

DOING THE RIGHT THING: LIFE STORIES OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERS,
WORKING-CLASS FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

BY

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study collected the life stories of three Manitoba women who first became mothers as adolescents. A literature review revealed that embedded issues of gender, race, and social class are rarely accounted for in research; adolescent mothers are a stigmatized group whose insider perspectives are rarely accessed. The stories of the three participants differed considerably since their life circumstances varied, yet common perspectives did emerge. Shared themes were: the importance of caring relationships and of sustaining connections among people; the importance of the woman's mother; a sense of the self as being different from others; the expectation and acceptance of change in one's life; and the desire to choose the morally and personally right course. The stories were illustrative of Carol Gilligan's (1982, 1988, 1990, 1991) work on women's psychological development. For these women, adolescent motherhood was not the defining experience of their lives, it was just one part of their story. The existence of familial and other supports and resources was important to the ease or difficulty of life for the women and their children. Implications of this study are that researchers and helpers must eschew current biased conceptions of adolescent mothers and listen closely to the women's own views.

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It is expected--or is it required--that thesis writers acknowledge their committee members and others who have contributed to their work. It is probably fair to say that I am a person who tends to avoid doing what is expected; however, these are extenuating circumstances. I am grateful for this opportunity to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Paul Madak. For every single time you made yourself available when you really didn't have the time, every single time you didn't get vexed when I had "just one more thing" to say, every single time you said, "You're the expert, you know this stuff," I thank you. In a perfect world, everyone would have an advisor like you. I am very glad for the chance to thank Dr. Zana Lutfiyya and Dr. Agnes Grant for their careful and critical work as my committee members. The women known here as Felicia, Dee, and Helen--it seems silly to try to express how much I appreciate the eloquence, the grace with which you shared the story of your actual life with me, and with others who need to hear it. How could words say, I am truly honoured?

Pat Sadowy has mentored and helped me in at least twenty-seven different ways. Thank-you Pat, for every little thing. Finally, my children, in whom the sun rises and sets... my husband, who is my true and valued friend...

my daddy, for singing to me lonesome old songs about our own
ones, who stand by us in a world that 'done us wrong'... my
momma, for giving me life, feeding me, loving me, raising me
up, bragging on me, and teaching me to do the right thing...
I can never thank you enough.

INTRODUCTION

Problems of Definition: More Than Semantic

What is an "adolescent mother?" When I first began planning this study, I wanted to explore experiences of adolescent mothers and to describe those experiences and their meanings from the women's points-of-view. At that time, I was thinking of adolescent mothers as defined primarily by their age; that is, I was defining them as mothers who were between the ages of thirteen and nineteen years. In working my way through the literature, however, it became increasingly apparent that even the basic task of defining my population was going to be more complex than I had anticipated. In fact, I soon discovered that it may be more accurate to think of adolescent mothers as a subset of never-married single mothers, who as a group "are apt to have a high rate of poverty, a high rate of minority representation, relatively low education, and little status in society" (Chilman, 1988a, p. 18).

Furthermore, although most of the literature is now using the more objective and seemingly more liberal descriptor "adolescent," I noticed that a key element for researchers in assessing these mothers often continues to be their unmarried status. For example, studies usually exclude teen-aged mothers if they are married (Chilman, 1988a) and much research--purportedly on adolescent mothers--includes older women if they are not married (e.g., Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger, & Lambert, 1988; Taylor, 1990).

While uncritical of motherhood as an institution, much of the literature unquestioningly assumes that unmarried adolescents should not become mothers and may reasonably be treated paternalistically if they do (Chilman, 1987). In this sense, the focus of the literature may still reflect the conservative values and moralistic attitudes which, in the past, unapologetically decried "unwed" motherhood (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine, & Klerman, 1986).

Since the literature varies so considerably in its definition of adolescent mothers, and since my interest generally is mothers who are perceived as "quite young" by current North American standards, I am using a broad definition, including in the category "adolescent mother" all those women who first became mothers when they had not yet reached the age of majority--twenty-one years. However, as my analysis showed, the problem of definition is much more than a practical one. The literature is generally critical of adolescent mothers, tending to focus in a negative way on their sexuality and to pathologize their motherhood. The literature acknowledges, as well, that a large proportion of adolescent mothers are from "minority" groups and/or have low socio-economic status (SES). However, the politics of gender, race, and social class are rarely scrutinized. My contention is that adequate understanding of adolescent mothers must begin with attention to issues of gender, race, and social class.

In reviewing the literature and in conducting this study, I am using a working-class feminist perspective. I define feminism here as "a set of beliefs, values and attitudes centred on the high valuation of women as human beings" (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective [HCWSC], 1983, p. 4). When I say that I am using a feminist perspective, I mean that my interactions with the literature, with research participants, and with the methodology are all mediated by a personal orientation of respect for women. This political perspective includes a belief in the relevance of women's experiences and of their thinking about those experiences.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define working-class perspective as a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes centred on respect for working-class people and on the high valuation of their ways of surviving and thriving. When I say that I am using a working-class feminist perspective, then, I mean that my analyses and actions are informed as well by a personal and political awareness of the class nature of society and by a willingness to see things from working-class people's points-of-view.

From the point-of-view of working-class women, the usefulness of much current feminist theory on motherhood is questionable. An important limitation, particularly of early analyses, is that they were atheoretical, as well as ahistorical and ethnocentric (Collins, 1990; Ferguson, 1989;

Johnson, 1988). Feminist motherhood theorists such as Firestone (1970), Rich (1976), Dinnerstein (1976), and Chodorow (1978) focussed almost exclusively on experiences of white, married women, and assumed that "the mother" has a level of affluence or even privilege which most women (and many men) do not possess (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Joseph, 1981). Yet feminist theories about the meaning and politic of motherhood are often assumed to apply to all women (e.g., Hamilton, 1991; Maroney, 1986; Snitow, 1992). Considering this "problem of exclusion in feminist thought" (Spelman, 1987, p. 2), it is important to go beyond what Firestone (1970) referred to as a "pure gender"--or white middle-class--analysis when critiquing ideas about adolescent motherhood.

I should also state at the outset that, although I am using a feminist perspective, this is not a feminist study as such. Feminist methodologies have recently been evolving which use particular conceptual frameworks, constructs, methods, and conventions (e.g., Kirby & McKenna, 1989). While my work shares many of the beliefs and aims of feminist research, this proposal conforms to the standards for qualitative methodology which I discuss in detail in my method section.

Reflections on Adolescent Motherhood: Doing the Right Thing

My title, "Doing the Right Thing," refers to a theme which emerges very strongly in all the women's stories--the desire to do the right thing, to choose carefully, from among competing alternatives, a course of action which is both morally and personally right. It is descriptive as well of my motivation in doing this study. In both my review of the literature and my work with the women, I tried not just to 'get the job done,' but to do it right. I have been guided throughout this study by a sense of my responsibility toward the women in the study and to many, many others. I really wanted to find out, and publish, the truth about their lives.

Research on adolescent motherhood is badly in need of primary descriptive information. As my literature review showed, research on this topic seems to go in a non-productive circle; a plethora of quantitative studies hypothesize a relationship between adolescent motherhood and various deleterious "effects," the hypotheses go largely unsupported, the studies recommend further research, and subsequent quantitative research begins again with the same assumptions and conceptual set. I believe that when more studies are done which show the women's own perspectives, a new and more valid conceptual framework can begin to be generated.

This study is also important in the ongoing process of evolving feminist-informed theories of motherhood. Because of its race, social class, and other biases, feminist theory to date offers a critique of motherhood which is partial, both in the sense of being incomplete and in the sense of giving primacy to the experiences of particular groups of women (Collins, 1990; Finger, 1984; Hanscombe & Forster, 1981). An in-depth study of the lives of women who have been adolescent mothers is important to the reconstruction of feminist motherhood theory. By understanding "motherhood" in the lives of stigmatized mothers, theorists can begin to synthesize a more authentic analysis of the politics of motherhood which takes into account the specificity of women as mothers and the diversity of mothers' experiences.

Layout of the Thesis

In reviewing the adolescent motherhood literature, I concentrate on its sensitivity, or lack thereof, to issues of gender, race, and social class. I attempt to place the issue of adolescent motherhood in a larger social context and to consider the implications of conventional responses to adolescent mothers in a society which differentially approves different kinds of mothers. I suggested that the tendency of adolescent mothers to be unmarried, poor, and

non-White is relevant and that societal responses to adolescent motherhood are political.

In my method section, I identify some of the implications of bringing a working-class feminist perspective to research on adolescent motherhood. I formulate a more specific idea of the kind of understanding I want to gain, and I describe the current research. In the next section are the life stories of the three women in my study; Felicia, Dee, and Helen. I conclude by exploring some of the main themes of the stories, considering the meanings the experiences seem to hold for the women, and reflecting upon the implications for our understanding of adolescent motherhood.

Adolescent Mothers in the Social Sciences Literature

Dominant Themes: The "Problem" of Adolescent Motherhood

For the purposes of this paper, the literature on adolescent motherhood can be loosely divided into the following three, often over-lapping, categories: statistical and demographic data, factors associated with adolescent parenthood and descriptions of programmes, and research about pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers.

Recent Trends in Adolescent Motherhood

That adolescent motherhood is a problem for women, their children, and society is increasingly "common

knowledge," yet the public perception of absolutes contrasts with a lack of consensus among social scientists (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986). The first, and in some ways the most central, controversy is the question of the extent of "the problem."

It is popularly believed that there has been an epidemic of teenage childbearing, but there is no empirical support for this contention (Chilman, 1980a). In Canada, for instance, 22,483 babies were born in 1989 to mothers aged 15 to 19 years (Statistics Canada, 1990b). This is substantially lower than in 1975, when 38,823 babies were born to 15- to 19-year-old mothers. A comparison of fertility rates (defined as number of live births per thousand women) shows a steady increase for this age group between 1941 and 1960 (from 30.7 to 59.8), followed by a steady decline until 1985 when it was 23.7 (Statistics Canada, 1990a). Between 1986 and 1989, the fertility rate has remained level at around 24 or 25. In fact, as of 1986, fewer teenagers and proportionally more women from age 25 to 29 were giving birth (Statistics Canada, 1986). The fertility rate for the 15 to 19 age group has been steadily declining since the 1970's and now seems to have levelled off (Statistics Canada, 1986). On the other hand, pregnancy rates for the same group over the same time period have actually increased. This opposite trend for pregnancy rate as compared to fertility rate can be explained by the fact

that a very large percentage of pregnant teenage women receive abortions--by some estimates, over 40 per cent (Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982).

Although the adolescent birth rate is thus quite conservative, what has increased dramatically is the percentage of young mothers who keep their babies rather than adopting them out (Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982), and who remain unmarried; 75 percent were single at the birth of their child in 1986 compared with 18 percent in 1951 (Taylor, 1990).

The American situation is similar to that of Canada, although the numbers are higher (Jones, Forrest, Goldman, Henshaw, Lincoln, Rosoff & Wulf, 1985). The American adolescent pregnancy rate was twice that of Canada in 1981, for instance, but the proportion of pregnancies that resulted in marital and nonmarital birth and in abortion was similar (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). Like Canadian birth rates, American rates decreased significantly from 1960 to 1980, and more recently have continued to decline, although at a reduced rate (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). The only increase has been in births to very young adolescents--those fourteen years and under--but these numbers are extremely small and account for a very small proportion of births to all adolescents (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). The percentage of births that were to unmarried American women, furthermore, has continued to rise. "Births to adolescent

women who were unmarried as a percentage of all births to adolescent mothers has increased from 15% in 1960 to 64% in 1987" (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990, p. 18). In summary then, and contrary to popular opinion, the well-established trend both in the United States and in Canada is toward less adolescent childbearing. The other strongly demonstrated trend is for adolescent women who continue their pregnancy not to marry. In other words, there has been no increase in childbearing by young women; rather, there has been a reduction in their marriage rate.

The fact of a distinct lack of epidemic in adolescent childbearing is well-known among epidemiologists, but the epidemic concept continues to be promulgated. Chilman (1980a) explained that this concept was advanced in 1977 by Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and has since been highly publicized. Popularization of the epidemic concept, while it heightened public awareness of the need for contraceptive education and services for adolescents and increased federal funding for services and for research concerning the "crisis," also had the unfortunate affect of distorting birth rate realities and picturing adolescent sexuality as generally problem laden (Chilman, 1980a). The epidemic concept probably also contributed to the stigma associated with adolescent parenthood, and to the growing bias against adolescent mothers (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986).

