part because I shared with them the information that I and three of my four sisters are single mothers.

Finding time and space

By the end of the semester, the six students in the first offering of WS 353 had formed close relationships with the ten high school students who regularly attended the sessions we sponsored. They also had accomplished remarkable things, which I will detail later. But our success in supporting the teen mothers required a great deal of resourcefulness and tenacity. The first challenge we faced was finding a time and place at which the college and high school students could meet. Because the girls who elect to participate in FDRP are balancing their responsibilities as mothers, students, and in most cases, part-time workers in the paid labor force, much of the mentoring they receive from the FDRP staff occurs one-on-one in the girls' homes. The staff does require that most of those enrolled in the program attend a 50-minute "Lunch and Learn" session once a month, but for a number of reasons, this venue wasn't suitable for our programs.⁶

It turned out that a few of the teen mothers could stay after school on Wednesdays, so this became our first regularly scheduled meeting time. But since we wanted to make our programs accessible to the other teens, we began searching for additional times and places at which the two groups could meet. We considered having gatherings on the college campus, but lack of safe and affordable transportation made this idea unfeasible.⁷ We resolved this problem—at least for some of the teen mothers—by forming a partnership with the much more accessible Third Street Alliance for Women and Children, a non-profit that (among many other things) provides housing and support services to low-income women and their children.⁸ Through a lucky coincidence, TSA had just opened up a new wing that was to house pregnant and parenting teenaged girls from the foster care system; the Director of Residential Services thought the programs we were designing for the high school moms would appeal to and benefit not only this incoming group, but also TSA's older single mothers.⁹ So we began holding a second set of sessions on Monday evenings.

Questioning the mothers and questioning our assumptions

As those who have taught service-learning courses know, one of the guiding principles of service-learning pedagogy is the importance of listening to one's community partner, of allowing the individuals one is seeking to support to articulate their concerns, goals, and needs. Thus just as they had done with the teen mothers, my Women's Studies students through conversation and a survey asked TSA residents to guide them in designing programs. Although the lives of the two groups of single mothers were quite different in some respects, one striking commonality surfaced in the survey responses: all the mothers had very busy, demanding lives and were particularly interested in activities that would be fun, creative, and relaxing.

The most popular suggestion, made by a college student who was an avid "scrapbooker," was to hold sessions at which the mothers and mothers-to-be could make baby or memory books. This activity turned out to be beneficial in three major ways. First, through the collaborative experience of scrapbooking, the single mothers and the 20-year old, non-parenting college students became comfortable interacting with one another. Secondly, because making baby and memory books often led participants to share with one another their family histories and future goals, the college students obtained information that helped them design subsequent programs that the mothers found interesting and useful. Last but not least, regular interaction with women whose lives are in many ways different from their own gave the college students a greater incentive—and an enhanced ability—to understand the ideologies and public policies that affect, profoundly and often negatively, young and low-income single women's experiences of motherhood.

The experience of interacting simultaneously with two groups of single mothers also foregrounded for me and the college students how important it was for us to constantly scrutinize our assumptions. For example, as we contemplated what might happen when the teenagers got together with single mothers in their mid-20s or 30s, we thought exclusively of ways the younger moms would benefit. Because many TSA residents are high school dropouts or have GEDs rather than diplomas, these women often have difficulty finding jobs that allow them to be financially self-sufficient. Thus my students and I assumed that interacting with the TSA residents would further one of the primary goals of the FDRP—would increase the high school students' awareness of the importance of finishing high school, then pursuing additional schooling or professional training. We also thought the high school students would benefit in two other ways: (1) should they ever find themselves in need of shelter or other kinds of support services nonprofits like TSA provide (such as dealing with substance abuse and domestic violence issues), they would know that such institutions exist, and (2) they could receive advice on childrearing from women who had greater parenting experience than they had.

The high school students did benefit from the interaction in these ways. But they also reminded us of something we had forgotten: the fact that young

people can instruct and motivate their elders. Because the teen mothers have convenient access to an excellent, inexpensive daycare and receive extensive support from the FDRP staff, many take it as a given that they—like almost all earlier participants in the program—will graduate on time, then enroll in college or high-quality job training programs. The teenagers' ability to juggle school work, part-time jobs, and mothering—and the confidence most had that they could continue to do so after high school—was inspirational to the older single moms.

