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Single moms' stepping stone

Young mothers like Katlyn Gunn find refuge, hope for future at SHYM apartment complex

LOIS LEGGE Features Writer
Sat, Jan 29 - 4:54 AM



(Tim Krochak / Staff)

PICTURES OF KATLYN GUNN'S little girl line the walls, cover the fridge and top the tables. Her baby's name — Kylie — loops across her inner wrist, a tattooed reminder when the child isn't in her arms.

"She's my everything," the 18-year-old Dartmouth mother says. "If I didn't have her, I don't know where I'd be."



Katlyn Gunn holds her daughter Kylie at their home in Dartmouth. The young mother and her daughter live in one of the units provided by Supportive Housing for Young Mothers, a non-profit organization that offers housing for 12 single moms on social assistance. (Ingrid Bulmer / Staff)

Perhaps the same could be said of where she actually is — a unique apartment complex, once a 1950s parochial school, tucked away behind a Dartmouth church.

These days, it's a sanctuary of sorts for young single mothers like Katlyn. And the staff of volunteers guides the girls to far greater life lessons. Like how to bond with their babies, how to balance their chequebooks, how to rise above the people or places or behaviours that have been keeping them down.

The non-profit Supportive Housing for Young Mothers (SHYM) opened this 14-unit dwelling in October 2007, after extensive renovations funded by the federal government.

The organization bought the building — owned by Halifax Regional Municipality and used as a storage facility — for \$1.

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Single mothers aged 16 to 24, mostly teenagers, live in most of the units, although two units are set aside for staff, one of whom is a permanent resident. The girls stay for up to two years, occasionally longer. Most have no place else to go.

Katlyn used to live in group homes.

Former resident Amanda Young used to be homeless, going from friend's house to friend's house — and spending a month at a Halifax shelter with her now 3½-year-old son Jordan — until she came here.

"For one reason or another, they're not able to live with their families," says SHYM executive director Wendy Fraser. "Those reasons can be anything from financial, to capacity of the family, to mental health or drug and alcohol issues.

"There's not really any one scenario that would fit for any of them. The common denominator is that they were young and didn't have family that was able to provide the support they needed."

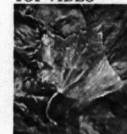
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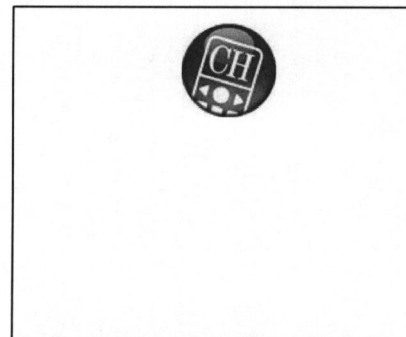
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Katlyn started running away from her family before she entered a group home at 14. That's also the age at which she became pregnant with her first child, a boy.

Because babies can't stay in group homes, and because their initial placing with a foster family didn't work out, Katlyn gave the boy up for adoption — a hard decision, she says, even though she believes "he's in a better place."

After moving back into a group home, Katlyn became pregnant again at 16. But this time, she wanted things — and the place — to be different. And they are, she says, thanks to support from what all the girls call SHYM.

The girls are all on social assistance, and their welfare allowances pay for their rent and child care. The province gives the non-profit organization a \$13 per diem for each girl.

Otherwise, about 70 per cent of its budget for staff, programming and other expenses comes from fundraising or grants, mainly from private foundations.

And the programs — parenting skills, sewing, cooking, cleaning, budgeting and more — are key. So are about 40 volunteers, who do everything from tutoring to babysitting to taking the girls to appointments.

Amanda, now in her own apartment with Jordan, says all the support helped take her from almost certain poverty to a whole new life.

She had dropped out of high school when she became pregnant at 16. Her parents helped her get into her own apartment but she couldn't keep up with the bills, despite holding down a job. She was evicted, and soon she and her baby, then five months old, were homeless.

"There (were) conflicts going on between me and my parents, so they didn't want me there, or my son," says Amanda, now 20.

"I don't know how to word it properly but I guess I wasn't the easiest kid to have, in a sense — a lot of bad attitude, just wanting to be a teenager or whatever."

Other circumstances complicated matters, but she doesn't want to talk about them.

She does talk about SHYM, though, often publicly, telling her own story and reassuring other girls that having a baby doesn't have to mean a life of poverty or other risks.

"When I was living here at SHYM, I went back to high school and I graduated," Amanda says. "And I went to NSCC (Nova Scotia Community College) and I did a little bit there, and then I was volunteering as a recreation program assistant at a nursing home, and then I moved out of here and I'm attending NSCC again doing a CCA, continuing care assistant."

"Honestly, SHYM for me was a necessary stepping stone to get to where I'm at today. . . . When I was homeless, all I could think about was . . . how am I going to feed my son supper or breakfast or the next meal? Am I going to be able to afford the next can of formula?"

"Every day was like making a strategy of how we'd get through that day, and then do the same thing over and over again. And then when I moved in here, I was able to stop focusing on the present day and I was able to start looking for the future."

Amanda says the people at SHYM were behind her 100 per cent.

"They were like my little cheer team on the side," she says.

Katlyn, too, is grateful for the support and says her confidence has skyrocketed since she came here a year ago. She is studying for her high school diploma and hopes to become a nurse someday.

Like Amanda, Katlyn believes the parenting programs at SHYM — everything from ways to interact with her baby to dealing with teething — have helped her become a better mom.

That's the biggest accomplishment of all, says Fraser, the SHYM executive director who has been helping teens in one way or another for her entire career.

"Our greatest success is to see babies who might otherwise not have the level of support, have it," Fraser says.

"All of a sudden, you see babies focusing and looking and responding. You can actually

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kind of watch and measure the changes in a short period of time after moms have moved here, and not because they necessarily weren't doing a good job but because it's very hard to focus on baby if you don't have a place to sleep at night.

"And so all your life needs become so predominant, and to be able to come here (and) feel like they've got a safe place, there's supports all around them, it feels like a gift to be able to help them enjoy their children and to really see those children blossom."

Fraser says it's especially thrilling to watch that happen, as research shows that children who don't adequately attach to their parents are at far greater risk of getting involved in criminal behaviour or having a host of other problems.

"These young women really have had to make a major decision, and really a major sacrifice," Fraser says. "And not absolutely every single one is successful, but most of them are."

"To be able to watch somebody change their life so instantaneously because of another being (who) they've (realized) is at least as important (as them), if not more . . . is just incredibly impressive."

"And I've never worked with a client group who I thought were so courageous."

(llegge@herald.ca)

'When I was homeless, all I could think about was . . . how am I going to feed my son supper or breakfast or the next meal?'

Single mom

AMANDA YOUNG

'To be able to watch somebody change their life so instantaneously because of another being (who) they've (realized) is at least as important (as them), if not more . . . is just incredibly impressive.'

Executive director SHYM

WENDY FRASER

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