"Causes," "Consequences," and "Solutions"

The literature gives considerable space and credence to demographic studies, which identify the incidence and apparent outcomes of adolescent childbearing. While these studies tend to lack a creditable formal conceptual framework (Chilman, 1980a), a popular conceptual set is apparent. Since the basic assumption of the vast majority of researchers is that adolescent parenthood is a problem, research is often conceived and presented in terms of causes of, consequences of, and solutions to, that problem (e.g., Dillard & Pol, 1982; Ireson, 1984; Makinson, 1985; McClellan, 1987; Miller & Miller, 1983; Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982; Simkins, 1984; Smith, Weinman & Mumford, 1982; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990).

Explorations of the causes of adolescent childbearing focus on its antecedents; that is, the series of behaviours and decisions which precede the birth of a child to an adolescent mother. These include initiation of sexual behaviour, use or nonuse of effective birth control, and coming to a pregnancy resolution. In their comprehensive review of the literature, Voydanoff and Donnelly (1990) concluded that young people who are poor, less educated, and non-white are more likely to proceed through each step toward adolescent parenthood. Socio-economic status (SES) is a relevant factor as well in determining the likelihood of marriage. That is, young people who are poor, especially

if they are not white, are more likely to become unmarried adolescent parents.

The literature often charges that the consequences of adolescent motherhood for the mothers are low educational and vocational attainment (Simkins, 1984), poor health (Makinson, 1985), lack of marriage (Robbins, Kaplan & Martin, 1985), welfare dependency (Miller & Miller, 1983), and an accompanying financial (Dillard & Pol, 1982) and social "cost to society" (Stark, 1986). In her analysis of research findings, however, Chilman (1980a) noted major methodological problems in much of the literature, especially the failure to use control groups and to control for compounding variables such as race and social class. She pointed to the tendency of researchers to mistakenly identify underlying factors associated with adolescent childbearing as its causes, and she explained that most of the negatives assumed to be consequences of adolescent motherhood are, rather, correlates. She emphasized that significant correlations exist between adolescent parenthood, and SES, race, and ethnicity, with poverty background and non-white race much more common among those who become adolescent parents.

Chilman's (1980a) consideration of the most methodologically sound research on education, later family size, marriage and marriage disruption, labour force participation, effects of welfare assistance, and maternal

behaviour and attitudes with children, led her to conclude that few differences exist between adolescent and older mothers of comparable status, and that "in general, the direct social and psychological effects of early childbearing, per se, appeared to be fairly minimal" (p. 801). Elsewhere, Chilman (1988a) explained that

it is a common and unfortunate error to conclude, as many do, that adolescent parenthood is the main cause of early school leaving, youth unemployment, poverty and welfare dependency or that these factors are the consequences of this parenthood. The chief causes of these problems lie in the structure of our society, with its institutional racism and social stratification and with the structure of our economy with its increasing high rates of unemployment, especially among minority youth (p. 38).

The literature often suggests that adolescent parenthood bears "consequences" for the children of adolescent mothers such as health problems, cognitive, socioemotional and behavioural development problems, and lower educational achievement (e.g., Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982).

Here again, more careful attention to the distinction between correlation and cause reveals a more comprehensive interpretation. Chilman (1988a) explained that earlier findings which attributed higher rates of prematurity and

associated birth defects to the mothers' age had suffered from too simplistic an analysis. "These outcomes were largely, perhaps totally, a result of the higher average rates of poverty backgrounds among adolescent mothers and their greater tendency to not obtain early prenatal care" (p. 35).

While acknowledging that the sons, but not the daughters, of adolescent mothers were identified as having more behavioural problems, and that the children of adolescent mothers displayed lower school achievement and somewhat higher rates of learning problems and school disinterest, Chilman's (1988) general conclusion was that "other frequently claimed adverse developmental outcomes have been overstated when they are attributed to youthful age (of the mother) alone" (p. 35). Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan (1987), in their survey of research on child development outcomes, also concluded that few differences have been found between the children of teenage and older mothers of comparable backgrounds.

Having identified the "causes" and "consequences" of the supposed problem of adolescent motherhood, a significant body of literature goes on to prescribe its "solutions" in the form of programmes to prevent adolescent childbearing and/or to intervene with adolescent mothers. Although many pregnancy prevention and adolescent parent programmes have been designed and put into service, few have been evaluated

(Voydanoff and Donnelly, 1990). Those few programmes which have been evaluated, furthermore, have shown little success (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990; Zelnik & Kantner, 1979).

One explanation for this lack of success may be the repeatedly demonstrated research finding that cognitive performance on measures of sexuality and birth control knowledge is not related in most cases to behaviour (Chilman, 1989; McClellan, 1987; Smith, Nennery, Weinman & Mumford, 1982; Smith, Weinman & Mumford, 1982). Young people who score well on measures of birth control knowledge are no more likely than others to actually use effective birth control measures (Chilman, 1989). Also, since the vast majority of young women have already quit school or are "failing" before they get pregnant (Chilman, 1980a, 1989), it may be unlikely that many will return to the school-based programmes after the pregnancy is discovered. Here again, social class is relevant. Poorer and non-white people generally are much less likely to excel in school, and are much more likely to become "dropouts" (Smith, 1990).

Recently, comprehensive programmes have become more popular. These programmes aim to reduce repeat pregnancies and overcome the health, educational, and employment or vocational problems often associated with early child-bearing (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986). Comprehensive programmes attempt to co-ordinate existing health, social, educational, and other services, and to make

them responsive to the needs of pregnant and parenting teens, while avoiding the financial overhead which would be needed for separate services.

A study by Weatherley, Perlman, Levine, and Klerman (1986) assessed comprehensive programme development and delivery in ten localities in the United States. The researchers found that "programs in all 10 sites faced severe obstacles in developing and maintaining programs. The constraints were so formidable that only under exceptional circumstances were comprehensive programs sustained" (p. 74). They identified four main kinds of constraints: inadequate financial support, insufficient health and welfare infrastructure, negative public and political attitudes toward a stigmatized population, and an unproven intervention technology. They pointed to the tendency among advocates to spotlight the few extraordinary cases in which comprehensive programmes have met with success, and they concluded that "as short-term emergency measures, [comprehensive programmes] should be assessed according to criteria appropriate for crisis intervention, which is what, with few exceptions, they provide" (p. 78).

Attitudes, Abilities, and Attributes of Mothers

A final important focus of the literature is on research concerning adolescent mothers, particularly their childrearing attitudes, knowledge and abilities, their child

abuse potential, and their psychosocial characteristics. The literature often assumes or implies that adolescent females who are pregnant or mothering lack sexual and parenting knowledge and abilities (e.g. McClellan, 1987; Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982; Smith, Weinman & Mumford, 1982; Simkins, 1984), and it is a "commonly held belief that adolescents by virtue of their age are poor mothers" (McAnarney, Lawrence, Aten & Iker, 1984, p. 362).

Some studies, which failed to use control groups, found support for this contention (e.g., Horn & Rudolph, 1987). However, many studies did not. Gullo (1985), for instance, compared knowledge of developmental milestones in three groups of women; middle-class older mothers, middle-class childless adolescents, and low SES adolescent mothers. The older mothers predicted developmental milestones better than the other two groups, generally and for the first year, but were no better at the prediction of second year milestones. No differences were found between the two groups of younger women. Gullo concluded that SES is the discriminating factor. He emphasized that the use of comparison groups is essential to such studies, since his study illustrated that the general public is not well-informed about child development.

McLaughlin, Pearce, Manninen and Winges (1988) and Roosa (1983) both found that adolescent mothers and their

children interact less verbally, and more physically, than do older mothers and their children. Roosa found, however, that the knowledge and attitude base of pregnant and never-pregnant teens were almost identical. Older mothers knew slightly more but Roosa concluded that the older mothers' scores were shockingly close to adolescents' considering how much more general education the older mothers had. Like Gullo (1985), Roosa concluded that the findings of his study illustrate the importance of using control groups. Other studies using appropriate comparison groups found no differences between adolescent and other mothers, but emphasized the relationship between mothers' knowledge and their SES (e.g., McAnarney, Lawrence, Aten & Iker, 1984; Schilmoeller & Baranowski, 1985).

Another assumption common in the literature is that the children of adolescents, whether by accident, neglect, or abuse, are more likely to come to harm than are the children of older mothers (e.g., Reis and Herz, 1987; Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982; Simkins, 1984; Taylor, 1990). However, Hayes (1987) agreed with McAnarney, Lawrence, Aten, and Iker (1984) that these assumptions are not supported, but that both child abuse potential and adolescent motherhood are related to low SES. That is, people from poorer families are more likely to be identified as abusing their children, and adolescent mothers are more likely than older mothers to be from poorer families.

Voydanoff and Donnelly (1990) suggested that most studies of adolescent mothers show some evidence of abuse, but they concurred that this was more the result of low SES than of low maternal age.

Chilman's (1980a) careful review of the literature led her to conclude that the majority of adolescent mothers "appeared to be as competent and caring as older but otherwise comparable mothers" (p. 800), and that there were no significant differences in accidents occurring to children of post-adolescent mothers. Chilman (1988a) found that studies whose methodology attended sufficiently to the effects of SES showed no support for a relationship between adolescent mothers and either child abuse or accident. Other research has also revealed the importance of social, financial, and emotional supports in reducing the likelihood of child abuse among adolescent and other mothers (Colletta, 1981; Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982).

In summing up findings about adolescent mothers, Chilman (1988a) observed the tendency among researchers to assume that knowledge is related to behaviour, and she noted that many studies of adolescent mothering are still not using comparison groups. She emphasized that adolescent mothers are a heterogeneous group, and that, especially if they are supported by parents, partners, and friends, they are as likely as comparably-situated older women to provide good, caring parenting. "The majority of these mothers are

as loving, conscientious and competent as older mothers of similar socio-economic status and race...and although some have claimed higher rates of child abuse among teenage parents, the research evidence to date does not support this claim" (p. 36).

Some writers also posit that adolescent motherhood has dire social-psychological consequences (e.g., Reis & Herz, 1987). Barth, Schinke and Maxwell (1983) listed the more commonly cited psychological traits of teenage mothers explored by psychodynamic studies as; weak ego strength, self-devaluation, low self-worth, low ability to make plans, overdependence, a proclivity toward using denial, risk taking, external locus of control, masochism, and anomie. The authors noted, however, that these psychological profiles have not been good predictors of early childbearers, and suggested that "the assumption that adolescent mothers continue to share common personality traits [sic] deserves to be greeted [sic] with skepticism" (p. 473).

It has often been claimed that adolescent mothers suffer from low self-esteem (e.g., Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). Some studies found support for this contention (e.g., Horn and Rudolph, 1987; Thompson, 1984). Studies which accounted for SES and other confounding variables, however, found no support for a relationship between adolescent motherhood and

low self-esteem (e.g., Fulton, Murphy & Anderson, 1991; McLaughlin, Pearce, Manninen & Winges, 1988; Streetman, 1987; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990).

An important study by Robbins, Kaplan, and Martin (1985) provided a sophisticated analysis of the demonstrated relationship between low self-esteem and low SES. Using a large sample (over 2000) of responses to a 1971 American national survey, the researchers tested multivariant causal models predicting out-of-wedlock adolescent pregnancy. They found weak age-specific effects of self-esteem and powerlessness; however, surprisingly, their finding was that youths with high self-esteem and perceived efficacy are more at risk for adolescent pregnancy. The authors also addressed the issue of the supposed external locus of control of adolescent parents, concluding that

the analyses presented here do not support the culture-of-poverty supposition that unplanned pregnancies result from self-attitudes of fatalism and worthlessness which are culturally transmitted among the poor... This pattern suggests a recognition of objective social disadvantage rather than culturally transmitted feelings of fatalism and worthlessness.
(pp. 579-80)

Some have also hypothesized that adolescent mothers are more likely than others to hold conservative sex-role values (e.g., Ireson, 1984; Taylor, 1990). The credibility of

Taylor's (1990) argument, however, was called into question by the lack of support she offered for her contentions. Although referring repeatedly to the traditional attitudes and beliefs of young Canadian mothers, Taylor's article listed just one somewhat-dated American research study (Cvetkovitch, Grote, Leberman, & Miller, 1978) to support the existence of such attitudes. Furthermore, Taylor failed to provide any evidence that young women who do not become adolescent mothers possess more liberal sex-role attitudes. Ireson's (1984) study was flawed by the ambiguity of her findings and the lack of consistency between the findings and her interpretation of their implications.