In fact, the TSA residents' excitement about furthering their formal education resulted in one of the most important programs facilitated by my students, an eight-week "college prep" course conducted at TSA by the director of Northampton Community College's New Options/New Choices program. New Options/New Choices is a grant-funded program that since 1980 has been supporting low-income individuals, especially single mothers, who wish to pursue post-secondary education.¹⁰ One of the students in my course arranged for the director of New Options to come to TSA to provide an overview of the program's services; these range from assisting individuals in choosing a career path to helping them become computer literate, obtain scholarships, or find affordable childcare. The NONC director was so impressed by the enthusiasm displayed by the TSA residents that she agreed to conduct the eight-week session at the shelter so that these low-income single mothers would not have to worry about childcare (which was provided by my students) or about finding the time and money to get to and from the community college (nine miles away). Most of the TSA residents attended these workshops, as did several other low-income single mothers who are mentored by the nurses who oversee the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare's Nurse-Family Partnership, women who had learned about our service-learning activities through the nurse who is the linchpin of FDRP.¹¹

Liability, transportation, and funding issues

Another project we began working on was a series of free "Mommy and Me/Water Babies" classes for women with children ages six months to two years. One of my students was on the college's swim team, which was willing to provide a properly certified instructor, and TSA was willing to give us access to the center's pool, which is often used for swimming classes for older children and adults. Several of the young mothers said they were interested in such a venture, so everything seemed to be in order. But then we had to deal with liability issues. To make a long story short, it took us the entire semester to figure out a way to provide adequate insurance coverage for the program we had in mind. Then, when we tried to mount the sessions on Sunday afternoons in February, none of the high school mothers attended. The weather was bitterly cold and understandably, the teens didn't want to wait for public buses or walk to TSA with infants and toddlers. Finding a safe, accessible, and affordable way for young and low-income single mothers and their children

to get to sites where college-sponsored (and other) educational programs are being held continues to be a major challenge. Recently, I and the NFP and FDRP nurse-social workers have joined others in creating a local Maternal Health Coalition; one of the coalition's top priorities is addressing the above-mentioned transportation issues.

Another challenge I and my service-learning students continue to face is finding a way to pay for the support programs we design. In addition to purchasing supplies for activities like scrapbooking and light refreshments for our weekly sessions, my students and I must locate funding for the more ambitious programs we run once a month. At these events, which generally draw from 40 to 50 women, we provide door prizes as well as dinner for the mothers and their children. For example, my fall 2006 seminar students held a "Spa Night" that featured free yoga instruction and a spoken word poetry performance; during this three-hour event, one group of college students gave the mothers manicures and pedicures while another group watched the women's children. Scattered throughout the room were informational tables on such topics as resume writing, stress management, and free and inexpensive family activities in the local area. To register for door prizes, mothers had to visit each station, where they had the opportunity to pick up handouts and brochures; play games that were both fun and informative; and converse informally about the subjects on which a third group of students had done research.

These programs have been incredibly well received, but of course they are costly. Thankfully, I teach at a college that generously funds both its academic programs and student organizations; over half the expenses my students and I have incurred have been covered by the WS program or by campus organizations to which my students belong. And it seems likely that in the near future our new President and Provost, both of whom have expressed a strong interest in service-learning pedagogy, may establish a budget line for those engaged in community-based teaching and research. Until that time, however, my students and I will be forced to devote quite a bit of time to soliciting donations from local businesses. Although I look forward to having access to a budget, engaging in fundraising definitely has been a worthwhile educational experience for my students. Not only have they learned how essential money can be to the success of activist projects, but they also have had a chance to educate other college students and many of our city's residents about the needs and concerns of one constituency of our community—its young and low-income single mothers.

