

Teen mom explains what she sacrificed: ‘everything’

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MONTGOMERY — When Shannon Hust became pregnant at age 16, more than one person told her she would never finish high school.

So she set out to prove them wrong.

It took one extra semester, but the now 38-year-old graduated and can look at her now 20-year-old son and know that what she sacrificed in her teenage years was worth the struggles.

But she doesn't recommend it.

“It was not a piece of cake,” Hust, of Prattville, said. “I didn't know the first thing about raising a kid. I was not prepared. I knew nothing.”

“Believe it or not, someone I was friends with in high school already had a kid, and she's the one who taught me how to change my son's diaper.”

Today, Alabama teen pregnancy is at a historic low, according to the recently released 2017 Alabama Kids Count Data Book, produced by VOICES for Alabama's Children.

Ranked 41st in the nation with a rate of 30.1 teen births per 1,000 teenage girls, the number of births to teenagers aged 15-17 have decreased by approximately 48 percent compared to 2005.

In 2015, a total of 229,715 babies were born to women aged 15-19 years in the United States, for a birth rate of 22.3 per 1,000 women in this age group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This is another record low for U.S. teens and a drop of 8 percent from 2014.

Birth rates fell 9 percent for women aged 15-17 years and 7 percent for women aged 18-19 years.

Although reasons for the declines are not totally clear, evidence suggests these declines are due to more teens abstaining from sexual activity, and more teens who are sexually active using birth control than in previous years, according to the CDC.

The 2015 Alabama number of teen births was 4,790. And despite Alabama receiving no state funding for teen pregnancy programs and despite there being no requirement that sex education be taught in schools, the students are being reached.

The proof is in the numbers.

When Hust's son was born in 1997, the teen pregnancy rate was 37.21 per 1,000 teenage girls, with 10,724 total births for girls ages 10 to 19. The youngest mother was 12 years old. The youngest father, 13.

“I think public awareness plays a part,” in the decrease of teen pregnancies, said Rhonda Mann, policy and research director for VOICES for Alabama's Children.

“But I think the more successful teens are in school the less likely they are to engage in risky behavior such as getting pregnant or committing juvenile crimes. Or idle teens, who don't go to school and stop working.”

By the numbers

Between 1991 and 2015, the teen birth rate declined by 64 percent nationwide. It has declined in all 50 states and among all racial/ethnic groups.

In 2015, the Montgomery teen pregnancy rate for girls ages 10-19 was 25.8, according to preliminary 2015 data provided by the Alabama Department of Public Health. The 2015 Alabama teen pregnancy rate was 20.7. The actual number of teen births in Montgomery in 2015 was 262.

In Autauga County, the 2015 teen pregnancy rate for girls ages 10-19 was 17.8, with 50 teen births.

And in Elmore County, the 2015 teen pregnancy rate for girls ages 10-19 was 15.3, with 56 teen births.

Over the years, there has been a strategic focus on implementing evidence-based programs that are medical accurate and age appropriate, said Jamie Keith, executive director of Alabama Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy.

"It's making sure young people do have all the knowledge and skills to protect their health," she said. "We provide training to schools and communities throughout the state."

From the beginning

Lynn Beshear, the state's mental health commissioner, is co-founder of the Montgomery Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and The Alabama Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

It was founded in 1999 and incorporated in 2002 in response to a deep concern among community leaders that Alabama had one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the United States.

Alabama has made progress in reducing teen pregnancy since 1999, but even with that progress, the state remains ranked among the states with the highest rates of teen pregnancy.

High rates of teen pregnancy burden not only teenagers but also their children, families and communities, while imposing large costs on taxpayers as well.

Beshear said the 18 years since the start of the campaign to the decline today is "a generation.

"The economic impact of teen pregnancy is huge," she said. "The social impact, you think about it ... being born to a person who is unprepared, unequipped to take care of their child. The best predictor of the health of a mother is the health of a child.

"Prevention in that way is really important to me."

Nearly all teen pregnancies are unplanned, and can be closely linked to a host of other critical social issues such as poverty and income, overall child well-being, out-of-wedlock births, responsible fatherhood, health issues, education, child welfare and other risky behavior, according to the campaign.

There are also substantial public costs associated with adolescent childbearing.

Consequently, teen pregnancy should be viewed not only as a reproductive health issue, but as one that works to improve all of these measures.

One school district's efforts

Elmore County School District brings in a variety of programs for their students. While not specifically called "sexual education" programs, they are designed to help students make good choices, including the Family Sunshine Center's "Safe Date" program.

"Sexual education is needed, but when you throw that word out, it's an uncomfortable topic for parents and teachers," said Stephanie Bostick the counselor coordinator for Elmore County School District. "But it has to be addressed. We have people who come in our school system that we contract through. And each school does something different.

"I feel we do a pretty good job in making sure they stay on the right path."

When Bostick began working in the school district as a graduation coach, she noticed of the students dropping out of school, that many were pregnant.