Adolescent Mothers: Young, Poor, and "Unwed"

In summary, then, a pronounced tendency of research is to hypothesize that adolescent mothers differ significantly from others, and that these differences are negative. Some of the more common predictions are that adolescent mothers have negative childrearing attitudes and little knowledge about children, are more likely than other parents to abuse their children, and have low self-esteem, a fatalistic outlook, external locus of control and conservative sex-role attitudes.

However, especially when sufficient attention is paid to the basics of proper quantitative methodology--using appropriate sampling methods and sample size; providing

control or comparison groups; controlling for, and accounting for, confounding variables such as race and SES; developing sophisticated and non-biased analyses; and striving for internally valid interpretations of the findings--the majority of studies reveal that adolescent mothers, individually, differ very little from others of similar social and economic circumstance. As of 1980, almost 20 years of research on "adolescent parenthood" (much of it funded by the U.S. government) seemed to have yielded barely more than a handful of methodologically-sound studies which, taken together, showed few differences between adolescent and other mothers (Chilman, 1980a).

One factor shown consistently to be significantly related to the incidence of adolescent motherhood, as well as to the experiences of adolescent mothers, is SES (Chilman, 1988a; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). Of women who become mothers at the age of nineteen or younger, a majority come from poverty backgrounds and have relatively little education. Many of the problems of adolescent mothers have been shown to be related more to poverty and to a lack of education than to their age. Furthermore, in the United States, a significant proportion of adolescent mothers are Black or Hispanic (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990).

The relationship between social class and adolescent motherhood, although confirmed in the literature, is rarely explored. Perhaps this is because the validity of existing

criteria for determining social class is controversial (McLaren, 1988). Ehrenreich (1989), who characterized the middle-class as--more specifically--a professional/managerial class, implied that working-class and poor people are those over whom the middle-class have control. Furthermore, such a strong association exists between low levels of education and low social class status that level of education is often used as an indication of social class (Ehrenreich, 1989; Li, 1988). For the purposes of this thesis, I simply acknowledge the complexity of defining social class status. I characterize poverty as the constellation of personal and social circumstances of those living at, or near, the Poverty Line (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1991).

Another factor important to discussions of adolescent parenthood is gender. Obviously, all adolescent mothers are female, but all adolescent parents are not. Still, the "parents" usually of interest to critical members of the public, as well as to researchers, continue to be the mothers (Barret & Robinson, 1982; Chilman, 1980a). While my own consideration of the literature has exclusively focussed on the mothers--and not on the fathers--this has been a purposeful focus. Much of the research, however, while focussing exclusively on adolescent mothers, and while failing to consider the putative fathers, seems to do so inadvertently. As I will discuss in some detail below,

sexism in research with adolescent mothers has limited its ability to generate valid information.

A final cogent factor is marital status. Chilman (1988a) characterized adolescent mothers as a particularly disadvantaged subset of a larger group: never-married, single mothers. Thinking of adolescent mothers in this way seems to have merit, since the two groups--adolescent mothers and single mothers--have important features in common. According to McLanahan and Garfinkel (1993), the number of single-mother families in the United States has increased dramatically since 1960, and nearly half of single-mother families currently live below the poverty line. In fact, unmarried single mothers, when compared to divorced or widowed single mothers, are more likely to live in poverty and to come from "minority backgrounds," and are also more subject to social stigmatization. In Canada too, the proportion of single-parent families has increased markedly; over 80% of such families in 1991 were headed by a female (McKie, 1993), and single-mother families were much more likely to be poor than were either single-father families (McKie, 1993) or two-parent families (Eichler, 1993).

Like adolescent motherhood, single motherhood has been constructed in the literature as a problem in need of solution (McDaniel, 1993). Single mothers, much more than their male counterparts, are the subjects of public

scrutiny, disapproval, and censure since "the fact of women's centrality in child care leaves women vulnerable to having the psychological fallout of identities gone awry linked to women's mothering" (McDaniel, 1993, p. 207). Adolescent single mothers, then, share with their older peers important structural disadvantages such as low SES and social stigmatization. Thinking of adolescent mothers as a subset of never-married single mothers leads to the conclusion that marital status must be considered in the development of an informed understanding of adolescent motherhood.

Analysis: Nothing but the Facts?

An increasing body of research findings supports the premise that adolescent motherhood is a complex issue; that adolescent mothers form a heterogeneous group and that their experiences and potential life chances are as diverse as their personal circumstances (Chilman, 1988a; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987). As shown by my review of the literature, however, research often continues to be based in a conceptual set which assumes that adolescent motherhood is, first and last, a problem. In fact, studies which are otherwise rational and well-informed, seem often to retain a rather contrived tone of urgency. Hayes' (1987) book, for example, which acknowledged the conservative demographic facts of the trend in adolescent childbearing, as well as

the relevance of SES and race to its consideration, bore the emotionally-loaded and potentially misleading title, Risking the Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing.

Furthermore, much of the more recent research still has a tendency to focus in a negative way on adolescent mothers and to pathologize their experiences (Chilman, 1987), and although writers usually sense that it is no longer acceptable to castigate young mothers for their lack of marriage per se, they can still couch their criticisms in concern about the purported "consequences" of adolescent motherhood for all involved (e.g., Dillard & Pol, 1982; Simkins, 1984).

How can one explain the mismatch between, on the one hand, the facts of adolescent motherhood as revealed in the research (stable rates, diverse characteristics of the population, structural causes), and, on the other hand, the continuing tone of much of the literature, with its thinly-disguised contempt for adolescent mothers and its simplistic claims of certain and dire consequences (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986)? As I stated above, my belief is that the research fails to acknowledge a formal conceptual framework, but it continues to be based in a simplistic conceptual set which, in focussing on the problem of adolescent motherhood, assumes individual pathology. This focus ignores the fact that unmarried adolescent

motherhood has a long history and that prevailing conceptualizations of, and responses to, adolescent mothers have been politically motivated, reflecting the dominant political philosophies of the day (Sedlak, 1983). Acceptance of the current mindset ignores, as well, that the focus of research attention has largely been determined by the makers of social policy, and by social services workers-interest groups for whom the maintenance of a "problem" focus serves utilitarian purposes. Research whose findings have been limited by the current problem-focussed conceptual orientation has tended, therefore, to omit consideration of both the larger social contexts in which adolescent motherhood is embedded, and the actual perspectives of individual adolescent mothers.

A Bigger Picture: Gender, Race, and Social Class

Eichler (1988) has suggested that sexism in social sciences research may appear at any stage of the research process. She identified seven major forms that sexism in research may take. Research is sexist

if it displays any sexist elements in any or all of the following: in language, concepts, questions posed, methods used, interpretations made, policy recommendations made, as well as overall perspective.

(pp. 48-49)

Although careful analysis of the degree to which sexism may be a factor in the research on adolescent motherhood would be time-consuming and unnecessary, a brief consideration is merited here.

Language may be sexist in two ways: the exclusive use of male terms for generic purposes, and the use of generic terms for sex-specific purposes (Eichler, 1988, pp. 38-39). Both of these practices limit a work's clarity and accuracy. The second form of sexist language usage is apparent in the adolescent motherhood literature in the common practice of using the generic term "parent," instead of the sex-specific term "mother" when only females are being considered. According to Eichler, "this practice as effectively confuses issues as the use of male terms for generic purposes" (1988, p. 39). Other writers have pointed out that the assumption that parenting is gender-free not only is inaccurate, but also obscures an analysis of the relative power of men and women (Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd, 1991). A non-sexist and less obfuscatory practice would be to use the term "parent" only when male and female parents were being jointly, and equally, considered.

Sexism in research concepts may be seen where some form of double standard exists, where traits of men and women are differentially evaluated, or where hierarchically structured sexual relationships are assumed or wrongly implied (Eichler, 1988, pp. 39-41). Although recognizing sexist

concepts is not at all straightforward, many of the concepts in the adolescent motherhood literature seem to me to be questionable. Some examples are the exclusion of married adolescent mothers from most problem-focused studies, and the presumption that pregnancy in adolescent women is a sign of personal inefficacy and irresponsibility. The concept of "parenting" itself is problematic, since the expression "to parent" has come to connote the completion of a constellation of physical tasks such as giving baths, reading stories, dressing, and teaching manners to a child (Swift, 1991). Defining the quality of a parent-child relationship by the degree of task-completion works against those parents with few resources and with parental skills or styles which lack mainstream societal approval.

Sexism in the kinds of research questions posed can be seen in the preoccupation of the literature with possible adverse characteristics of adolescent mothers. Are adolescent mothers unknowledgeable? Are they abusive? Do they fail to stimulate their children's development? Research which is non-sexist would tend as often to hypothesize positive or exemplary characteristics of adolescent mothers as it did negative ones, and would test negative hypotheses about the men involved in pregnancies of adolescent women as often as the women.

Sexism in methods refers not so much to whether certain methods are, in and of themselves, sexist, but to sexist

uses to which research methods can be put (Eichler, 1988, pp. 42-45). I will be considering the question of sexism and methodology more closely in a later section, but one obvious example of sexist use of methodology is the consistent failure of researchers to account for the sex of all participants of the research process. Although writers consistently fail to provide the needed information, it appears that much of the research considered above was conceived, carried out, assessed, and written up by male researchers, often using instruments designed by men, on samples of all-female subjects, about women's experiences.

Sexism in interpretations made theoretically should not be possible, since interpretations should be guided by the research data. However, this is not always the case. Ireson (1984) had hypothesized that adolescents who get pregnant are more likely than other sexually active adolescent women to be traditional in sex-role orientation. She compared questionnaire responses of 161 adolescent women, some of whom were seeking pregnancy tests, and some of whom were seeking birth control. Ireson's study found that pregnant teens, when asked to name something they were "good at," more often named activities judged to be traditionally sex-typed. Pregnancy test-taking teens, who were lower in SES than the other group, also had lower educational expectations and occupational aspirations, had

lower grades, and were more likely to have dropped out of school than were birth control seekers.

Interestingly, the study also found that birth control seeking teens had more traditional occupational aspirations than pregnant adolescents. For instance,

the birth control seekers...(were) less likely to even mention a job interest in a field that is not strongly female sex-typed. Among pregnant teens, 62% indicate aspirations for work in at least one occupation that is not strongly female sex-typed, while only 43% of the birth control seekers indicate a similar interest (Ireson, 1984, p. 199).

In spite of these ambiguous findings, however, Ireson concluded that lower aspirations and grades among pregnant adolescent teens may be an indication of "a more traditionally feminine focus on boys and future domestic roles" (p. 198), and she concluded that "traditional sex roles are related to the occurrence of adolescent pregnancy in this study" (p. 189).

Eichler (1988) suggested that it may not be advisable for researchers to make policy recommendations since the same findings can often be used to make two diametrically opposed sets of policy recommendations. My discussion above touched upon sexism in policies recommended by the adolescent motherhood research. Regardless of the research

findings, studies seem to recommend prevention of adolescent motherhood and amelioration through more research and through programme funding.

Eichler's (1988) final, and most important, category is overall perspective. Sexism in this form may be seen if research is from the perspective of one sex only, if it implicitly accepts the notion that females are passive or acted upon, or if members of one sex are seen as more important than the other (pp. 48-49). Certainly, the adolescent motherhood research tends to see females as more important than males to this issue (Chilman, 1988a). Considering the fact that the general mindset about adolescent "parenthood" is very negative, this singular focus on women is anything but progressive. The idea of adolescent mothers as passive and acted upon is also basic to the research, both in its assumptions about their supposed low self-esteem, fatalism, and external locus of control, and in its consistent tendency to be prescriptive and paternalistic about the best "solutions" to their presumed problems.

Even cursory application of Eichler's (1988) criteria to research on adolescent motherhood forces the unsettling conclusion that the research may be riddled with sexism. It follows, both ethically and empirically, that sexism in research on adolescent mothers must be avoided. However, a growing awareness is developing that feminist analysis which

attends only to gender is itself a problem. In Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought, Spelman (1987) pointed out the white, middle-class bias pervasive in much early feminist theory. Spelman critiqued the belief that women are a homogeneous group which underlies the idea of women as a sex-class (Firestone, 1970), and she pointed out that non-dominant-group women neither agree with, nor benefit from, this belief. She contended that valid feminist theory must be anchored in class- and race-specific conceptions, and must attend as closely to the differences among, as to the similarities among, women.

Spelman's (1987) analysis raises the question, can research truly be woman-centred if, in assuming that all women are the same, it fails to account for the race and social class of participants? My literature review showed that adolescent mothers tend to have low socio-economic status and, in the United States at least, to come from "minority" groups. Particularly considering the marginal status of adolescent mothers, non-biased research with them needs to be sensitive to issues of race and social class, as well as guarding against sexism. A cogent analysis of adolescent motherhood, besides accounting for gender, must attend to the race and social class of adolescent mothers.