In addition to the programs I've mentioned, the college students have provided one-on-one tutoring, especially for teens who are on maternity leave. They have twice conducted a "baby items" drive at the college, as well as located and transported free used furniture to the homes of low-income mothers. And they've created a *Parenting Resource Manual* on topics in which the mothers have expressed interest; these include breastfeeding, child nutrition, child discipline, child development stages, choosing educational and age-appropriate

toys, baby-proofing one's home, and tips for saving money on a wide variety of parenting-related expenses. Some of these topics have been the basis of brief, interactive presentations at one of the weekly meetings; others can be the basis for presentations by future WS 353 students. The idea, of course, was to create a manual that could be revised and expanded in subsequent years.¹²

Creating a sustainable partnership

As the phrase “subsequent years” suggests, it was important to me from the outset that I create a relationship with the FDRP (and as the collaboration expanded, with Third Street Alliance and the Nurse-Family Partnership) that would be sustainable; I did not want to enter into a partnership with community organizations that have ongoing needs if I could offer only one-time, short-term support. Thus I arranged in advance to offer the service learning seminar in the fall, then teach a spring semester literature-based Women's Studies course in which students could participate in the “single moms program” for their major course project. I redesigned “Literary Women” so that many of the texts focused on low-income women, and I began the semester with a video on teen mothers that a graduate of the FDRP program had produced for a college course, actively trying to cultivate student interest in this ongoing service-learning venture.¹³

The dozen “Literary Women” students who chose to pursue the service-learning project option continued the tutoring activities initiated by the seminar students and in an effort to promote family literacy, initiated a new “arts and crafts” activity—making children's books—for the weekly sessions.¹⁴ Two of the students designed a very successful presentation on dating and domestic violence, as well as created a chapter on this topic for the *Parenting Resource Manual*. Another group of students created a cookbook entitled *Nutritious Recipes for Young Mothers on the Go*, which in addition to recipes, contains advice on how to plan, budget, and shop for meals. The authors created a sample two-week schedule of dinner meals, demonstrating how one can save both time and money by doing such things as freezing portions of a casserole for future use or by using a cooked chicken for several different meals. The students priced the items needed for their two weeks' worth of meals, and even showed how the cost of that same set of meals would decrease once basics like flour and condiments were purchased. The authors presented their cookbook at a session at which they brought the main dish, while asking the mothers to prepare one of the appetizers. The interactive nature of the presentation was very appealing to the mothers, as was a similar session at which college students demonstrated how to make homemade zucchini-carrot baby food.

This academic year I'm again teaching WS 353 and Literary Women back-to-back. Because enrollment in the seminar tripled, fundraising was much easier, as was planning and implementing large-scale events that many single mothers attend. For example, this September my students sponsored a workshop run by single mothers' rights activist Katherine Arnoldi, author

of the award-winning graphic novel *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenaged Single Mom*.¹⁵ Arnoldi shared some of her own experiences as a former low-income single mother, gave advice about identifying family-friendly colleges and universities and accessing scholarship opportunities, and moderated a lively, community-building discussion about single motherhood. Because I had 17 committed volunteers, we were able to invite not only the high school moms and the residents of TSA, but also the residents of a nearby subsidized housing complex and the low-income, first-time single mothers in the Nurse-Family Partnership program. Towards the end of the event, we invited these “new” single mothers to join us at our weekly meetings and urged them (and the nurses and caseworkers who mentor them) to contact us if we could assist them in other ways. As a result, some of my students began tutoring low-income single mothers who are taking classes at the local community college; others are helping a nurse find parenting materials for her cognitively impaired clients; and a third group is teaching the NFP staff how to manage their computer data base more efficiently.

But having 17 students in the seminar comes with its own set of problems. For instance, I now realize that one reason last year’s college students and single mothers bonded fairly quickly is because attendance at many sessions was low. Generally four to six mothers and four to six college students attended a given weekday session; not only could this small group converse as a whole, but it was easy for individuals from the two groups to pair off.

But when WS 353 enrolls seventeen, the college students have to take turns attending the weekday sessions; rotating in and out, their interactions with the single mothers are less frequent and therefore less likely to result in close, mutually beneficial relationships between members of the two groups. This problem is especially exacerbated this year because for reasons too complex to detail, none of the parenting and pregnant teens has been able to commit to the Wednesday sessions at the high school that we ran so successfully last year. On the other hand, because of programs like the “spa night” and the Arnoldi workshop that reach large audiences, the college students are now offering their support to two additional groups of low-income single mothers. But as the scope of the project expands, the need to address both issues of sustainability and the obstacles posed by inadequate monetary and transportation resources becomes increasingly pressing—and the solutions more complex.

