

# Project aims to help teen moms learn about motherhood

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AUDRA D.S. BURCH • DECEMBER 24, 2014

On the same day Wilnie Thermitus was arrested for breaking into a home, she found out she was pregnant. Just 15 at the time, Wilnie still remembers the emptiness of sitting in the juvenile holding area trying to figure out what would come next, when to tell her parents and how in the world she would raise a child arriving in just five months.

In the hours before her first court appearance, Wilnie decided to write a letter to Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge Orlando Prescott, apologizing. Prescott diverted the expectant teenager to the Young Parents Project as a condition of her six-month probation term, which ended in May.

It was a second chance.

In a partnership with Florida State University's Center for Prevention & Early Intervention, the Young Parents Project, adapted from Yale University, helps guide pregnant or new teen mothers in the juvenile justice and dependency system in two Florida cities — along with their young children — through counseling, education, social and health services. The idea of this broad intervention effort, based in the home, is to build and strengthen the mother's ability to "hold their baby in mind," meaning to make the child a priority, an inspiration to make better decisions.

**“Thank God I became part of this program. I am not sure who I would be without it.”**

“What is a mistake if you don't learn from it?” said Wilnie, now 17 and months away from high school graduation. “Thank God I became part of this program. I am not sure who I would be without it.”

Almost two years after her arrest, Wilnie is now everything she wasn't: arrest-free, employed and the mother of a healthy baby girl named Mariah, who just celebrated her first birthday. “One of the things I learned and they talked about a lot, was that I had to put my baby first when I was making decisions,” she says. “I want her to have the life I never had.”



Wilnie Thermitus, 17, snuggles with her daughter, Mariah, who recently turned one year old.



Anne Josma, 17, plays with her son, Kevin at COPE Center North, a school for pregnant teens and young mothers.

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The results are tangible: Of the more than 250 teen mothers served in Miami and Tallahassee, only 1 percent were re-arrested during their two years in the program. The number of mothers in the program who had another baby within two years is less than 5 percent compared to the national average of 25 percent of teen mothers.

It operates on an annual budget of about \$735,000, funded by The Children's Trust, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, The Miami Foundation and The Women's Fund. Currently, the program includes 58 mothers who were originally involved in the delinquency or dependency systems in Miami or Tallahassee.

## Breaking the Cycle

In a tiny back office of the Juvenile Detention Center off Northwest 27th Avenue in Miami, the YPP staff is busy checking on mothers and their children. They make weekly phone calls and home visits to make sure the teenager is feeling good about her new role as a mother, to make sure the baby is doing well physically and mentally, to make sure the home — often dysfunctional and tumultuous — is as stable as possible. That might include teaching the mother how to receive medical benefits or find employment or even figuring out how to get the lights turned back on. Essentially, the goal is to break the multi-generational cycle of delinquency, early parenting and poverty.



Miesha Johnson, 18, helps her 9-month-old daughter, Zha'nyi, stand up in the den of their Miami home as Young Parents Project counselor, Barbara Ferrer visits with them on Thursday afternoon, Nov. 5, 2014.

Based on a Yale University project, Young Parents Project offers at-risk mothers home services ranging from nursing to mental and social services."

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Every mother comes from the criminal courts where they have been placed on probation, or from the child welfare dependency system where they have been abused or neglected or did the same to their own children. They range in age from 12 to 18. Sometimes, they are not in school. And often, the baby's father is not supportive. The mothers can stay in the program until the child's second birthday.

Many of these pregnant teens or mothers are at a crossroads, where they must choose between healing and trouble. Much of their new chapter depends on changing the way they view themselves and motherhood.

“This is about supporting the new mother and shifting the dynamic and changing the picture dramatically,” said project director Barbara White, based at the FSU office in Tallahassee. “We know they are from high-risk situations where there has been a trauma, or abuse or violence. We are trying to help them form a safe world for their children.”

That daunting task is handled by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals, including a nurse, a social worker and an infant mental health specialist, who visit weekly with the mother and her child in the home. The team’s job includes understanding the mother’s criminal or child welfare case, and if needed, getting them back into a school that accepts expectant or teen mothers. The specialist focuses on the development of the bond between mother and child. The nurse advises on the child’s physical progress.

“So often there is chaos in the house so we are putting out fires even before we get to the intervention,” said Barbara Ferrer, an infant mental health specialist. “The focus is to help these girls develop their ability to keep their baby in mind, to reframe how they think. Sometimes, it’s about breaking the bad habits from the generation before.”

Much of the work is built on trust.

“We make ourselves available to these young ladies. They have our cellphone numbers that can be used 24/7,” said Juanita Armbrister, care coordinator and team leader. “We want them to feel like they can pick up the phone and talk to us.”



Miesha Johnson, 18, plays with her 9-month-old daughter, Zha'nyi in their Miami home as Young Parents Project counselor, Barbara Ferrer visits with them.

Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Maria de Jesus Santovenia, who has recommended the program for several teens, recalled a young woman who had gotten into trouble and was refusing to go to school.

“She turned around in a way I would have never predicted. She went back to school and started doing for herself. She got married and is now finishing her [high school equivalency test],” said Santovenia. “I don’t know of another program out there that is meeting these kinds of needs.”

By the time Anne Josma joined YPP, she had already been arrested for fighting, trespassing and stealing. And, she had a son on the way.

“I was a troublemaker. I didn’t want to listen. I just wanted to stay in the streets,” said Anne, 17, who lives with her family and son, Kevin, in North Miami. “Now, I am focused on school and I want to be a nurse. I am trying to build a relationship with my son. I give him lots of love, I talk to him and I read books to him. I want to be a strong mama.”

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The program was launched in 2005 by retired Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Lester Langer, who spent 12 years in juvenile court.

“So I am sitting in court and dealing with these young people who are committing crimes. And at some point, it dawned on me that so many of them happen to be pregnant or were young parents,” Langer said. “I wanted to come up with a way to help turn these kids around. Ultimately, it was about teaching them to love their babies more than they love getting into trouble or drinking or drugs. The idea is to keep their children from becoming the next generation in the delinquency or dependency system.”

Two years later, Yale University’s model was adopted and in 2011, Miami-Dade judges requested an expansion of the program to include mothers involved in the dependency system.

“We spent a good deal of time trying to massage the program to meet the needs of the mothers,” Langer said. “But we knew the importance. We know that if you have a child in the child welfare or delinquency system at a young age, that is a major indicator that the next generation may also face the same troubles.”

## A reason to Succeed

One day last month after school in Miami, Miesha Johnson, 18, comes home to meet with Ferrer. Johnson, who had a history of fighting in school, plays with her 11-month-old daughter Zha’nyi on the floor of the tiny den as Ferrer checks in: How is the job search coming? How is the baby doing? Is she teething or walking? Johnson, a high school senior, tells Ferrer the good news. She had an interview at a bookstore today and it went well. She said Zha’nyi has started rocking, the early stages of development before the first steps.

“I got arrested and charged with battery in April [2013] and found out I was pregnant in June,” said Johnson. “I was in trouble and I had no idea what to expect as far as my pregnancy. I remember how I would sit on the bed and try to imagine what my life was going to be like with a baby. I was worried.”

Eighteen months into the YPP program, Johnson has stayed out of trouble and said she is focused on graduating high school. She would like to go to college and one day own a daycare center.

“I am a mother now. I have to finish school. I have to stay out of trouble. I have to be a role model,” she said. “She is the reason I get up in the morning.”