The Black feminist theorist Collins (1990) offered a rare analysis of "unwed" motherhood which takes into account race and social class. Collins asserted that stereotypical

images of Black welfare mothers generally, including Black adolescent mothers, are used to control and disempower Black women. Collins explained that, since one in three African-American families is officially classified as poor, it serves the financial and ideological purposes of the State to stigmatize welfare mothers by shifting the blame for systemic poverty to them.

The image of the welfare mother provides ideological justifications for interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression... The welfare mother has no male authority figure to assist her. Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought: she is a woman alone. As a result, her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage. (p. 77)

Collins further identified the function of controlling images of welfare motherhood as providing ideological justification for limiting Black women's fertility so as to keep them from "producing too many economically unproductive children" (p. 77).

Collins' (1990) linking of disempowering images of mothers with fertility control is an important point. One way in which marginalized groups have historically been oppressed is through population control. McLaren (1990)

showed, for instance, that between the latter 19th Century and the mid-20th Century, eugenics programmes advocating forced sterilization of the "unfit" flourished in Canada, as they did in the United States and Europe. Among the groups most often targeted by eugenics societies were immigrants, disabled people, Native people, and "unwed mothers" including adolescents (McLaren, 1990; Pence, 1990).

This connection between selective population control and public censure of certain kinds of mothers also has implications for feminist theories of reproductive rights. Although capitalist patriarchal societies have historically attempted to control all women's sexuality and fertility, this control has been maintained in different ways with different populations of women. Women from dominant classes may have been pressured to produce children, but non-dominant-group women have often been discouraged, or actively prevented from doing so (Collins, 1990; McLaren, 1990; Rich, 1986). Collins' (1990) analysis highlights that it is problematic to develop a feminist perspective of adolescent motherhood without taking into account issues of race and social class, or for that matter, without considering history.

The fact of a class-based difference in women's experience of "reproductive freedom" will elude feminists who fail to develop a race- and class-inclusive understanding. Chilman's (1980b, 1987) stance on adolescent

motherhood, for instance, though exemplary from a pure gender (that is, white, middle-class) point of view, runs into trouble. Since her feminist perspective is not enhanced by an informed critique of racial and class politics, she fails to question State-supported policies which covertly maintain control of "adolescent fertility," policies which, in Collins' (1990) opinion, are racially-motivated.

Fine Tuning: American Analyses in Canadian Perspective

Another limitation of current analyses of adolescent motherhood concerns the preponderance of American literature. The rare Canadian writings, while quoting Canadian statistics and focussing on Canadian subject populations, accept without revision popular American analyses of the significance and implications of adolescent motherhood (e.g., Sacks, Macdonald, Schlesinger & Lambert, 1982; Taylor, 1990). The underlying assumption is that there are no relevant differences between Canadian and American adolescent mothers.

Several excellent American researchers have demonstrated that adolescent mothers are from diverse backgrounds, and that the exact constellation of factors which make up any given adolescent mother's experiences are relevant in imagining her present and future life prospects (Chilman, 1980a, 1988a, 1988b; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn &

Morgan, 1987). The majority of American studies have been conducted in large American cities, often in the poor inner-city neighbourhoods and using a large proportion of Black subjects. Canada has different demographics from the United States with great variability between geographic regions (McLaren, 1988), and with its own history of racial relations, and both inter-group and intra-group politics (Li, 1988; McLaren, 1990). There is no reason to assume that the sample used in any given American study would be representative of Canadian adolescent mothers in general.

While a significant proportion of American adolescent mothers are Black, the racial composition of the group "Canadian adolescent mothers" has not been demonstrated. Taylor (1990) asserted that a significant number of clients in a Manitoba adolescent mothers' programme are Native. It is problematic to assume, however, that members of different racial groups share common characteristics; that is, we cannot necessarily assume that a population predominantly of young Black American women is either similar to, or different from, a population predominantly of young Native Canadian women.

Furthermore, the United States and Canada, although both North American capitalist democracies, differ in many respects. Of particular relevance to this discussion are the health care and welfare systems. In the United States, many of the adverse health effects originally assumed to result

from pregnancy in adolescence have been demonstrated to be related to the mothers' lack of health care (Chilman, 1980a). Good prenatal care has been shown to mediate poor prenatal and perinatal outcomes such as prematurity and low birth weight. Low birth weight, in turn, has been found to be related to developmental delay and other long-term problems of children. With Canada's system of socialized medicine, then, it may be reasonable to expect a much lower incidence of health-related problems among the families of young Canadian mothers.

The American system of welfare differs as well from the current Canadian system. In the United States, Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) and food stamps are two parts of a complex system which is sub-divided into separate services, each with its own set of qualifying criteria and application procedures (Sorella, 1991). The Canadian system uses a kind of "package deal," with people who need to apply for welfare filling out just one application and, if they meet the acceptance criteria, receiving blanket coverage for all their living needs including food, rent, transportation, and so on (Marcotte, 1992). Canada also has an acceptable system of government-subsidized housing and, in many large cities, government-subsidized daycare.

It would seem that disadvantaged populations in Canada suffer from fewer structural impediments than their American

contemporaries. In fact, American analysts often look longingly to Canadian health and welfare models in their considerations of long-term and systemic solutions to the problems of adolescent mothers (e.g., Rubin, 1988; Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986). Canadian analyses of adolescent motherhood must acknowledge that the situations of Canadian adolescent mothers are, if not better than those of Americans, then certainly different.

A Closer Look: Research from a Working-Class Feminist Perspectives

In the popular imagination, the idea of adolescent motherhood seems to ignite a volatile combination of weighty issues; youth, sexuality, motherhood. When seen through the lens of a dominant worldview, the conditioned response seems to be that of the traditional patriarch--stern, disapproving, threatening dire consequences for non-compliance, and an ever-tightening grip on the reins of control. Rather than inspiring creative solutions, this kind of conceptual crisis seems to attract responses and proposed solutions which are regressively conservative and authoritarian (McDaniel, 1993).

Consideration of the feminist literature demonstrates that any kind of motherhood is political (Rich, 1976). Although status quo mothering may help to perpetuate an oppressive system, "counter-cultural" family arrangements

may present productive and radical alternatives (Ferguson, 1989). Furthermore, mothering has different meanings for women of different cultural and social groups (Collins, 1990). The "good mother" is socially constructed, and criteria for being a "good" mother are often implicit rather than explicit (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). "Not only are the circumstances in which women should give birth prescribed, but the age at which they should give birth and how they should live after birth are also the subjects of political statements" (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991, p. 15). Adolescent mothers are among those constructed to be "bad" mothers (Phoenix, 1991).

Seeing adolescent mothers as a particularly stigmatized sub-group of single mothers (and remembering my earlier findings about their socio-economic backgrounds) forces one to confront important political and ethical questions about societal responses to adolescent motherhood. Should "society" try to prevent teenage pregnancies and repeat teenage pregnancies? Should "society" prevent pregnancies in other groups of women? Which women are entitled to have children and which women are not? By what criteria should these decisions be made? Who should be allowed to make these decisions?

Placing adolescent motherhood in larger context reveals that, although the experiences of adolescent mothers are personal, they are also political, as are analyses of

adolescent motherhood and societal responses to adolescent mothers. Understanding the larger context in which adolescent motherhood is embedded, as well as the methodological and political constraints of existing research, leads to the conclusion that a closer look at the lives of adolescent mothers is needed. Getting a closer look at adolescent motherhood necessitates posing some very fundamental, though not very simple, questions. How do women who are adolescent mothers construct or understand their lives? How do they feel about their situations? What do they identify as their problems? Their triumphs and satisfactions? Their disappointments? What do their experiences mean to them?

In a rare consideration of the perspectives of adolescent mothers, Phoenix (1991) found that adolescent mothers' "insider" perspectives differ markedly from those of "outside" experts.

Both sets of accounts are socially constructed, but it is generally the case that "outsider" perspectives construct motherhood in the teenage years negatively while young women themselves do not generally consider that they are too young to be mothers. Disparities in power between "young mothers" and researchers and other professionals who pronounce on early motherhood are such that outsider constructions impinge on "young

mothers'" lives while insider constructions are rarely recorded. (p. 99)

What is needed, then, is research which accesses the "insider" perspective on adolescent motherhood--that of adolescent mothers themselves.

How can my study best connect with the "insider" knowledge of adolescent mothers? The overwhelming majority of research studies uses quantitative methodologies. Studies often begin with a standard conceptualization of "the problem," and a preconceived and specific research focus (e.g., self-esteem, mothering ability, abuse potential, sex-role values), often using standardized measures to test their hypotheses. In her consideration of sexism in research methods, Eichler (1988) observed that any method may be used in a sexist manner, but she suggested that in certain instances qualitative methods may be more appropriate for feminist researchers "not because (qualitative methods) are especially appropriate for the study of women but because they are particularly appropriate for exploring subjective experiences at the collective level about which little is known" (p. 43).

Weatherley et al. (1986) asserted that adolescent mothers have been unable to influence the direction of research or to have a say in public policies which intimately affect their lives because they are a marginalized group with no powers of advocacy. McDaniel

(1993) insisted as well that the voices of single parents in general are missing from the research and are much needed in the development of a fair and acceptable public policy.

Basic descriptive research about adolescent motherhood which is responsive to issues of gender, race, and social class, and which attends to the perspectives of adolescent mothers themselves, is much needed. It is to a description of just such a study that I now turn.

METHOD

If hundreds of thousands of North American young women are opting to have and keep their children in spite of considerable pressure to give them up and in spite of obvious social disapproval and financial penalty, then surely this experience must hold some meaning which research has so far failed to recognize. Yet research which seeks to explain the meanings of this experience is almost non-existent.

Eisner (1991) observed that meaning is an important aspect of life which is often lost to behaviour-focussed research methods. He explained that

meanings are construed, and the shape they take is due, in part, to the tools people know how to use.

Different disciplines employ different tools. Thus which meanings become salient is a function not only of the qualities 'out there,' but of which tools people bring to them. (p. 36)

Patton (1987) concurred that how we do research largely determines the degree to which we can come to understand the perspectives of the people that we wish to study. He said, "The fact that data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth and detail of qualitative data" (p. 9).

I used qualitative methods to describe experiences of adolescent mothers in depth and detail from the perspective

of the women whose experience it is. My aim was to find out about the lives, experiences, and perspectives of women who had their first child while they were teenagers. Knafl and Howard (1984) suggested that qualitative methods can be used for several different purposes: instrument development, illustration of a larger quantitative study, sensitization, or conceptualization. The present study has as its purpose what Knafl and Howard referred to as "sensitization," or what Cobb and Hagemaster (1987) called "description."

I decided not to focus on young women during their pregnancies, or within a year of the birth of their child, for two reasons. First, the vast majority of existing studies have been carried out during the late pre-natal period and the first few months of the motherhood experience, while very little is known about the mothers' experiences thereafter (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987).

Second, the development of understanding--or insight--takes time, especially when the experience is one which is as large and encompassing as is often the case when one "becomes" a parent. So I wanted to approach women who had some distance from the unique very early days of motherhood--women who had the benefit of a few years' perspective on their experiences.

I am aware that studying a phenomenon in retrospect will affect the accuracy of the details of the women's

accounts. Memory has a way of changing details in order to accommodate the present-tense perspective. However, the purpose of this study was not to have a longitudinal report of the details of the women's lives, but to allow the participants to reflect upon an experience which has spanned several years and to construct their own version of "the big picture" of that experience. Regardless of the precision of their memories, how the women remember their experiences is an accurate indication of their meaning. I did not desire to hear only the verifiable, day-by-day details of experiences, but rather to find out the larger meanings they have taken on over time.

Using the Life Story

How do women who were adolescent mothers explain their experiences? I decided to ask them. While they may, or may not, have larger theoretical perspectives from which to analyze their experiences, I believe that they are best able to understand and to describe the meanings of their experiences. I wanted to access the women's own construction--their story--of what the experience was about. And I wanted to give them the opportunity to bring insight and understanding to their description. I decided that the construction of life stories would provide a structure within which these insights and reflections could be generated.

Using the life story strategy was congruent with my purpose, and allowed me to avoid the pitfall, so prevalent in existing research, of structuring analysis of the lives of adolescent mothers around factors which the researcher has pre-determined to be relevant. Having the women construct their own stories allowed them to determine the relevant themes and to choose their own focus.