The value of complex partnerships

The biggest challenge we have faced is finding a way to “save” the Family Development Research program, whose grant funding expires in June. Even though the FDRP has met, indeed exceeded, its objectives, the daycare facility at the high school is being closed at the end of the academic year. Moreover, no one was assuming responsibility for writing grant proposals that would fund what the teen mothers themselves regard as the most important feature of the program—the mentoring services provided by the nurse, who for all practical

purposes also functions as the girls' social worker. Here is where the complex web of partnerships that my undergraduate Women's Studies students helped to create proved most useful: the FDRP staff, the director of the local Nurse-Family Partnership, and a number of individuals and non-profits who had become aware of and valued the programs my students had developed began working with me to make sure that young single mothers in our city continue to have the mentoring services that they need and so richly deserve. Currently this informal group of activists are putting the finishing touches on a grant proposal, and we have found a local nonprofit that wants to make maintaining and strengthening a combined FDRP-NFP initiative its top priority for the coming year. Without the connections among organizations and community activists that my students helped to forge, it's unlikely that I and others in the community would have collaborated in such a timely and effective manner.

Out of the mouths of babes' moms

I could talk at length about the value of service-learning, about ways in which the college students' ability—and desire—to retain, grasp, and assess the facts and theories they encountered in course readings was enhanced by their firsthand interactions with single mothers. I could detail how much my students learned from the community college financial aid officers, social workers, nurses, and young single mothers who visited our classroom, individuals who have far more knowledge than I have about some aspects of low-income single mothers' lives. I could describe how these WS courses have helped many college students hone their skills as activists, about ways in which my students are continuing to support local teenaged and low-income single mothers through volunteer work, internships, independent studies, honors thesis projects, or leadership positions in the college's "Community Outreach Center." But since such topics are complex and beyond the scope of this essay, I'll close with a few words about and from two recent high school graduates, who regard the mentoring they received from the FDRP nurse and my students as playing a key role in their personal and academic development. This information comes from Rachel Gallagher, a student in my first WS 353 seminar who has conducted interviews with FDRP "graduates" as part of an honors thesis project, one designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of both grant-funded and college-sponsored mentoring programs for parenting and pregnant teenaged girls.¹⁶

Kim is a white, working class student who has just completed her first semester in the honors program at a local community college; she became pregnant as a high school sophomore. Although she currently lives with and receives much emotional support from her parents, she did not tell them she was pregnant until five months after her son was conceived. She has remained good friends with her son's father, a college senior who not only pays child support but also assumes primary childcare responsibilities on the weekends. Compared to that of most other teen mothers, Kim's life seems almost blissful,

and her future does indeed look bright. She graduated in the top ten percent of her high school class, and if she can maintain a GPA of 3.5 or higher, she will continue to receive scholarships that cover her college tuition.

But Kim's home life was far from idyllic when she became pregnant; her father was a heavy drinker who only became a recovering alcoholic after Kim's son was born. According to Kim, it was the FDRP nurse more than anyone who helped her maintain high grades and achieve emotional stability during her first two years of motherhood. "Sally is always there for you no matter what your issue, no matter what your problem," Kim remarks; "I had somebody to talk to and help me who I knew wasn't going to be judgmental." Kim speaks of how convenient it was to have free transportation to and from a great daycare, and how comforting it was to know "that my son was fine and so close by." Of the monthly "Lunch and Learn" sessions, Kim notes how much she benefited from programs on topics like birth control, STDS, and filing for child support, and how much she treasured the opportunity to trade experiences with other young moms. "We'd all sit around and talk about life," notes Kim, "just kind of help each other, and Sally would always be there to give suggestions."

