

The Cycle

Local teens share their real life experiences of dealing with the realities of pregnancy, abortion, and the struggle to find support.

* The names in this article have been changed to secure the anonymity of the sources. Any connection between the names and actual persons is entirely coincidental.

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Editor's Note: This story contains information about teenage pregnancy, abortion and adoption and may contain content that could be emotionally disturbing to some readers.

As Grand Ledge student Jane Doe* walked the halls between classes, she found herself abnormally exhausted from every day activities. Leaving class to throw up in the bathroom became a weekly occurrence. Her worries and stomach expanded gradually as she constantly questioned keeping the life inside of her.

SEEKING INITIMACY

Almost a year before she found out she was pregnant, Doe had met Josh Smith*.

"I was so drawn to him... he was exciting, and he was what I needed, he was a breath of fresh air, he didn't stress me out, he didn't say bad things about me, we didn't fight, he just gave me this happiness that I wasn't having [before]," said Doe.

Soon after they starting dating, the topic of sex came up in their conversations. Smith said that, to him, sex is an important element of a serious relationship.

"I mean if you really want to have something serious with me... sex is important to me," said Smith.

Doe, a virgin at the time, remembers feeling pressured into having sex.

"At first I told him that I didn't want to have sex, and he broke things off," she said.

Within a month or two, Smith and Doe were back together and started to become sexually active. Looking back on the relationship, Smith admits that not becoming sexually active would have been better for their relationship in the long run.

Cindy Myers, a social worker at the

Grand Ledge Counseling Center, said that teens often try to seek intimacy through sex and that often the lack of communication can bring sex into a relationship before the couple is truly ready.

"Sexual intimacy is thought to be the same as emotional intimacy. This is common among boys and even more common among girls. The lack of appropriate limits and ground rules and communication can leave a teen more vulnerable to premature sexual contact for which they are not ready," Myers said.

Smith said that he more or less convinced Doe to become sexually involved before she was ready.

"I guess to some extent I did pressure her into having sex, I'll admit that," he said.

THE BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION

After Smith and Doe decided to become sexually active, Doe noticed a change in their relationship.

"I think there was a lot of change in our relationship just because sometimes I wouldn't communicate with him. I would close up because I didn't want to tell him how I was feeling," she said.

Smith started to become frustrated with Doe's secrecy and defensiveness. The lack of communication caused more problems for their relationship.

"Any problem that the world faces has to do with the breakdown of communication somewhere - any problem," said Smith. "Everyone's different, every situation's a little different, but every relationship needs that communication before they can have sex."

Myers explained that males communicate to maintain independence and females talk to maintain intimacy.

While communication styles differ between genders, they are both a learned behavior that begins in childhood.

"Language and communication... develops through a combination of nature and nurture, genetic predisposition and environmental stimulation. Gender socialization is deeply rooted in our culture, our families, and in our schools," said Myers. "Teenage boys and teenage girls need a full repertoire of skills to develop and maintain healthy relationships."

Rose*, Doe's mother, said that she did not talk openly about sex with Doe or follow through with her concerns regarding her sexually active daughter.

"One time I came home, and, this is my fault, I found a condom wrapper on the couch, and I put it in my pocket and when

Jane came home from school

I asked her who had been over here. She said 'Josh', and I pulled [the condom wrapper] out of my pocket and I said, 'Well, next time you guys have sex, make sure he throws away the wrapper,' said Rose.

"But then I said things to her like, 'Okay, now that I know you guys are having sex, you need

to go to the doctor, you need to get on birth control,' and I never followed through with it."

THE CHOICE

Smith found out about Doe's pregnancy approximately two months after conception.

"She talked to me and said 'Well, what's wrong with keeping it?' I was like... the whole point of taking birth control was to not get pregnant. I said, speaking for myself, 'I know that I am not ready to have a child. Obviously you have the ultimate choice, but if you really think about this, this is a total life altering moment. I don't think either of us are responsible enough right now to raise a child,'" said Smith.

Doe said that Smith did not discuss her options with her, but rather told her that an abortion was the best option.

Soon after, Doe agreed.

Smith said that he could not imagine Doe going through a full term pregnancy while still in high school.

Doe knew that she was not ready to have a child, but said that if she went through with her pregnancy, she would not have been able to give her baby up for adoption.