The conception of "life storying" which informed this research incorporates ideas from three areas of study; adult education, feminist research, and traditional qualitative research. First, in "lifewriting," the life story has been used by teachers and literacy workers as a teaching technique with various client populations. "Lifewriting, as a generic term for all forms of biographical writing, provides a large umbrella under which writers... can experiment with the expression of their ideas, experiences and perceptions" (Butler & Bentley, 1992, p. 33). Although lifewriting has been useful in working with experienced or "expert" writers, both written and oral life storying have been found to be particularly beneficial in working with less experienced and new learners (Butler & Bentley, 1992).

Second, life histories have been used by feminist researchers. According to Kirby and McKenna (1989), life histories are helpful in obtaining information about

particular events or passages in people's lives, and are especially appropriate for researching "from the margins."

The strength of this method is that subjective data from many previously unexplored areas can be incorporated into what we know about the social world... Traditionally, experiences of those who live on the margins have been neglected and have thus gone unrecorded. In starting from experience, new possibilities for research using the life history approach emerge. (p. 82)

Feminist researchers believe that doing life histories always involves interpretation, and that researchers, to construct valid life histories, must give precedence to the intentions and preferred focus of those whose lives they are describing (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

Third, the life history is a strategy traditionally used by qualitative researchers. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state that life histories may be particularly appropriate when the researcher wants to illuminate subjective human experience since "the life history enables us to know people intimately, to see the world through their eyes, and to enter into their experiences vicariously" (p. 81).

Life storying, as used in my study, synthesizes aspects of the above three traditions. Although paralleling in many ways the life history strategy traditionally used by qualitative researchers (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), my study

shares with feminist research the goal of honouring the unique experiences and perspectives of women (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). It also benefits from attention to, and awareness of, practical details of story construction and writing process more often thought to be the domain of educators.

Selecting Participants

A qualitative researcher uses purposeful sampling, so instead of choosing a sample which is representative of a larger population, I was looking for "information-rich sources" (Patton, 1987, p. 53). I also wanted to find women who were "typical cases" (Patton, 1987, p. 54) in the sense that they shared some of the more important demographic and other characteristics which the literature identified as being related to adolescent motherhood. The logic of using typical case sampling was not to allow me to make generalized statements about the experiences of all members of the group, but "to describe and illustrate to those unfamiliar with (the group) what is typical" (Patton, 1987, p. 54).

Since it has been demonstrated that very few adolescent mothers make use of any organized services (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986), I decided against obtaining references through programmes for adolescent mothers. I hoped that choosing mainly women who had not

been involved with formal interventions would yield descriptions which were more typical of the majority of adolescent mothers. I assumed as well that participation in organized programmes may have affected women's experiences, as well as their perspectives and insights about them.

As it turned out, Felicia, a woman in my study, had lived at a residence for adolescent mothers. The inclusion of Felicia's story is not a problem however; in fact, it provides some interesting contrasts with the other stories. My aim was not to exclude women who had been involved in programmes; it was simply to avoid including only women who had participated in programmes.

Since qualitative researchers have often studied members of "deviant groups" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 7), it seems to be assumed that researchers will not personally know members of the groups they wish to study (e.g., Patton, 1987; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). However, and possibly related to my working-class background, "adolescent motherhood" is not unusual among my acquaintances. Therefore, it was both practical and logical from a research perspective that I contact women who were known to me or to my acquaintances. Participants were found by word of mouth through my personal friendship networks, a sampling method sometimes referred to as "snowballing" (Patton, 1987). Knowing, or knowing of, the women also gave me some confidence that they would be both willing and able to articulate their ideas--another

important characteristic of qualitative research participants (Patton, 1987).

Choosing my sample in this way was also beneficial in helping me access and gain "entré" with participants (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). As Phoenix (1991) pointed out, it is often the case that women who have children in their teenage years do not identify with others in the same situation, often rejecting the label "adolescent mother." In fact, when I first invited the women to join the study, each one--while pleased and excited about participating--said something to the effect that she had never really thought of herself "that way."

Three women--besides myself--participated in the study. My sample was fairly homogeneous; each one of the women identified as White, two were from working-class backgrounds, and one was from a professional-class family. Felicia was twenty-eight years old and became a mother eleven years ago when she was seventeen. Dee was thirty-eight and had her first child twenty years ago when she was eighteen. And Helen was thirty-nine and first became a mother when she was seventeen, twenty-two years ago. Felicia and Helen both have university degrees and are married. Dee completed her grade twelve through upgrading. She has been divorced for several years, and is currently planning to remarry. Felicia has two children, Helen has

three children, and Dee has four children and is currently pregnant with her fifth.

In designing my study, I encountered some questions about issues of race and social class. My literature review showed that race is an important factor in both the experience and politics of motherhood, and also that a significant percentage of American adolescent mothers (with whom most research to date has been conducted) are Black. My analysis was that one cannot necessarily generalize common racial or other characteristics of American populations to Canadians, and that the race and social class of participants are relevant and should be acknowledged in the research.

Early on in my study, I decided to approach only potential participants who were White. This decision was partially influenced by my knowledge that the advisability of White researchers working with non-White participants is currently a subject of controversy (Personal communication, Professor Agnes Grant, September, 1992). Black feminist theorists, in particular, have informed my thinking on the relevance of social class and race. For instance, hooks (1984), Collins (1990), and Joseph (1981) all agree that these two factors are closely related, and that one's social class probably influences experience as much as does one's race. Therefore I do not see my decision about the racial backgrounds of participants as contradictory. I have

acknowledged the racial identities of all participants in this research, including myself, and in my conclusion I explore the relevance of social class to the stories. The extent to which race influences the life stories of adolescent mothers can only be understood when similar work has been done with diverse other groups of women.

Creating the Stories

My formal interactions with participants began with a telephone call in which I asked each woman to participate in the study, and in which I suggested that she might "give some thought to" how she would tell her story. Invariably, this gave rise to questions about what a life story was and how it was begun, so I suggested that before our first meeting she might want to do a chronology or "life line" (Butler & Bentley, 1992; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) or to record her reflections in some other way.

Qualitative life histories are based on "in-depth interviews with one or a small handful" of carefully chosen subjects (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, pp. 83-84). Our interviews followed the format which Patton (1987) calls the "informal conversational interview" (pp. 110-111), what Taylor and Bogdan (1984) refer to as in-depth interviewing for solicited narratives. What this means is that, although I had some very general questions that I wanted to eventually

cover, I let the women's stories emerge in a natural way rather than formally structuring the interaction, as is often the case in research interviews.

Generally, the first interview followed chronologically the events of the woman's life. Dee and I constructed a life line together and then explored in greater depth the events on the line. Both Felicia and Helen brought written outlines which we followed. Felicia's notes were in the form of various questions, events, and issues she saw as relevant, and Helen brought four sequential questions for reflection around which she structured the telling of her story.

The interviews seemed always to begin with a "friendly chat," often about recent happenings with our children, and with the sharing of food which either the woman or I had supplied. This not only functioned to build "rapport" (Patton, 1987), but also allowed us to ease into the story. This was important because each of the women found beginning her story quite daunting; when it came to actually telling the story, each one became very quiet and then said something like, "It's hard to know where to start."

At the first interview, each participant also read my letter of introduction (see Appendix 1), and we discussed issues of confidentiality and signed the letter of consent (see Appendix 2). All of the in-person interviews were tape recorded and I transcribed the tapes directly onto computer

disk. Pseudonyms were used for people and places. The transcriptions were backed up on disk at my home as well as being printed on hard copy.

I kept a research journal (Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), in which I wrote interview notes, but these were quite sparse, consisting mainly of questions or ideas, many of which had already been addressed within the interview. After each interview, I jotted down brief notes containing physical descriptions of the women and our setting, my reflections on how the interview went, and key points of the story and of my developing awareness of its themes. As I will describe below, this journal was also where I recorded brief notes of telephone conversations with the participants.

The research varied from my original proposal, mainly in the length and number of interviews. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) indicated that the precise details of when, how often, and for how long, participants in life history studies are to be interviewed are difficult to determine at the outset. Although I had intended to interview each woman three or four times for approximately an hour each time, it turned out that I met with each of the women only twice. Each of the two interviews lasted between two and two and one-half hours.

Probably, this was related in part to the obvious enthusiasm of the women--they really wanted to tell their

stories. Perhaps as well the women were so keen to share their whole story partly because they had been so well 'prepped' by the telephone conversation. The degree to which the women were welcomed as full participants in the research may also have made them feel more comfortable in changing these and other limits of the study. Furthermore, it seems more practical for women who are mothers to free up a couple of big chunks of time, than to find several smaller ones.

Although quite tiring, the length of the interviews was not a problem for me. In each case, I had the entire afternoon clear, as well as several extra blank tapes available. When I began to become tired, I would usually suggest taking a break for tea or a snack and, when we returned, we would both be refreshed and ready to continue.

The telling of the entire basic story at the first interview also allowed both the woman and myself to reflect on the story before the second interview. Between interviews, I transcribed the tapes of the first interview onto computer disk and printed out the transcript. I sent a copy of her transcript to each woman, and asked her to jot down her reflections, questions, and any changes or additions she wanted to suggest at our next meeting. I asked her as well to think about the story as a story and to consider what it was about and what its title should be.

After transcribing the first interviews, I also read through each transcript from top to bottom, making margin notes, recording questions, and thinking about themes and about the meaning of the stories. Life histories are often presented in the first-person so as to give an authentic sense of the person's "voice" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The actual work of constructing the stories in this way was facilitated by the computer. After saving each transcript, I simply copied the transcriptions onto a separate "stories disk," where I began revising them. I created a rough draft of each story by deleting most of what I said as well as the "ums and ahs," repeated information, and so on, leaving a beginning story in the first-person.

I then read each one of these rough drafts, thinking more specifically about themes and about how the stories would be structured and presented, and once again making margin notes. I also started forming a synthesis of important features of the stories which I later used to develop my conclusion. In the case of both Felicia and Helen, I had a story title in mind by this point. I read and revised these rough drafts again, and also wrote down some tentative questions and comments about the stories before telephoning the women to arrange for the second interview.

Once again, the telephone calls turned into fairly lengthy conversations since the women had also been giving

their stories considerable thought and were keen to share insights and observations with me. And once again, I decided not to discourage this process, instead responding naturally and chatting about their observations as well as sharing some of my own thoughts. By this time, I had taken to having pen and journal in hand when dialling the women's numbers and I jotted down the main ideas that were covered. Some of these ideas influenced the directions or emphasis of the stories, and often they also helped to direct and inform my developing analyses and conclusions. I estimate these telephone conversations to have averaged one and one-half hours per woman.

Following these conversations, and before the second interviews, I typed up a handout (see Appendix 3) which I gave to each of the women at the second interview. This handout consisted of specific questions for each woman, general questions which I asked all of them, and a few pages of notes on what I saw as the common themes of the stories. In the general questions, I was mostly trying to flesh out their ideas about reproductive choice and their experiences with, and thinking on, the factors (birth control, abortion, adoption, and so on) which were of such interest in the literature on adolescent motherhood. Each of the questions was not addressed by all of the participants--sometimes they had already been covered sufficiently in the first interview.

I decided to do these handouts because I felt that I had a formal agenda for the second meeting in the sense that there was a more specific direction that I wanted to take. I wanted this difference clearly reflected to the women. I also wanted my forming synthesis and analysis to be clearly and directly stated so that their response to it would be an informed one.

The second interviews began with the women's comments on the transcripts and other reflections on the stories, as well as any other topics, stories, or details they wanted to provide. This was followed by consideration of my questions, first the specific ones and then the general ones. I gave the questions handout to each woman after her comments so that she could address the questions in whatever order she chose. One of my questions was whether there were any special names she wanted used, either for herself or for others in her story. Although all the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, I have used the names specified by the women if they had any preference. During the break, I gave each woman the handout on my analysis so that she could read it carefully. Often her reading of the analysis section provoked responses of surprise and pleasure that other women had experiences that were in some ways similar to hers. Each of the women also responded to this reading with comments about the importance of these findings. As Helen said, "Doing this research has also been one of those

validating experiences for me, that tells me I wasn't alone in this, I wasn't doing it wrong."

One of the final questions I addressed with the women was what I referred to as "the bottom line question"--what is your story about? What did this experience mean to you? I used the women's responses to this question to help me in finishing off the stories, to tell me where to place emphasis, and to help me decide on a title. Both Felicia and Helen answered this question essentially by stating or paraphrasing a title that I already had in mind. Felicia answered that her story was about "doing the right thing." (Her full response to the question appears as the last several paragraphs of her story.) Helen said that her story was about being precocious, being independent, and doing everything in her life at top speed. As you will read presently, this idea is encapsulated in the title of Helen's story, "Cruisin' for Home on #1."

