

CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING

Parenthesis Family Center helps new mothers

By **Michelle D. Anderson**

TRIBUNE REPORTER

Before giving birth to a little boy at 17, TaTyana Bonds immediately began to experience the stigma associated with being a teenage mother.

"Once I became pregnant, I was put into a box. I was different from everyone else," said Bonds, a senior at Oak Park and River Forest High School.

But at Parenthesis Family Center, a family support organization based in Oak Park, Bonds, now 18, escapes the stereotypes and builds relationships with young mothers. They understand the challenges that accompany juggling motherhood with educational and work responsibilities while also trying to have a social life.

Parenthesis, which was founded in 1980 by two graduate students at the Erikson Institute for Child Development in Chicago, provides counseling, support and parenting education at little or no cost to teen and single parents, new moms, and high-risk families.

"I enjoy being with everyone at Parenthesis. I'm with people I have something in common with," said Bonds, who joined the group four months into her pregnancy. She found out about the program through a friend, who is also a teenage mother.

Parenthesis Family Center is one of numerous organizations in the Chicago region supported by Chicago Tribune Holiday Giving, a campaign of Chicago Tribune Charities, a Mc-

Cormick Foundation Fund.

In her early days at the center, Bonds learned about labor and delivery. After she gave birth, many of her Parenthesis peers were by her side helping her with her first few days of motherhood, Bonds said.

During weekly visits at the center, Bonds shares a meal with social workers and with other mothers and their children. After dinner, she joins discussions and participates in educational activities. Sometimes, they discuss how she can improve her relationship with her child's father or learn parenting skills through a nationally certified program called Parents as Teachers.

Bonds said that without Parenthesis, she would still have support from her family, but not as much knowledge.

Program Director Ann Puccetti said teen mothers often experience isolation because friends aren't always present after the baby is born. Teens also face the challenge of establishing independence as mothers while still having to respond to an authority figure.

"Trying to be a parent while still being parented is challenging," Puccetti said.

As part of the program, a social worker meets each participant at least twice a month at home, school or at work to offer individual counseling and support.

The community-based group helps about 200 people a year; Executive Director Kathy Kern said.

Over the years, Parenthesis has served an increasing number of low-income families. One-fifth

of the participants in its teen mothers group are homeless, Kern said.

Some of the mothers also must deal with violence and drug abuse, she said.

"Families fall through the cracks," Kern said. "The best way to address high-risk issues is before and right after the birth of a child."

When the organization launched in 1980, it offered a morning program for mothers and their children. It has since expanded its services to help not only teen mothers, but older single mothers, too.

Today, Parenthesis also hosts a "Family Wrap" program for high-risk homes and a six-week session for new mothers. This fall, the group hosted a workshop series focusing on parenting techniques, self-esteem, communication and relationships.

The agency's funding comes from local government, foundations such as United Way and fundraising initiatives, Kern said.

Peggy Wright, a family support specialist who works with the teen group, said participants like Bonds come to the center because of deep-rooted passion to become better mothers.

"Parenting is hard at any age," Wright said. "They come voluntarily because they want to be better parents."

Please donate now to Chicago Tribune Charities Holiday Giving. Give online at chicagotribune.com/holidaygiving call 800-217-3190, or text CHARITY to 85944 to donate \$5