"After nine months, my mom would have been used to it, and she would have helped me support it. I think an adoption would have been a lot harder than an abortion," said Doe.

The further along her pregnancy became, the more she wanted to keep the child.

"You are the girl, you want to keep it... I would rub my stomach out of no where; I was really starting to be connected to it. I mean you have this thing that grows inside of you," she said.

THE CONFESSION

Eventually Rose caught on to her daughter's pregnancy.

"I had too many indications: she was sick all of the time, she was gaining weight, she was tired, she was eating a lot. I know what those are, she kept denying it," she said.

Finally, after finding papers regarding information on the abortion Doe was planning, Rose confronted her daughter about her pregnancy.

"I snuck through her room, and I found papers. She had gone to the court to make it legal as a minor to get an abortion. [She had] a judge sign it. How she knew to do that... was unbelievable to me," said Rose.

Rose knew why Doe was so afraid to admit her pregnancy.

"[She was] scared because I always said, 'You get pregnant, you're out of here'... and she threw that back at me, 'I didn't tell you because you always said you'd kick me out.'"

THE CLINIC

After Doe was four months along, Smith and Doe's relationship had a falling out, and Smith decided that he would not financially contribute to Doe's abortion.

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When Doe was 16 weeks pregnant, she went in for an ultrasound for her abortion. The nurse discovered that Doe was four weeks farther along in her pregnancy than expected and referred her to another clinic for a more in depth procedure.

Relieved that Doe had told her about the pregnancy, Rose went with Doe to the clinic to get an abortion.

While Rose was waiting, she was shocked by the people coming into the clinic.

She saw one woman get dropped off in a taxi, yelling into the phone, "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Inside of the clinic, Doe remembers a girl coming out of a room after her procedure.

"She started bawling, and she started freaking out and was screaming, "Where is my baby, where is my baby?"... When they finally got her kind of relaxed, they sat her down in the big, puffy chair next to me... her eyes were red and puffy and there were tears streaming down her cheeks and the woman next to her goes, "Were you unsure?" And she started bawling even more, and I just took her hand [and held it until] she fell asleep," said Doe.

Doe said that it was surreal to hold a stranger's hand, knowing exactly how they were feeling. It was comforting to be surrounded by people who were going through the same thing.

Rose noticed how many women came into the clinic by themselves and realized how little support the women had.

"The picture I will never forget is walking out to my car, thinking I have to stay here for two hours, what's going on with my baby [Jane] in there, and just seeing that taxi cab and junky clunker cars and fancy hummers and just all walks of life, people coming in and out of there, it was unbelievable," said Rose.

Rose was shocked at the lack of support women had at the clinic, not only from mothers, but from the men involved too.

"At that clinic, how many guys did I see there? None. Maybe one or two in the parking lot, but most of those women were there on their own. Arriving there in a taxi cab, and not just one taxi cab, I saw three or four pull up and that was just from 6 to 8 a.m.," said Rose.

THE AFTERMATH

Rose realized that all of the women at the clinic were there because they were not ready to have a child.

"They created a life, they did an action that maybe they weren't prepared for the consequences, and now they have to deal with it," she said.

Smith said that he realizes that he will not have to worry about raising the child, but dealing with Doe's pregnancy was a lesson learned within itself.

"With the fact that she was pregnant,

it's so hard not to think about her every second. One of the last conversations we've had... she would randomly hang up when it started getting hard for her to deal with," he said.

Rose recalled her own feelings when she had a miscarriage at eight weeks, a few months before she was pregnant with Doe.

"I was devastated... I still think about that... what its life would have been like or why it didn't continue to live, I think about the age. We planted a tree kind of as a memorial and you go look at that tree now and it's just huge," she said.

Rose said that she is worried about how Doe will deal with the aftermath of her abortion.

"I think she'll try to pretend like it didn't happen, she'll try to get on with her life, and that's when I say it scares me that she'll carry that inside her, that scar, and not come to terms with it," said Rose.

While Doe believes that her decision was the right choice, she still struggles when dealing with her abortion.

She said that she will probably think about it every day for the rest of her life.

"I don't sleep very much anymore; I think I fell asleep at four last night. I'm really tired, but I can't stop my mind from thinking about it," said Doe. "I can keep my mind off of it enough to the point where I don't break down and want to cry. I have all these distractions going on around me [during the day]. Then [at night] I go upstairs, and I get ready for bed, and I crawl under the sheets and [I] start to think about it. Last night I was thinking if it was a boy or a girl."

