

Published May 26, 2011
Published Thursday May 26, 2011

Teen parents celebrate diplomas

By [Erin Grace](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



KILEY CRUSE/THE WORLD-HERALD

The College of St. Mary is the next stop for Tychell Harris, a teenage mother who graduates from Omaha South High School this week.

Graduations are about endings and beginnings. Today, Tychell Harris will celebrate both.

She finished high school at Omaha South and graduates Friday. She is enrolled at the College of St. Mary and will move onto campus this fall.

That might seem unremarkable, but consider how Harris spent her senior year:

As a mom.

Teen parenthood, particularly for low-income and minority teens, can mean an end to the educational road. But not for Harris and 45 other participants in a new program aimed at young, struggling parents. All are graduating from various Omaha public high schools.

"We want to put wind in their sails and ... encourage them that you can do anything you want to do if you continue in the same energy and effort," said Justin Dougherty, who oversees the Young Families Incentive Program at the North Omaha Center for Healthy Families, based at the Urban League headquarters at 30th and Lake Streets.

The center, funded by Lutheran Family Services, formally opened in March. But school-based services to teenagers like Harris began last fall, in collaboration with Building Bright Futures, the Omaha-based public-private partnership working to improve graduation rates.

Harris was sitting in a parenting class at South when she heard about the program and realized its weekly parenting classes and twice-monthly support groups for teen parents met at the Urban League, a quick walk from her house.

What's more, by attending classes and meeting other obligations — like getting baby Kamari her scheduled immunizations and well-baby checks — she could earn points to "buy" items Kamari needs: diapers, wipes, clothes, blankets.

While the freebies were nice, Harris also found she wasn't alone — six South High seniors were in the program. She learned parenting skills and how to watch for her daughter's developmental milestones. And she got connected to an array of programs she didn't know existed.

Harris went from being a nervous and scared mother to one growing in confidence — and choices.

She liked that participants and workers have been supportive and "didn't judge."

Her mother, Rochelle Harris, liked that her own parenting advice was reinforced, that her daughter was learning skills to make her less dependent.

She marvels at the mother her daughter is becoming: teaching Kamari the ABCs in different languages, doing all the nighttime duty.

"It allows her to feel like she's doing something right," said Rochelle Harris. "(She) has that sense of accomplishment: 'I'm doing something. I'm not just sitting here thinking I have no hope.'"

That's what the center promotes.

Dougherty said the stigma of being a teen parent has lessened but can be a real game-ender for many teens.

“There is the social assumption you ruined your life,” he said. “What we're trying to do is encourage and provide any opportunity we can with these kids to reach their goals, that their dreams don't die.”

The center's mostly free services include the incentive program that got Harris her diapers, specialized early childhood therapies for infants through children age 21, a 16-week parenting program, parent support, a fatherhood initiative and case management for pregnant and parenting teens.

The center serves about 250 families and hopes to expand to 300. The bulk of the young parents served are under age 21, and a majority are working on finishing high school. It is holding a graduation party Thursday from 4 to 6 p.m.

Dougherty said the center aims to reduce stress for young parents who, for lack of resources and support, can feel isolated and overwhelmed. This puts their children at risk. (One of the center's goals is to reduce incidences of child abuse and neglect.)

Rochelle Harris said her daughter has become an attentive, confident parent.

“I'm so proud of her,” she said. “Even though she doesn't think I'm as proud of her as I am.”

Contact the writer:

402-444-1136, erin.grace@owh.com

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