Dee's response to the bottom line question was also very important. Although I felt in working with the first transcript that I understood the events in Dee's life, and although I had played with some possible titles, I had a sense right up to the second interview that I didn't really know what her story was about. After some silent reflection, Dee said that her story was about surviving. (Dee's full response also finishes off her story.) So "Just

Mostly Surviving" became the title of Dee's story, and I emphasized that theme in my final development of the story.

After the second interviews, I transcribed the tapes onto computer disk and made a second interview file. Once again after saving all the originals, I appended the second interview data to the drafts of the stories. I then deleted some of the information and incorporated some of it into the body of the stories. I printed out the evolving stories, edited, reprinted, revised, and eventually came up with a finished story.

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), the life history should be "marked by minimal interpretation and conceptualization" (p. 124). Life history researchers affect the construction of participants' stories in the sense that they present and order information according to what they think is important, but the researcher's primary task is to let participants tell their own story. In this study, I chose to interpret my primary role beyond data collection as that of editor, focussing mainly on understanding the stories from the women's points-of-view, and then simply making their stories as cohesive and accessible as possible.

Some Quiet Reflections on Process

As my literature review showed, adolescent mothers are a stigmatized group about whose true experiences and

perspectives little is known. Like other stigmatized and marginalized groups, adolescent mothers have little power and few opportunities to have their voices heard (Weatherley, Perlman, Levine & Klerman, 1986). An assumption of mine in doing this research is that adolescent mothers as a group will benefit from the knowledge generated by my work. In this sense, I felt that my study was ethical.

I was also concerned about the effects my research would have on the women who participated. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) commented that people asked to participate in life story research often feel pleased and honoured by the request. I have seen, while doing this research, how important having a say in meaning-making is to my study's participants, and also how much validation comes from sharing common experiences. Helen, for instance, used her participation in this research as a focal point for further communication and discussion with family members. She passed her transcripts around to her children and her parents. In fact, at one point Helen's oldest daughter, Belle, asked her to ask me if I wanted to interview her, since she felt that she also had important perspectives to offer. (I responded that although it might not work out for this study, I would like to get together with Belle at another time and hear what she has to say).

I interpret such shows of "real" interest in the women's lives beyond the research as part of my responsibility in this work. Often, researchers' focus on ethical conduct is limited to gaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. However, given the importance of making connections as personal validation in these women's stories, I decided to facilitate their connecting, if desired, with each other. Each of the women agreed to having a copy of her story shared with all the other participants. I also suggested the possibility of getting all four of us together for brunch at some time in the future, and everyone is enthusiastic. We have all agreed not to talk about other participants beyond this meeting.

Making these connections is a "nice" way to finish off a project whose work has been the focus of the last several years of my life, but I feel that it is also ethical. On many levels, the women have put themselves and their lives into this research. Facilitating their meeting with each other is meant as, and I believe is interpreted as, a show of reciprocity and respect, and proof that I was "really" listening.

Qualitative research involves participants to varying degrees (Patton, 1990). Some advise researchers to be "honest, but vague" when explaining their studies to potential participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Others suggest that the researcher is an equal with "other

participants" in the study (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). In designing my research, I invited extensive participant involvement, from telling the women frankly what my aims were, to giving them a great deal of freedom in the construction of their stories, to sharing my developing analysis with them and revising it according to their feedback.

Some of these decisions were practical since it was a life story study, but they also have implications for the validity of the study. Kirby and McKenna (1989) said that feminist research can be called valid if the participants recognize themselves in the data, and others have pointed out the connection between the quality of interactions with participants and the validity of qualitative studies (Eichler, 1988; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). By these measures, this study has validity. The fact of my strong sense of responsibility to the women to render their stories both accurately and beautifully was an ethical consideration for me, and yet it also contributes to the confidence in the study's findings.

This point became clear to me in my final interview with Felicia. When mentioning that she had been sexually abused as a child, Felicia stated that her husband Tony had asked her if she was sure she trusted me enough to talk about "that." She responded with, "If I didn't trust her to hear 'that,' I wouldn't be telling her anything. I wouldn't

have agreed to be in the study." This anecdote illustrates the connection which I believe existed between my honesty with participants and the quality of the information I was able to obtain.

Another assurance of the study's validity relates to the quality of my own participation in the study. Eisner (1991) emphasized the importance of the researcher as instrument in qualitative research. Although my fundamental belief in constructing the stories was that the women knew the stories and my job was to help them access and organize that knowledge, my role in many ways was not a passive one. During the interviews, and especially after having a basic idea of the "plot" of the stories, I would at times ask questions, re-focus, or even state my own take on certain aspects of the women's experiences.

As Eisner (1991) said, the key to success in such encounters often is the researcher's ability to trust her or his capabilities. In this work, I balanced this trust in my abilities, as well as in my motivations, with what I would call a habit of tentativeness. In other words, I trusted myself to interact effectively and ethically with the women, but I also tried consistently to be aware of why I was acting as I was. My internal criteria for a good reason to say something was that it would help to get at the truth of the women's experiences.

STORIES

Although the stories are in the first-person, not everything that you will read is exactly as originally stated. The three stories found in the next one hundred and twenty pages are distilled from approximately four hundred double-spaced typed pages of transcripts representing twenty-one hours of interviews. However, a great deal of each of the written stories is in the woman's original words. Obviously, I removed my own dialogue and the women's superfluous comments and expressions. But in the interests of brevity and clarity, I also at times substituted my own words or a summary of the topic as the woman had rendered it.

For example, Felicia made specific reference to virtually all of her ten brothers and sisters by name during the early parts of our interviews, as well as to cousins who figured prominently in her childhood memories. In Felicia's story below, I made an effort to make reference to her siblings only when necessary, and only one at a time. I also tied each one of the siblings' names to an incident or quality, so that the reader would be able to follow. My intention was not to change the feeling or the truth of Felicia's story or her experience, but instead to make it easier to understand.

It happens that the stories are ordered by the length of time the women have been mothers. Felicia, whose story

appears first, had her first child most recently of the three women, Dee has been a mother for a longer period, and Helen for the longest. I placed the stories in this order partly to accentuate theme development, since some themes are established in one story and then are better defined, picked up, or turned around in others.

This ordering also accentuates the development of insight over time. As a mother of pre-teen children, Felicia brings great perceptiveness to her story. Helen's vantage point now that her children have left home, however, allows her to flesh out the 'big picture,' placing her mothering experience in the larger context of her life. Dee's account is in some ways more straightforward. Dee is focussed more on present events, perhaps at least partly because she is still in the process of having children, and still in the process, as well, of ensuring their survival. Dee's understanding of events also has been influenced by counsellors and other professionals.

I'd like you to meet Felicia.

Felicia is a striking woman, big-boned, dark haired, and impeccably coiffed. Today, she is clothed in contrasts. Black jockey pants, a cream-coloured silk blouse with dark complex-patterned vest, and low heels. Her hair--carefully and closely cropped--looks elegant. Her eyes are huge, dark, and soft, yet her gaze is direct and unflinching.

Felicia works at a daycare. She is twenty-eight years old, married for nine years to Tony, a carpenter. They have two children, aged eleven and eight. With her easy-going manner, one can imagine Felicia as being good with children. She did well at university, and her brightness comes through in the high degree of organization of her thoughts, and in her insights. Felicia has a sense of humour, and sometimes rolled her eyes and giggled during our meetings, but there were times too of serious reflection and soul-searching.

Some other time, Felicia might tell you animatedly about a professor who once advised her that, if she ever wanted to get anywhere in the world, she was going to have to overcome her "low-class" way of expressing herself. And she would tell you quite proudly how she held her head up and told that guy right off. Hmph! As you got to know Felicia better, you would find her fiesty response not at all hard to imagine, and you might at times replay this scene in your mind, just for enjoyment.

Yet maybe you will also smile to yourself as you continue to listen to Felicia's story, noticing the unique and creative vernacular she sometimes prefers. There is something decidedly "a little bit country" about her. Something refreshingly forthright in her manner. Something that looks, brightly and unblinking, into your eyes, seeming to say, "This is me. Take it or leave it."

Today, Felicia sits relaxed yet alert on the couch, backed by a red and gold checkered throw. Wind playfully tosses the autumn trees outside the window. Felicia gazes calmly into a big, black mug of steaming tea, her hands encircling it almost lovingly in her lap. And she begins to speak.

Felicia's Story: Doing the Right Thing

So you just want me to talk about me, huh? Well you can't really understand me without knowing about my childhood. You have to know about my family and where I came from before you can understand anything about my life.

So. I'm the youngest of ELEVEN children! And I do consider that very important. The sibling next to me was a boy and there were several years between him and my next youngest sister, Diane. The boys would always play together and my sisters would always be off doing their teenager-type things, and I would never have anybody to play with. Besides that, we lived on a farm twenty miles from town so there weren't any other children nearby. Normally, when people think of a family of eleven children, they think all these happy little children playing together. But I was really quite lonely as a child.

And then, although we have such an awful lot of family, extended family, I didn't really know them. On my dad's side, there were several aunts and uncles living near us in

Saskatchewan but by the time I was born, we didn't really see much of them. My mom came from a big family too, ten kids, out in Ontario, but then when she married my dad, he moved her to the farm. So she was the only one who lived far away from her brothers and sisters. And I never knew them either, only met them once or twice on visits.

Although I must say my mom talked about her brothers and sisters and her mom and dad, constantly. My mom is really quite a storyteller. When I was little, I remember, lots of times it was just my mom and me at home together. And she just told so many stories about her family that I felt I knew them too. I think she told so many stories because she just missed them so much that she wanted to hold onto that past. But that really made me grow up with such a strong sense of the importance of your brothers and sisters, and the importance of your family. I really do feel that, with a different mother, we could have been a very apart family, and I feel that we were kept together because of her.

Another important thing about my family is, we never, never, scream or hollar or yell or fight. Never. Like, so extremely seldom. My mom always said that since she knew what it was like to be spanked by her dad, she could never do that to her kids. She could never make them feel that way. And my dad always said, "Well, in the English family--that's everything I've ever known--it was always the mother

that spanked the kids, it would never be the dad." So neither one of them would spank us.

A lot of people have said to me, "Well you were just totally undisciplined." I wasn't. My father could just give us a look of disapproval and we would cringe. That look still has power over me today. And when I think about the stories my mom has told about her family, I think, "Well they certainly were much more of the scream-yell-get it out in the open-type family." But my dad's family never showed emotion. So my mom never really did either.

Well I think my mom was so intimidated too, when she first met my dad's family. Like she moved so far away, all by herself. Married to this man. Then he says, "Come out and meet my parents. Oh, by the way, I have to go back to work so you just go and live with them for awhile and I'll be back in a few weeks." Which is what my dad did! Well now, I love both of my parents greatly, but sometimes I think, how could he possibly have done that to her? And how could she have just put up with it?

So there she was, all on her own with his parents, for I guess about a year until my dad came back. And my grandparents continued living at the farm where my parents live now, for quite a few years; I guess the first four or five years that they were married. When my mom first moved in, they had a live-in housekeeper. Which I think was also a big intimidation for my mom. She came from a very,

basically, poverty-type life. And she moved in with my grandparents, who I wouldn't say were rich, but were much richer than she was. They were your typical English people, who would not have come from a poverty family in England.

But they had all the English little mannerisms, and silly stuff. Like I can remember my grandmother teaching me how to drink tea. Properly. I mean like, I remember my grandmother sitting me down and saying, "You always have your teacozy on your teapot. You pour in your water and put your cover on right away. You must have your teapot covered so that tea is hot. And you keep your pinky up when you drink. You do this and you do that..." I mean at the time, she did it in a very pleasant way--it was almost funny. And yet, I wouldn't have gone to her house and drank tea wrong!

She wasn't a mean person but she had standards. And she very much liked my mom. She liked her and yet she never really respected her. She could never be quite good enough, you know, because she didn't come from the right upbringing. My mom said that when she first moved in, Grandmother Bouvier looked her up and down. And it was, "Well I don't know. She looks a bit too skinny and a bit too scrawny but, we'll fatten her up a little bit." She'll do, sort of thing.

And yet, my mom said that by the time she'd lived there a year, she's sure that my grandmother Bouvier had told her every secret and every thing about her that she could

possibly imagine. She said they would just sit and talk together for hours and hours and hours. One of my grandmother's sons, my Uncle Herbie, never did get married, he lived with my mom and dad for his entire adult life. And the others lived farther away. So it was my mom and my grandmother all the time. And I think my mom missed her own mother so much, that it was very comforting to have another older lady around to talk to.

