

FSU program targets teen moms in trouble

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DOUG BLACKBURN • AUGUST 13, 2014

Tyshonda Smith beams with pride as she walks across Tallahassee Community College's campus, Smith's young son toddling at her side.

Trevion Abdul-Jenkins, just shy of 17 months, stumbles and lands on his rear end. He begins to whimper until Smith picks him up, caresses his cheek and returns him to his feet.

Smith, 18, is beginning work on a nursing degree, a first step toward what she hopes will lead to medical school and a career as a physician.

She realizes these are heady dreams, especially compared to the nightmare that characterized her childhood. Trouble in many forms was Smith's constant companion. As recently as April 2013, one month after giving birth to Trevion at age 17, Smith was in shackles and chains on a van bound for a juvenile detention facility in Miami.

Smith is quick to credit a Florida State University program, Young Parents Project, for her remarkable turnaround. YPP, part of FSU's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention, is funded by the state Department of Juvenile Justice, receiving \$260,000 for the current fiscal year.

Members of YPP's three-person team attended juvenile court with Smith after she returned to her native Tallahassee in June 2013. They have helped her navigate the vexing web of social service agencies that can provide assistance, and they have given Smith invaluable parenting tips that she said have benefited her and Trevion greatly.

"They love me. I know they love me. They always help me. They'll do anything for me," she said. "They don't bring anger to their jobs — some people do that."

Smith, like most of the 11 girls currently in YPP in Leon County — FSU runs a separate YPP in Miami — did not start life on a level playing field. Smith was a victim of domestic and sexual abuse as well as a witness to domestic violence. She and her siblings at one point were removed from their home for their own protection.

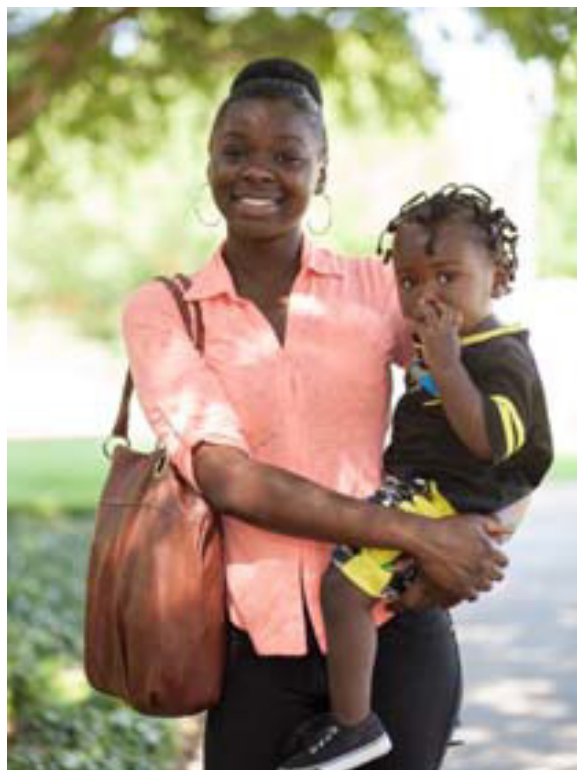


Photo: Michael Schwarz
Special to the Democrat)

Generational Impact

Social workers and psychologists use a term, adverse childhood experiences, to determine an adolescent's odds of getting in trouble with the law as a teenager. Smith's ACE score made her a prime candidate.

She had a temper she couldn't control. She was expelled from Griffin Middle School after threatening a teacher. She was booted from Second Chance Academy as well. She talks openly today about drug abuse that began before she was a teen.

YPP has two goals. It wants to help Smith and Trevion, of course, and it aims to break a cycle of abuse and neglect that Smith was in before she knew it.

"The one thing that I see is that we have the opportunity to have the generational impact," Barbara White, YPP director, said. "We can work with both the adolescent mom and the baby. They are both so very needy and so very important. If we get in there right now we have a chance to be on the prevention side instead of deeper-in court involvement and a young child having challenges."

FSU's YPP began in Miami seven years ago. YPP in Leon County is only two years old, but by all accounts it is doing what it is intended to do: assist minimum risk girls who are pregnant or are new mothers, and also in trouble with the law. Minnora Bishop, head of the probation office at DJJ, says the Young Parents Project fills a unique niche.

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As far as I can tell, it is working very well for the most part. The girls are doing pretty good. I think the recidivism rate for the program is pretty low," Bishop added.

The data substantiate Bishop's observations. Of the 24 Young Parents Project participants who have given permission to share data, only half were enrolled in school when they started the program, and 96 percent were enrolled in school at the end of the past school year. In addition, teen moms have improved knowledge of child development, according to White, which is a protective factor against future child abuse.

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Most importantly, 96 percent have not had subsequent births and 96 percent have not been re-arrested, FSU reports.

This is a game changer for these teens, White said, not to mention a huge cost savings to society.

Fill-the-Gap Service

Martin Fitzpatrick learned about YPP early on during his 14-month stint as Juvenile Court judge for the 2nd Judicial Circuit, which began in 2013. He was already familiar with FSU's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention, having heard its director, Mimi Graham, at national conferences where she spoke passionately about the challenges facing young parents from broken homes.

"I think (YPP) is a great program. In our community there is a need for that sort of fill-the-gap in service," Fitzpatrick said. "Traditionally it would be provided by the church or the government. I think it's a program that the faith community should be standing up behind and supporting wholeheartedly."

Tyshonda Smith remembers learning about YPP in early 2013, when she was seven months pregnant with Trevion. Before she was eligible to enroll in it, however, she was required to spend time at the detention facility in Miami. While there, she encountered other girls she knew from Tallahassee.

She was better off than many, she said. She stopped doing drugs as soon as she learned she was pregnant. She's also naturally bright; while in Miami she passed the GED even though she had had very little high school experience."

Tyshonda is resourceful. A lot of these girls are when they're motivated," said Gita Patel-Steingart, YPP site coordinator. "Early intervention is vital. This is early for her son, and it's early enough for her to still make some better choices in her life, to not go on to be an adult offender."

Smith insists she is determined to stay on the path she is on, to get through school one semester at a time. She doesn't want limits placed on her, either."

I want to be a nurse but I also want to advance to be a doctor. People keep stopping at nursing. I don't want to stop at nursing," Smith said. "I'm motivated."

If You Want to Help

The young families in the FSU Young Parents Project live in poor housing, lack transportation, have limited financial resources and lack supportive adult relationships to help them address even the most basic needs for themselves and their children. The program is totally grant supported and FSU's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention is always looking for funding. It welcomes checks, monetary, and in-kind items as tax deductible donations.

Credit card donations made be made by either mailing in this form: <https://one.fsu.edu/document.doc?id=123> and referencing Fund #F07850 or calling 850-644-4000 and referencing Fund #F07850.

Checks made payable to: FSU Foundation and reference Fund #F07850 on the check. Use this form when mailing in checks: <http://one.fsu.edu/document.doc?id=666> .

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