Kim claims that many teachers at her high school assume that teen mothers "don't care about school, wanna drop out, and don't even have ideas of going to college"; as a result, they don't inform these students about admissions procedures or scholarship opportunities. She claims that the college students were particularly important to her because they supported and helped her achieve her goal of attending college full-time right after graduation. "My biggest concern was getting grades high enough to get a full scholarship and I was struggling in pre-calculus," Kim observes, noting that she was "so thankful for the tutoring" a college student provided and how reassuring it is to know that "the Lafayette girls are still there if I ever need help with college coursework." "I know I would have graduated without these supports," Kim concludes, "but the fact that the tutors and Sally were always available was so helpful, because as a teenaged parent sometimes you get so stressed. When you have people to turn to it keeps you from giving up or becoming so aggravated you explode."

Tina, a nineteen-year-old African American single mother who gave birth to her daughter when she was a high school junior, also speaks of how much she benefited from the FDRP and college-sponsored programs. Currently Tina lives with and receives a lot of support from her mother and an older sister, but she gets little financial or emotional help from her child's father, who has been in and out of jail for much of the past three years. Tina admits that initially she thought the programs for teen mothers were "gonna be dumb." But she soon changed her mind, claiming that, "knowing you're not alone in being a teen with a baby helps you keep your head up and stay strong and not listen to people who say you can't do what you wanna do because you can. I'm doing it!" She appreciates the fact that the college students were available for tutoring or "if you just needed a babysitter to get your homework done," and glows with pride as she talks about how the professor was so impressed by

the poem she wrote to teach her daughter about body parts that she read the poem at a national conference.

Tina also credits Sally and the college students for helping her sustain her dream of becoming (as Sally once was) an emergency room nurse. After Tina became pregnant, the high school teacher who was charged with helping Tina keep up with her coursework only made one visit to her home; not surprisingly, when Tina returned to school she had to “cram everything in” and ended up earning grades lower than those she was used to receiving. Her teachers then convinced Tina to enter a vo-tech program in cosmetology, even though she indicated she had little interest in this field. But as Tina notes, the college students kept alive her belief that she had the ability to become a nurse, and after Tina graduated, Sally helped her find a job at a local nursing center that will pay for her to take courses leading to an LPN or RN degree. And like Kim, Tina knows that she can continue to turn to Sally and the college students for both moral and practical support. “I look forward to Sally’s visits,” Tina claims. “She helps you encourage yourself and really helps you with parenting skills, telling you that even though you’re a teen, you can still give the baby what the baby needs.” “And I know,” she concludes, “that the college students would try to help you out with anything; all you have to do is ask.”

¹According to Melissa Ludtke, 87 percent of teen mothers—the vast majority of whom are not married—are poor or near poor (26). About 40 percent of unmarried mothers (of all ages) in the U.S. do not have high school degrees; roughly two-thirds of these mothers and their children live in poverty (1997: 30).

²The FDRP program has been quite successful. Whereas one-third of the pregnant and parenting girls not enrolled in the program have dropped out of school, FDRP participants have graduated at or above the rate (c. 86 percent) of non-parenting students at Easton Area High School (see www.eastonsd.org/di.htm). Only one FDRP participant has had a second, closely spaced pregnancy, and only 6.5 percent of the infants born to FDRP teens have been below average weight at birth, compared to a county average of 9.6 percent. All five members of the first FDRP “class” have completed post-secondary degrees and are pursuing careers that they find rewarding and that allow them to be economically self-sufficient: two are medical assistants, one is an accountant, one is a chef, and the other works in the field of early childhood education. This year, one of the FDRP seniors graduated in the top ten percent of her class (she was ranked 12th); this young woman received five scholarships, including one that will cover all her tuition expenses for the first two years of community college.

³As is revealed by such studies as those undertaken in 1992 by the Alliance for Young Families (a Massachusetts nonprofit dedicated to preventing adolescent pregnancy and to expanding quality services for teenaged girls who do become

mothers), young mothers who have access to the kind of support services provided by FDRP “are more likely than other teen mothers to postpone the birth of a second child” and thus are “more likely to finish high school and less likely to remain dependent on welfare; [moreover], their children, on average, do better in school” than those of other teen mothers. Similarly, two Yale psychologists who tracked adolescent mothers in New Haven found that those who remained in comprehensive, school-based programs similar to FDRP for seven or more weeks after giving birth were considerably less likely to have another child in the next two years than pregnant girls who had never participated in or who had dropped out of the support program. For more information on these and similar studies, see Ludtke 170-75.

