



## Teen moms find support to attend college

---

Jennifer Ramirez remembers it so vividly: the excitement, at 15, of having her first boyfriend.

Then the fear, when she found out she was pregnant.

“I was in the tenth grade,” she said. “And I remember when I found out, it took me at least, like, two weeks to tell my parents.”

When she finally did tell them, they worried that Jennifer’s dream of being the first person in her family to graduate college had ended.

“I had all these emotions going through myself. I didn’t know what I was gonna do,” said Jennifer, who is now 23. “I was so worried about school. I was just really scared.”

The odds were certainly against her. Less than two percent of girls who get pregnant before they turn 18 have a college degree by the age of 30. But Jennifer knew it wasn’t just her future at stake, it was her newborn son’s, too.

So she began the uphill journey -- to raise Jordan while working and getting her degree at the University of Maryland at College Park. She says it was daunting, even, at times, overwhelming. Then she heard about Generation Hope.

The nonprofit is the brainchild and labor of love of Nicole Lynn Lewis, who was just a teenager herself when she got pregnant in 1998. But two and a half months after Nicole’s baby girl was born, she started classes at William and Mary.

“And I was sitting in classrooms with, you know, people who were my age that were worried about, maybe the party that was going on Saturday night,” recalled Nicole, who lives in Columbia, Md. “And I was concerned with, you know, what am I cooking for dinner? Am I gonna get to my daughter in time?”

There were plenty of naysayers, who never thought she could pull it off. But four years later, Nicole graduated. Then, when she was 29 years old, she founded Generation Hope in March 2010 to help other pregnant teens do the same.

The first-ever class has seven teen girls, chosen from 12 applicants.

If they’re attending a two year college they get \$1,200 a year, for a four year school, it’s \$2,400. The very first application was from a girl who became pregnant at 12. “And that was a huge shock for all of us,” Nicole said, still reeling from the memory. “It really brought home for me the need for our program. Because I can’t see telling a young woman who’s 12 years old that her life is now over.”

And that was the message Jennifer Ramirez needed to hear. She was willing to work to assure a better future for herself and her son. Generation Hope’s scholarship definitely helped ease her financial burden. Still, it’s the emotional burden, teen moms will tell you, that can be even worse. So Generation Hope matches each teen with a mentor.

Suzanne Simpson, 49, is not the kind of person Jennifer would usually come across; a lawyer and president of the Howard County women’s bar association in Maryland. They both admit that the first time they met, they were both very nervous. Jennifer laughs now, remembering, “But when I saw her, she was wearing all this jewelry. And I was just, like, ‘Oh, we’re a match made in heaven.’”

And it turns out, though they’re more than 20 years apart, their sons are almost the same age. The boys play together. They talk. Jennifer calls Suzanne a role model. Suzanne says she gets back even more than what she gives. And there’s a lesson for everyone in their story, young and old.

“Everything happens for a reason,” said Jennifer, with wisdom beyond her years. “So, take the good, and the bad, and make it great.”

And so she has. Jennifer will get her college degree later this month. In her heart, she said always knew she could do it. Generation hope made sure she didn’t have to do it, alone.