So yeh, my mother was quite close to my grandmother Bouvier. And us as kids were as well. My grandparents were fairly English, but it just made them a little different. I think they were a very positive part of my life when I was younger. And we missed them when they were gone.

Another important thing about me is that I never felt that my siblings understood me. I've thought about this alot, and thought, is that all in my mind? But I don't think so. Like I can think of some definite times when we were not connecting at all. For instance, my oldest brother Bud. He's so male chauvinistic. He is out of date, and out of touch. I love him but... I don't want to spend a lot of time with him. Lots of times, when I'm with them I think, "We are different, this family and me." But then I also think we're a close family. I often go over to Liz's on a Sunday, or to Harry's--the ones who live in my same city. And we still all get together every year, one or two times. Every single one of us. Even I think just for a large

family to want to actually get everybody together, is probably a sign that we are fairly close.

There was also a strong belief in education in my family. A lot of people from big families who live on farms don't necessarily finish school, but we always did have that really strong sense of wanting to finish school. Out of all the kids in my family, everyone of us has finished high school. One brother and one sister have had to go back in order to do it, but we all have. And now there are three of us, including me, who have gone to college or university. I believe we got that from my mom and dad.

Going to school in a small town like Sunnyside, you have the same kids right from kindergarten to grade twelve. Actually, I'd say about half the class at least that I was in kindergarten with, I graduated with. That's something that I really think is different from in the city. But after graduation, I kind of went to Winnipeg and most of them went to Regina. If I had gone to Regina like I should have, I would have continued to see them. But as it is, I really never see most of those people anymore. Not that I really mind. Honestly, with most of them, I can't imagine what we ever had in common.

And I say "like I should have" because when you live in our corner of Saskatchewan, that's where everybody goes. To college in Regina. Or almost everybody. A few people, you know like the people who wanted to be doctors or something

like that, would go to Manitoba or Southern Ontario to university. But I don't think I ever even knew anybody personally who went to university, and I'd always thought that I would go to Regina like everybody else.

I always said that I was not going to have any children, I was just going to look after other people's children. I was planning on being a daycare worker. That's what I put in our high school year book in grade eleven-- when my life was all plain and normal and simple! That I was going to be a daycare worker and that I was going to go to college in Regina. Mm hm.

Some of my friends really thought of me as being rich, because I could go into the stores and pick out a new pair of runners or whatever and my father would never say no to me. But we certainly weren't rich. In fact I know oldest sister Liz was really embarrassed about the farm. I was never embarrassed by it, but it was also never a sense of pride about it. It was "the farm". I didn't mind my friends coming over. Of course a lot of people lived on farms, it wasn't just that it was a farm, but our farm. Liz was very embarrassed that, well, let's just say my mother wasn't the world's greatest housekeeper.

It wasn't that she was a bad housekeeper. I've said to Liz, "You know if you had eleven little kids... and a huge old house. And a husband who did absolutely nothing, and another man living in the house that did absolutely

nothing..." Like my uncle and my dad would walk into the house with manure dripping off their boots and it wouldn't even occur to them to stop and take them off.

And my mom's so easy-going you know. So she just... she was busy with the kids anyway, taking care of us, teaching us things, telling us stories. The housework just wasn't that important. The house was never spotless. And it still isn't. My parents are not materialistic, at all. Which I see as being almost a flaw. Like I wouldn't want them to be really materialistic, but they're not at all materialistic. They don't care at all about owning things.

For instance, last year I went to the farm in the middle of summer. And we always bring our own milk and stuff, so I said, "Well I'm going to put my milk in the fridge." And my mom said, "Oh well. I guess so, but close it fast."

And I'm like, "Why?"

"Oh, well the fridge hasn't been working for about a week now. We ordered one from the Sears catalogue, it just takes a few weeks to get it in."

"Mom!" I said, "Mom. When a fridge stops working, you buy a new one. Plain and simple." And I said to them, "You know, we're sitting on the same couch that us kids gave you as a Christmas present fifteen years ago. Maybe you should splurg and buy a new one! You have money in your savings account--maybe buy something, mom!"

As a teenager, I wasn't particularly popular but I wasn't a nerd either. Still, I always felt that there was nothing special about me. And I'd wish things like, that I would break my leg or something, just so that I would have something special about me. And I always felt that I didn't get enough attention. I never felt that I was really noticed. I was always a very good student but I wasn't... outstanding. Thinking about it now, I think that, marks-wise, I was outstanding. But yet I never felt that I stood out. I think my parents did the best they could. But just being the eleventh child... Now my brothers and sisters tell me I was so incredibly spoiled! But I don't remember it that way.

I led a very sheltered life. I wasn't around criminals, I wasn't around drugs. I've never smoked, I've never done drugs, at all actually. I've never even tried marijuana or anything. I tried one cigarette once. Half of my brothers and sisters smoked but maybe I sheltered myself from it. I've always considered myself to be rather naive almost.

I guess that's why I really just never thought I would get pregnant. Teenagers say that and people say, "Well what a stupid thing to say." Well really! I can't relate to it now at all. But at the time, I just never thought I would get pregnant. It wouldn't happen to me. There was nothing special about me, there was nothing that stood out.

I remember I met Tony once--this was two or three years before we actually started going out and then got married. And I remember him and me and my friend Laurie were sitting in a restaurant. And him, being from Winnipeg, and being much more worldly than I would have been, was saying to Laurie, "Well, you've got to be using protection if you're going to be sexually active." But it very quickly turned to me being sexually active and what kind of protection was I using? And I remember just thinking, "How dare you! even insinuate that I would possibly get pregnant." I thought, "Of course I won't get pregnant!" I don't know why I wouldn't have but...

I think about it now and I think, Well why would I have thought that? Just because I never planned on having kids? I never really connected it with this, but like I said I've always wanted to do something that would make me stand out, something special. I never connected my being pregnant to being that thing. But... I also think now that was part of it. I just thought that it doesn't happen to normal, regular, unspecial people. "You have to be either one of these SLUTS... that is out there sleeping with everyone, doing all of these horrible things. Or... something, you know it can't be just me, I'm just plain and simple me." So it couldn't ever happen to me. Or at least that's what I thought.

And I also think of that town. Teen pregnancy is incredibly high in that town, but I don't think I really ever knew anybody personally that had gotten pregnant as a teenager. Unless they did and left and I just never heard of them.

Something else that's important in all this is, when I was four or five years old, I was molested by someone. This was somebody who I spent time with, I'm not positive of who it is. But he was going to babysit me, he was carrying me on his shoulders, and he had a book, we were going to go and read a story in the barn. It's a really big old barn which was full of square bails, and we went to the very top of the bails, which wouldn't have been an unusual place for us to really go. And he did definitely sexually assault me. I have no idea how we got out of the barn. I can remember, like vivid details up to a point, and then I can't remember anything.

I was also molested several times as a young teenager, I would have been ten or twelve the second time. This was like boyfriends of my older sisters, sort of thing. Like it was somebody that I had great respect for, somebody that I would have really wanted to like me--they seemed so cool, so worldly. And then my best friend's father also tried to rape me one night. But I always did hate him, so in a way I think that didn't really do as much damage. But I remember very much feeling as a young child, especially as a

teenager, that if someone loves you they're going to want to sleep with you. And I do feel that that had a big part to play in what happened to me.

I haven't gone out with a lot of people, maybe three or four people, other than Tony. And obviously Jake, the guy that got me pregnant. But I really, really believed that if I was going to have a good relationship with any kind of person, that I was going to have to sleep with them. It wasn't so much that I wanted to sleep with them, I just really thought you have to.

So when I was fifteen I met Jake, who I now know was actually a real jerk in a lot of ways. But in other ways, he did make me feel special, which was something that I was always looking for. He was older, he was twenty-three then. And when you were with him, you were so obviously with him. Like he just made it so obvious to everyone around, you were with him. And I just, I thought for sure I was in love with him and I would marry him someday. And I just knew that I had to sleep with him because I wanted to keep going out with him. I had to sleep with him and I wouldn't get pregnant--it was just perfectly clear in my mind. So that's what I did, I slept with him. It was just the not-getting-pregnant part that didn't quite work out...

And it basically was good sex with Jake. He was older. He did know what he was doing. I couldn't ever say that he was bad in bed, he definitely was not. And I actually

thought I was getting pretty good at it too. And I could keep having sex with him so that he would stay with me. I was probably right, when I think about it now, that if I hadn't had sex with him, he wouldn't have gone out with me anymore. That may not have been such a bad thing, but at the time I thought it would have been a horrible thing.

So I was sleeping with Jake on and off, believing I wouldn't get pregnant, not using any birth control, and I ended up getting pregnant. I didn't know I was pregnant at first because I actually still had a period for a couple of months. Not a heavy one but a small period. Sometimes I'd be getting worried about it because I was really, really sick. I had morning sickness all day, every day. So I had gone to a few doctors in Sunnyside, and they told me that I had Mononucleosis and gave me a prescription for penicillin. But it didn't help so I went back and they gave me a stronger prescription, which also didn't help.

So I came to Winnipeg to visit Liz for the weekend and I went to see a doctor here. I was in his office like thirty seconds and he said, "Well are you pregnant?"

And I said, "No! Of course not! You mean... Me!" How could I be pregnant?

But it was very obvious to him and in a very quick examination he said, "Well we'll do a pregnancy test but I really think you should start considering that you're pregnant. And not just a month or two, obviously you're

three or four months pregnant." And he phoned me back at Liz's and he said, "Well, you are pregnant. Are you going to tell your sister or your parents?"

And I said, "Well of course I'm going to tell them I'm pregnant." But I didn't. I had found out, I guess about the beginning of summer. Then I went back home and I remember trying to tell them. I even remember going into my mom's bedroom one night, and we were laughing and laughing about something. And I said to my mom, "Well, I guess I'm just pregnant!" And my mom was laughing, and I said it a couple of times, and I kept laughing and she kept laughing too. So it didn't work. I guess a teenage daughter can just not tell her mother she's pregnant while laughing about it!

By that time, Jake had broken up with me. I'm not sure if he broke up with me just because we broke up, or if there were some rumours going on around the town that I was pregnant. Rumours didn't really mean anything because in that town, there was constantly rumours. There was rumours for, like a year, that I was pregnant, before I got pregnant. So nobody really took them seriously, but I'm not sure if he broke up with me because he had heard these rumours and he was worried about it. Or... what.

Actually I went to a dance, and he was there with another person and he didn't talk to me all night. Which, he went out with other people periodically while we were

dating. But not in that town, because that would be very embarrassing to me. We had had fights previously because he thought that I wasn't acting like we were serious. But I was kind of always under the impression that I was the one who always wanted to get serious, not him. So the night that he brought someone else to the dance, he danced with her to that song, "I've Been Waiting for a Girl Like You." That had always been our song. So that's when it was over with me and Jake.

So then after the trip to Winnipeg, I phoned him, and told him that I was pregnant. And he said on the phone, "Well, I don't think it's mine... I don't think I'm the father."

And I was just so shocked, that he would say that. And so I said, "Well, I didn't say it was yours, I'm just telling you that I'm pregnant."

And he said, "Well, I don't think I'm ready to get married."

And I said, "Okay fine," and hung up.

So actually about two days before school was going to start, my grade twelve year, I was thinking, "Well, what am I going to do?" I was about five or six months I would say. It was starting to show--not an awful lot, but starting.

Anyway, the doctor in Winnipeg had phoned Liz, because he was very concerned. He thought that if I'd been having a period, I might be having complications. So eventually,

since he hadn't heard from me, he phoned Liz and ended up telling her I was pregnant. So Liz phoned me and said, "Felicia, I think you should come to the city."

And I said, "Well, how could I come to the city, like two days before school starts?"

And she said, "Well, I think we need to discuss what you're going to do with the rest of your life..."

And it was like, Okay, so obviously, she knows, and I can go to the city. And she just told dad that I had to come for a visit. And I went to the city and she actually ended up phoning my mom and dad and telling them that I was pregnant on the phone, I never did tell them. Any time that they had to be consulted for a decision, Liz phoned, not me. I'm not even really sure why. Because I had a pretty good relationship with my parents, I knew they weren't going to blow up or anything like that. And yet, it would have been... that look. They would have been so disappointed. So, I just didn't talk to them for awhile. And Liz just took over.

When I arrived in Winnipeg, Liz and I talked about what I should do, and she said there was a home for unwed mothers and I could continue going to school or do whatever I wanted. And she said, "Do you want to go back and live on the farm?" And I said no, because I wasn't impressed with the doctors there and I just didn't think I could do that.

So I lived at the Rez until just before Christmas. And Pearl was born in late November.