As her arms were wrapped around her legs in a child's pose, she wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "It's just hard. You start to think about what your future would have been or I'll think about how happy it would have made me."

SEEKING SUPPORT

When Doe was faced with the realities of her pregnancy, she was scared to tell her mother. Her mother said Doe was scared to get help and her boyfriend at the time concluded that an abortion was the best option. Looking back, Rose said that the best thing a teen can do in a situation like her daughter's is to talk with their parents.

"Speak with [your] parents," she said. "What [Doe] went through, I can't imagine her doing that by herself, you need a support system."

Myers, a social worker at the Grand Ledge Counseling Center, agrees that the most important thing a teen needs,

especially a teen dealing with a pregnancy, is a support system.

"Teens that I have seen that have had an unplanned pregnancy, they really need the support of their parents," she said. "The times when it does work, is when they have a supportive set of parents to help, allow them to be a teen, finish school, and go to college."

LOCAL TEEN MOTHER SPEAKS

Sophomore Stephanie Lundquist attended her freshman year at Grand Ledge High School during her full term pregnancy. Her daughter, Ava, was born on June 30, 2005. Lundquist attends school, works a part time job and raises her child with the help of her mother.

Her mother runs a daycare and is able to watch and raise

Lundquist's child so Lundquist is able to finish and accomplish the demanding obligations that pertain to a typical teen life.

Even though Lundquist had support to raise her child, she said that her pregnancy may have been avoided if she had openly talked about sex with her parents.

"I think parents want to have higher standards for you, it's not realistic to want somebody [your child] to wait [to have sex] and you have that standard for them. But you need to realize and say 'I know that you're not going to wait so if you need to get on birth control, you need to tell me.' Don't keep it a secret because if you are sneaking around about it there is more stress and you're not as open and I felt that

way with my parents," she said.

DETERMINING WHAT IS BEST

Fran Card, an employee from Christian Cradle, an adoption agency in the local area, said it is hard for her to imagine a teen raising a child.

"You're asking a teenager to do an adult thing. But teenagers should be teenagers, they shouldn't be taking care of a child 24 hours a day," she said. "Ninety eight percent of teen adoptions are successful. Teenagers [think they] know everything, but in reality they don't know how to be a parent."

Card said that it takes more than love to raise a child. There are more responsibilities that teens may not be aware of.

She said that she believes older women are more apt to give their child up than a teen.

"Teens think that they can do everything, and they try to raise [the child] themselves," she said. "Teenagers are not capable of looking down the road five years from now, teenagers live for today."

Card said that adoption is not about the birth mother. It is about doing what is best for the baby.

When Lundquist became pregnant, she said, "My mom told me that it was totally my choice. If I wanted an abortion, she would support me because it's not her that would have to live with it. It would be me," she said.

Because Lundquist had a support system to help raise her child, it was easy for her to decide that raising her baby would be best.

"I took responsibility," she said. "I knew I had been around kids my whole life, and I know I wasn't raped, it wasn't forced on me. I should just do the best for [the baby]."

Even though Lundquist decided to keep her child, she still plans on furthering her education.

Lundquist said that she plans on

graduating from Grand Ledge High School and hopes to attend a college near home to further her academic career.

LOCAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Even if a teen does not have a supportive set of parents, there are local organizations that are available to help if a teen becomes pregnant.

'Youth for Christ' provides a teen parent program every Tuesday from 6:30 - 8:30 p.m. at the Trinity Church in Lansing.

At one of the weekly meetings, volunteer Danielle Jackson stood in front of the room to represent mothers everywhere.

Teen Parent coordinator, Sally Hall, told the teen mothers to come up one at a time and yell out the biggest problem that teen mothers face.

One by one, each mother stood up until Jackson was completely surrounded with teens representing problems like the lack of finances, schooling, childcare, support from friends and family and worries about not being able to accomplish goals for finding a father figure for their child.

Once Jackson was completely surrounded, Hall stood outside the circle and told Jackson to try to push herself out of the circle.

When Jackson couldn't break past the resistance, Hall said, "See how hard it is for her to get out? Here I am on the outside, and see how hard it is for me to help when all of these problems are surrounding her?"