⁴Thus far, the children of all graduates of the FDRP program have been kindergarten-ready by the age of five. The educational future of these children is bright; studies of female-headed households reveal that the level of “maternal education is the primary factor in how well the children are likely to do in school” (Ludtke 299).

⁵Although some of the parenting and pregnant teens at the high school seemed to assume that all Lafayette College students are from well-to-do families, they learned through interaction with my students that this is, indeed, not the case. For instance, three of the six WS 353 students in my first seminar qualify for and receive full or almost full financial aid.

⁶The time of each session was limited (especially since students were getting and eating lunch the first few minutes), any presentation or activity would have to be repeated three times, and none of the college students had a class schedule that permitted her to be at the high school from 10:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Most importantly, the FDRP staff often needed this time to run other programs or to facilitate community-building among the young mothers.

⁷Many of the high school girls are too young to drive, and those old enough to do so often don’t have access to cars. For liability reasons, the college does not permit its faculty and students to transport members of the community who are being supported through service-learning classes and volunteerism, so it was not possible for my students to take the teen girls and their young children to and from campus. Public transportation also was not an option, because bus service to and from “the hill” on which the college is located is infrequent, and most of the high school students live more than a mile from campus.

⁸Through its resident housing program, Third Street Alliance provides “a safe and nurturing environment to women of diverse backgrounds and personal challenges, allowing them to initiate steps to stabilize their lives and the lives of their children” (www.thirdstreetalliance.org). The center has a daycare for older adults dealing with memory loss and/or physical losses associated with aging, as well as an affordable, high-quality daycare center that is licensed through the PA Department of Welfare. TSA also offers a broad range of programs to the general public, including classes in aquatics, karate, yoga, table tennis, and cooking. It is within walking distance of the college as well as the homes

of several of the teen mothers.

⁹In September 2005, TSA opened a new wing for its Supportive Adolescent Independent Living (SAIL) program, which was designed to provide housing and support services to single, pregnant, and parenting adolescent girls involved in the foster care system. Because of various bureaucratic snafus, to date no adolescent girls from the foster care system have been placed in the SAIL wing; it remains unutilized, despite the need for such a facility.

¹⁰For more information on the New Options/New Choices program, see www.northampton.edu/office/ncno.

¹¹The Nurse-Family Partnership is a program funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In the Easton area, four full-time nurses and one supervisor mentor 80 low-income single mothers who are not enrolled in high school; some of these young women (who range in age from 17 to about 30) are high school dropouts and others are high school graduates. The goals of NFP are similar to those of FDRP, but unlike FDRP participants, the mothers do not meet as a group but instead receive one-on-one support through regular home visitations. The NFP nurses are eager to help the mothers they mentor establish a sense of community with one another and with other single mothers in the area; they were delighted that some of NFP participants attended the NCNO workshops held at Third Street Alliance. My current students and I are expanding and strengthening our partnership with NFP and plan to continue to do so.

¹²My fall 2006 seminar students added three sections to the resource manual: one chapter focuses on how to apply and get scholarships to local colleges, the second focuses on stress management, and the third provides information about public library programs and other free and inexpensive activities that might be of interest to local low-income mothers and their children.

¹³This impressive video, which documents the day-to-day struggles and achievements of two young mothers in the year leading up to their high school graduation, is now being used in “life skills” classes at several local middle schools. Both the professionalism of the production and the articulate, resourceful, and ambitious mothers featured in the film disprove the notion that teenaged single mothers are doomed to lead a life of hopelessness and poverty.

¹⁴The idea of making inexpensive books to teach young children such concepts as numbers, colors, animals, and the weather was one that was suggested to us by an NFP nurse, who taught us that we could make the books childproof by enclosing the pages in small ziplock baggies, and that the book could also serve as a teething ring if we holepunched the baggies and strung them on plastic shower rings.

¹⁵For more information on Arnoldi’s fiction and work as a single mothers’ rights activist, see www.katherinearnoldi.com.

¹⁶The two teen mothers have given me permission to quote from their interviews with Rachel, but their names (as well as that of the FDRP nurse) have been changed to protect their privacy.

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