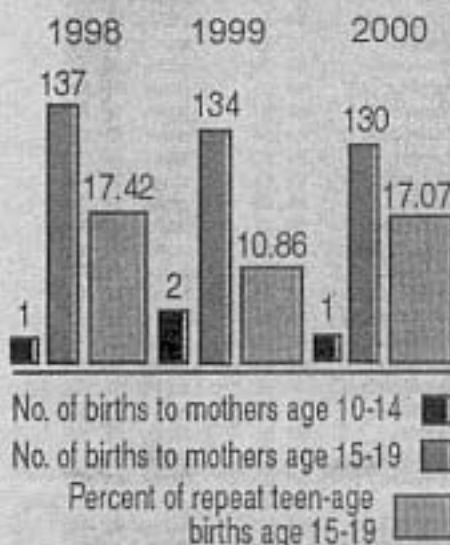


Teen faces life as expectant mom

Tracking teen births in Citrus County



SOURCE: Florida Vital Statistics

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Kari Panzner isn't a typical 15-year-old.

Instead of worrying about which boy to date and which way to wear her hair, Kari is decorating a small bedroom in her mother's Hernando mobile home — in anticipation of her baby boy's birth.

She and her boyfriend, 19-year-old Matt Drew, live with Kari's mother and plan to wed by the end of the year.

They were engaged Oct. 13 and found out Nov. 27 she was pregnant. It wasn't exactly welcome news, but the couple soon had to accept the responsibility. Her due date is July 26.

Kari isn't alone. Statistics show

Citrus County's number of teen-age pregnancies has been steady for the last several years. Mothers between the ages of 15-19 gave birth to 137 babies in 1998, 134 in 1999 and 130 in 2000, according to Florida Vital Statistics.

Most teen-age pregnancies occur after the age of 15 in Citrus County. Girls age 10-14 delivered just one baby in 1998, two in 1999 and one in 2000.

Kari's mother, Melinda Panzner, said her older daughter got pregnant as a teen-ager, too, and she had higher hopes for Kari.

"It's not something you'd wish for your kid," she said. "I just asked her to please stay in school. That's all I wanted. I wanted to attend one of my daughter's graduations. Education comes first."

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Panzner gave her permission for Drew to move into her home. Kari said she didn't tell Drew right away they were expecting. She didn't know how he'd take the news.

"He kind of figured it out because I wasn't fitting into a size one anymore," she said. "So I just came out and said it."

Drew said he was shocked.

"I said, 'Oh my God. I'm going to be a father.' It took me a few months to get over the shock, but now I'm excited. I think I'm more nervous than she is."

According to Kari, she and Drew have discussed that her young age could lead to criminal charges against him. "We've talked about all that and he doesn't want to hear it," she said.

Kari's first obstacle was school. As a sophomore at Citrus High School, Kari said

she immediately informed the school of her pregnancy. When she began to show, she was placed in the school's Teen Parent Program.

"I ride the normal bus with the regular kids," she said. "It's just that once a week I go to the teen parenting classes. We do all sorts of things."

Kari said class subjects include everything from baby massages and bathing techniques to watching videos that depict the reality of pregnancy and childbirth.

Once her baby is born, Kari said the program would enable her to ride a special bus to school with her baby. The bus takes babies to child care and the mothers to school. Kari said she'll also receive financial assistance for her son's child care costs.

Kari said if it weren't for the school's program, she probably wouldn't go back to school in the fall.

"It would just be too hard," she said, "getting back and forth

to school and taking care of the baby. I'd probably drop out."

Many girls like Kari drop out for other reasons. Teen-agers can be cruel, and Kari said she's heard her share of snide comments since she got pregnant.

"The kids can be so mean, but I just ignore them. I have friends that stick up for me. They tell them to leave me alone," she said.

Now that she's out of school for the summer, Kari said she's been taking advantage of the Citrus County Health Department's Lamaze classes. Drew attends the classes, too, and has become a star student.

"I think I pay more attention that she does," he said.

Kari said she may be putting her life on hold for the baby right now, but she hasn't given up on her dreams to finish school and someday go to law school.

"I won't drop out," she said. "I always wanted to go to law school. That's still one of my dreams, and I think I can do it."

On the right path



BRIAN LaPETER/Chronicle

Tracey Duncan, the new women's administrator/family facilitator at The Path of Citrus County homeless shelter, wants to provide shelter residents with a safe place to stay and help them become self-sufficient.

Finding solutions keeps new administrator at homeless shelter awake

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Tracey Duncan's goal is to help Citrus County's homeless population, doing whatever it takes to meet their needs.

As the new women's administrator/family facilitator at The Path of Citrus County, the 36-year-old Lecanto woman's days stay full, answering often-desperate phone calls, driving shelter residents to job interviews or to apply for public assistance.

Duncan said the new job also keeps her awake at night, thinking about ways to do her job better or help more people.

"I drive my husband crazy because I can't sleep," Duncan said.

She learned the basics of helping people as a Family Action Center parent facilitator in Citrus County, helping needy families with children in public schools get money for food, rent, electric bills and other needs.

Duncan's compassion for the homeless came from watching her mother

“It's very easy to get discouraged and give up.”

Tracey Duncan

women's administrator and family facilitator at The Path of Citrus County homeless shelter.

struggle to raise a family as a single mom.

"It's very easy to get discouraged and give up," Duncan said.

But sometimes, a little help and encouragement is all it takes to create a new start. That's the rewarding part of her job.

However, not every shelter resident becomes a success story.

Duncan said a 63-year-old woman suffering from dementia came to the shelter. The woman left the shelter in the grip of a delusional episode, claiming she saw ghosts and feared the German police were after her.

Duncan could do nothing but watch

helplessly as the woman packed her belongings and left the protection of the shelter. Duncan explained that because the woman was not a danger to herself or others, she couldn't be sent to a psychiatric hospital. Although Duncan had recently contacted one of the woman's relatives, Duncan couldn't keep her from leaving.

DuWayne Sipper, director of The Path, said in recent weeks the shelter has had to turn people away. The maximum capacity at the faith-based shelter in Beverly Hills is about six in the women's shelter and five in the men's shelter.

"I don't think there's a day where we don't turn somebody away," Duncan said.

One of Duncan's biggest challenges is to meet the needs of the shelter itself.

"I didn't know how hard it is to get donations or to get regular funding," Duncan said.

Duncan is also determined to do more to help, whether it's learning how to write grants or becoming more involved with the homeless coalition.

"I would really love to help solve the homeless problem," Duncan said.