Hall's Teen Mother Group is a nondenominational Christian Organization along with 'Youth for Christ'.

She said that the teens do not have to be Christian to attend.

The group is open to people between the ages of 13 to 21. Currently, there are 12 mothers in the program, ranging from the ages of 17 to 21. Their children range between the ages of three weeks old to eight years old.

The group also brings in guest speakers to help the girls through issues that young mothers may not have been exposed to at an earlier age. They have brought in the Lansing abstinence-based Smart Program to talk about sexually transmitted diseases. Firefighters came in to teach infant CPR. A midwife talked about labor and delivery and someone from the Women's Resource Center from Lansing Community College came in to talk about furthering education.

"[We are] getting ready to start a new curriculum called 'Brain Wise'. It was developed by a doctor, and it helps to teach kids to make decisions based on their logical brain, rather than their emotional brain," said Hall.

The Teen Mother group focuses on relationships. They have topical discussions about friendships, purpose, love and how important education is to help the teen

mothers continue the schooling they need.

"They have a place to come to and belong where they are not ostracized or judged," said Hall. "A lot of these girls are off and on their own, raising a baby."

During a discussion about when the mothers should tell their children that their birth fathers have never been in their life, one mother said, "I was grateful that he was nowhere around. I was a stronger person to raise her all by myself."

Another teen responded, "I've never met my real dad."

BREAKING THE CYCLE

"When people become parents, they go on automatic pilot and do what their parents did... they repeat patterns and do what's familiar," said Myers. "The less we understand about ourselves and the impact our life history has had on us, the more likely we are to repeat patterns we have observed."

Hall said that there is a common link between all of the teen mothers.

"At least one of the parent's aren't involved in [the teen mother's] life... a lot of them come from dysfunctional families," she said. "[This program provides] someone there to walk alongside of them with their ups and their downs and show them that they are loved, that they weren't awful because they were a teen parent."

While the girls of the Teen Parent group say that they would not give their children up for anything, Hall said that they admit that they wish they would have done things differently.

OPINIONS ASIDE

Stephanie Lundquist said that during her pregnancy one of the hardest things that she had to deal with were the glares that she received from other students passing her in the halls.

Joanne Lundquist, Stephanie's mother, said that Stephanie has done a good job raising Ava.

"It has made her well rounded and a better person. She understands a little bit more about what is going on around her," she said. "Until you become a parent, you don't understand how hard it is."

Doe agreed with Mrs. Lundquist and said that people will never understand what a situation dealing with pregnancy is like until they experience it first hand.

"Someone can believe whatever they want to believe, but you'll never know how it feels, or what you would do, until you are in that situation," said Doe.

Doe said that she used to be more against abortion than for it, but her opinion changed after she became sexually active.

"It all changes once you have sex," she said. "I thought I could do it by myself, and the whole situation made me realize that I need my mom. You just need one person that cares about you enough not to let their opinion stop them from supporting you."

Family Values

Junior Garrison Schrauger believes in abstinence until marriage. He said that his family is the largest influence in his decision to stay abstinent. He also said that his father is a pastor.

"As a Christian, [abstinence] is a part of my beliefs. It's something I was taught by my parents and is something that I strongly believe in," said Schrauger.

He then pulled out a card from his wallet that he received in his freshman Personal Health and Wellness class that said, 'I am a sexually mature, aware, responsible teen.'

On the back of the card, his name was signed, under a vow that stated that he will remain abstinent until marriage.

Schrauger believes that teens who do not have strong support systems are more likely to make destructive decisions.

"It's almost as if they aren't aware of the consequences, if they don't have anyone telling them what the consequences are," he said.

Schrauger believes that the main reason why teenagers are having sex is, "For the thrill of it. Teens are always trying to make themselves more adult-like."

Junior Erin Nevitt also plans on staying abstinent until marriage.

She said that she gives credit to her family for bringing her up with strong morales.

When it comes to why teenagers decide to have sex, Nevitt said, "I think when people don't know where the relationship is they use [sex] to advance it."

Nevitt believes that teens can find intimacy through verbally connecting and creating an understanding of eachother.

"I don't think intimacy has to be just physical," she said.

Michigan Abortion Law

Michigan law requires written permission from a minor's parent or legal guardian in order for a minor to obtain an abortion. The law also permits a minor to obtain a court waiver instead of parent/guardian consent.

MCL 722.903