“I made it my mission to help these kids out and get them to graduate,” she said.

About 70 percent of all students who drop out of school early do so because of teen pregnancy, according to Teen Pregnancy Statistics. The dropout rate among pregnant teens is 90 percent across the U.S.

“We have a lot of things for our students who are pregnant to get them to stay in school,” Bostick said.

Understanding the students don’t have the financial means for child care — or transportation — the school district made a deal with them: stay in school, and child care will be covered. The district offers this through their relationship with an early learning center near the high schools.

“We also have virtual school,” Bostick said. “We have one in virtual school who is expecting. It’s hard for them to get caught up. For a kid who takes two months off school, it’s hard. Our main goal is to keep kids in school.”

Reaching the youth

The Alabama Department of Public Health Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Branch administers federally funded programs across the state, including “Making Proud Choices,” which is an evidence-based curriculum that emphasizes that the risk of STDs, HIV and pregnancy can be reduced by using contraception, if they choose to have sex.

Another program, “Making Proud Choices,” is brought into community settings, including foster care, community centers and youth detention centers, said Vontrese McGhee, director of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Branch, Bureau of Family Health Services.

“We also fund school and community-based projects to provide abstinence education to middle and high-school youth,” she said. “‘Making a Difference’ is an evidence-based curriculum that provides youth with the knowledge and skills to reduce their risk of STDs, HIV, and pregnancy by abstaining from sex.”

“Relationship Smarts” is another curriculum in schools and communities throughout the state, she said, and focuses on building skills and knowledge necessary for healthy relationships.

Kim M. Smith was 16 years old when she had her baby girl, Kaila. Then a rising junior at Lanier, she considers herself one of the fortunate ones. The Prattville resident had the support of her parents and the child’s father, she said, “stepped up to the plate. He did.

“And he stood beside me, but it’s very challenging, and I don’t recommend it.”

Keith believes the trending decline can be attributed to more young people participating in the programs across the state.

“The message in education and intervention is to have the knowledge and skills to protect their health,” she said.

“Certainly there are protective factors that maybe will protect them on risky behaviors and not just sex.

“We’re doing a lot of advocacy.”

An outreach program through the Family Sunshine Center, called Safe Dates, is an evidence-based program used in middle schools and high schools that discusses teen dating, dating abuse and red flags.

“There’s a session in there that covers sexual assault,” said Laura Gibson, prevention educator with the center. “We go over the facts, and dating sexual abuse, overcoming gender stereotypes. We do talk about sexual coercion, and if their partner’s body language is saying no.

“I hope the program has something to do with the decline in teen births.”

A mom's view

Pregnant as a sophomore, Smith finished high school on time with her class of 1988.

While in high school, she took classes for half of a day, and worked the second half of the day so she could pay for child care.

"I think the most challenging part is you bring a child into the world, and it's a 24-hour job," she said. "I'll tell you, I don't care if you're 16 or 35 or 45. If it's your first child, I think if you're older, you're more equipped to handle it."

After high school, Smith took evening classes at Troy University at Montgomery, where she majored in resource management with a concentration in psychology.

It took her 10 years to finish, but with taking evening classes, working full time and taking care of her daughter, "I beat the odds is all I can say.

"I think I was more determined than anything."

Asked what she sacrificed, she said, "everything. Financially, mentally, physically. Some girls are 16 and they do well. It just happened I had two parents who were there."

'I've never regretted having them'

Hust moved out of her house when she was 16 years old and had moved in with a friend.

The 1998 Stanhope Elmore graduate met a boy, got pregnant, and at 17, had their son. Soon after, she moved in with the father's family.

"I was on Medicaid for a long time," she said. "We used WIC, and we were on food stamps, and minimum wage was \$4.25 an hour. You can't raise a kid on that. I was working at Hardee's in Millbrook, and I was somehow able to provide for my son."

Hust had plans to join the United States Air Force. A ROTC student in high school, she had to leave the program because of her pregnancy. And to enlist in the Air Force, she was told she would have to turn over custody of her son in case she was deployed or sent overseas.

"I just worked different jobs until I could figure out what I was going to do," she said. "I wasn't prepared for anything that was going to happen. I didn't have a backup plan. The only thing I thought of was that I had to care for him, however I was supposed to do it."

She shares this message often with her children. A message of decisions, consequences and the same advice she gives them time and again: don't do it.

"I've never regretted having them," Hust said, "but I tell them what I learned and sacrificed and gave up. Being able to share that with them I think helps them realize this is not a choice they are ready to make."

Because in the end, she said, she gave up herself to raise first her son, and then her daughter, who she had at age 21.

"I spent most of my adult life trying to figure out things that I should have figured out at 16," she said. "I always put my son first. Even when I was a teenager. Even if I didn't want to.

"That was always second nature to me. The only thing that mattered was making sure he was taken care of. So now I'm 38, in college, and still figuring out life."



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