And when I was staying at the Rez, I thought about Jake a lot. And I thought, I don't want to marry him, I don't want to be marrying somebody who's going out with other people. I also thought he would be a terrible parent, which had never mattered to me when I had never planned on having kids. But I had babysat with his nieces and I thought he was just terrible with them, he was very mean and immature. So I thought, Well I couldn't marry him and then let him be a father and be mean to my child, I couldn't do that. I thought he was great when I was never going to have kids, but then when I was definitely going to have a kid, it changed everything. I told all my friends that they weren't allowed to tell him where I was staying. Although he did apparently ask, I don't think he looked awfully hard.

Right from the beginning I had said that I was going to give this baby up for adoption. I had my plans; I was going to go to college, work in a daycare, maybe travel or something, have a life. I had things to do. It was plain and simple and going to be easy. Of course I knew it wouldn't really be easy, but I thought it would be easier than it actually was.

The thing was, I just couldn't give her up for adoption. I still have a tremendous amount of respect for people who do give their children up for adoption. Because

I honestly think that I was doing that for her sake--giving her up. I knew it would make everything easier for me. But I also really thought that it was best for her.

I was sixteen when I got pregnant, I was seventeen when I had her. I really thought, What kind of life can I give this baby? I can't support it--I can't. I don't know how to be a good parent. I really, really thought that giving her up for adoption would be... the nicest thing to do for her. She can have parents with money, parents that would love her and make her feel special. Even to this day, when something goes wrong, I think, Why did I mess up this kid's life and keep her? So I have a lot of respect for people who do give them up. But after she was born, I just couldn't, couldn't do it.

And I really thought that all of my family wanted me to give her up. Except for my parents, I knew they didn't. My mom said, "I'm very upset about this. I don't know how I can stand knowing that I have a grandchild out there and not knowing how it's being treated." But they were also very much, "If that's really what you want, we'll support you in whatever decision you make."

But everyone else seemed to want me to give the baby up. All my brothers and sisters seemed to want me to give it up, although most of them never actually said so. But my brother Harry did. This one night, him and his wife Jan picked me up from the Rez and took me over to their house

for dinner. And after dinner, they sat me down and said how, if I do keep this baby, that's all I'll ever do, is have baby after baby after baby, and in five years I'll have five babies, and just be living on Welfare, and never make anything out of my life. And I was just horrified and even more resolved, "I can never keep this baby!"

So I thought, "Okay! No problem! I'm getting rid of this baby!" And it wasn't that I was "getting rid of" it, I really did think it was doing the best for her. And obviously, I didn't want to end up like that either.

And the counsellors at the Rez were very pro-adoption. They were probably very pro-abortion too, but I was obviously too late for something like that. They said that it's completely your decision. And yet, they made it so clear that I was doing the right thing in giving the baby up. They actually said these exact words to me, quite often; "It's a very mature decision that you're making." Well of course I want to be mature, I'm having a baby. I want to be exceptionally mature. And the Rez staff also kind of confirmed the belief that if you do have your baby and keep your baby, then you're going to live for the rest of your life on Welfare. You're never going to do anything, you're not going to go back to school. So I really felt that I had to make that decision. But ultimately I didn't decide that.

Right after I moved to the Rez, my friend Laurie came to the city and she said, "Well what're we doing?"

And I said, "Nothing. I'm pregnant! We're sitting here all night."

And she said, "Well remember that guy Tony that we used to know? Let's phone him and see if he'll come and pick us up."

And I was like, "Oh yeh, embarrass the hell out of me now. A guy that I went out with a few years ago and now I'm pregnant and you want to phone him up. Okay, fine!" thinking that she was going to go out with him.

So she phoned him and said, "We'll meet you at the Sals," and we walked to the Salisbury House. And he came and picked us up and he was a little shocked because by now I was... obviously pregnant. And she sat beside him, but he basically I guess felt sorry for me. And so he phoned me up the next day and said, "What are you doing?" and we went for a drive or something. And then he phoned me up again the next day and he phoned again a few more times and we just became friends, like very good friends.

Actually, I spent a lot of time talking to Tony. I even talked to him about how hard it was to give the baby up. I think he was really the first person I actually talked to honestly. Like I could talk to the counsellors at the Rez but I just basically said what I knew they wanted to hear. But I actually just talked to Tony, said what I was

thinking and feeling and so forth. I guess maybe because he had been so honest with me when I first met him and had talked about birth control, I found then later that I could talk to him about whatever I wanted. And he was constantly rescuing me from the Rez.

I really needed rescuing, too. I didn't fit in at the Rez at all. And this is a terrible thing to say, but the other girls all seemed to be really screwed up people, and I wasn't. Like they had all been beaten and, you know they had broken family lives and lived in foster homes and stuff like that. So I really didn't fit in. I also really had these feelings of being a bad person and being punished, because of the way things were at the Rez. I mean, it was very very different. You had to be in by a certain time and you had to do your breakfast line-up stuff and you had to do your jobs, and there were all these rules. It was like I almost thought, "Okay, I'm in prison now."

I was very lucky that I had a wonderful social worker though. An absolutely fantastic social worker, who probably could have used stuff against me, and did all the little mind games and stuff that the other girls were talking about. But she was very young and had just graduated so she was new at this, and just became my friend. And let me tell her the things that I wanted to tell her and didn't judge me. So it turned out okay.

And then Tony and I became friends and he was always under the impression that I wouldn't be keeping this baby. Tony comes from a very conservative, traditional-type family. And I really thought that if I kept this baby, then there was no way I could be with Tony. And I leaned on Tony so much. It was, "Get me out of here for a little while. I don't understand the people, and I don't understand the system, and it's very strange." It was a wonderful place in a lot of ways, but it was very very strange for me.

And then Pearl was born. They all must have known I was giving her up for adoption, because I never saw her, I never held her. I asked, "Where's the baby?" And a nurse was on her way out of the room with her. And I said, "Well can I see her or can I touch her or something?" And she walked over and stood out of reach and just sort of tilted the head down for a second. And all I seen was this really lots of dark hair. And I still, I can see that dark hair on the top of her head. But that was all I seen. And I sort of reached out to her but right away, the nurse lifted her up and marched her out of the room. And I also had to ask if it was a boy or a girl. Nobody shared that information.

And that's all I remember, seeing the top of her head and her really dark hair. And then I got put in my room. Oh and they gave me demerol, which I've since found out I really can't take at all, and that was an absolutely horrendous experience. And they gave it to me much too late

and by the time it kicked in she was already born and I was laying there in the recovery room.

Oh and you know when you get up that first time after the baby, and you have that rush of blood and so forth? Nobody ever warned me about things like that. And I was just terrified. I stood up, and all of a sudden I had this big gush of blood and I thought, "Oh my god I'm dying." And then, "I've got to get this mess cleaned up before anybody sees it." So I went to the bathroom and by the time I came back out of the bathroom, the nurse had already cleaned it up. But I was just horrified, and nobody had even warned me that this was going to happen. I mentioned it to the doctor later and he said that was to be expected. And I'm like, "You should have told me about those expectations before."

There's a card that they give you, with your last name written on it, so you can go and see the baby in the nursery. And I guess one day when I was sleeping someone came in and put the card, with Bouvier written on it, in the drawer and went out. I didn't even know they'd put it in there. It wasn't in there before, and then when I'd got up, I looked in the drawer and saw it. But nobody ever brought the baby to the room of course.

So I had this card in the drawer and Harry came up to visit me. And he said to me, "Can I go see the baby?" And I said, "Yeh!" Like I was just thrilled that somebody finally wanted to go see this poor little baby. So I gave

him the card and he went to see it by himself and he came back. And I said, "Well... what does she look like, the little baby?" And he said she was a very cute little baby. And that was about all he said, and then changed the subject right away.

And that's another thing. They tend to get you out of the hospital as quick as they can, because they don't want you in the same hospital as those babies. They want to get you away from them. The day I was supposed to leave was just the day after she was born, when normally they were keeping new mothers for three days. And they had the babies at one end of the hall, and then it was all the way down the other end of the hall and I was the last door, almost off the maternity level altogether. So it would have been a really long walk. But that morning after my shower, I was all ready to go and I finally took the card and I walked all the way down there and held the card up to the window. And they did bring the baby over. And I looked at her. And then I left the hospital. And didn't write my name on anything.

Well first I went back to the Rez. But they put me downstairs with the other pregnant mothers. Normally, you get moved to the main floor but that's where the mothers had the babies. So they put me down the stairs. And some of the other girls said, "Well this is ridiculous, she has to go up and down these stairs, she can't do that. She just had a

baby." But they never did move me. They left me downstairs. 'Cause they didn't want me near those babies at all.

After she was born, I thought, "Well, I don't want to give her up for adoption. Maybe if I just took her and moved to a completely different town and didn't tell anybody who I was." But I don't think I ever really knew that I was allowed to change my mind. I wasn't allowed to change my decision, it was a good decision, I had made it, and I better just stick with it. I was doing it for the right reasons so I had to just do it. And then I became very very upset about the decision I'd made, but I didn't know that I could change it.

At the time, fourteen days was as long as you could leave a perfectly healthy baby in hospital. And I had those fourteen days to sign the adoption papers. But I just couldn't bring myself to sign them. So I went to the hospital each day to see my baby and see if I could get myself to sign the paper. I would go to see her and I would hold her in an old rocking chair that they had there at the edge of the ward. And I would think, Well, I could take her and move away to this place, some place where nobody knew me. I could change my mind. And just get a job doing anything. Not let myself have five kids and live on Welfare and stuff...

And I also would have these lovely fantasies about the wonderful perfect life she could have with her adoptive family, if only I could sign the paper. These perfect parents and this perfect house--her own room, beautiful furniture, sunlight--and this perfect life where she would feel so special and so loved. I really wanted to give that to her, but everyday I left without signing the paper. Because I just couldn't.

And the counsellor at the home actually said to me, "You know, you just better sign the papers fast. Because these people that are adopting the baby, they've been told that there is a baby born in the hospital that they might be able to adopt. And they're just waiting for it." You know, that I was really making them feel bad, I was really hurting them. And that I should think about how I was making them feel.

And I remember thinking, "Oh those poor people. They've wanted a baby for so long, and here this one's just sitting in the hospital with nobody. I'm being so selfish. I really should just give it to them I guess." But I guess I didn't think about them quite strong enough to actually do it.

So finally, she had been in the hospital for the whole fourteen days, and then you either had to sign for the adoption or you could temporarily put them into foster care. But after fourteen days, you had to make that decision. I

had stayed at Rez the whole fourteen days and my social worker had taken me out to lunch a few times. And the last day, we were driving in her car home from lunch, going back to the Rez to drop me off. And she said, "So, today is the day you've got to sign these papers. You have to sign these foster parents papers."

But I said, "I just can't do it."

And she said, "Well it's not a permanent decision. It's just a temporary one, for foster care. It's not the adoption papers."

And I said, "Well I guess I could sign them then but I just can't sign definite adoption papers yet. I just can't."

And she said, "Well, or you could go get the baby..."

And I looked at her. I couldn't believe she said that, I was just amazed. I said, "Okay... Well let's do that then."

It was just this big relief. Like, "You mean I really can just make that decision?" Nobody had ever actually said that to me. And I just felt that I couldn't because I just felt that nobody was going to support me in it. And I would have to move away all by myself and not see my family or anything. And so it was just this big relief to think, I can just make that decision and take this baby home.

So I went back to Rez and said, "Tomorrow morning I'm going to go get my baby."

And they were all like, "How could you do this thing!" And the counsellor pulled me into her office and said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" And, "Who's been putting these ideas into your head?" And, "We know you don't really want to do this, you're just following what your family has been telling you."

And I said, "Well I haven't even told my family yet. And nobody has been pushing me, I just have changed my mind." But they wouldn't believe it.

So then the next morning I phoned Liz and I said, "Liz, I've decided I just can't give her up for adoption, I'm going to take her home."

And she said something like, "I was hoping you'd change your mind."

And I remember saying to her, "You mean you're not mad?" I was truly amazed and just couldn't believe it. And I said, "Well I want to go get my baby and they won't let me have it out of the hospital until I have a ride to the Rez," even though it's only a couple of blocks away.

So then Liz said, "Well okay I'll come with you."

And I said, "Well I don't own anything." I owned one sweater and a bonnet, which I had owned ever since I had found out I was pregnant actually. There was a little pink sweater and a little pink bonnet, and I had hid them on the very bottom of my drawer so nobody would know they were in there. And so Liz came over in the morning and we went

shopping. We bought a box of diapers and some washclothes and a couple of pairs of sleepers.

And then Liz and Diane took me to the hospital and the hospital said, "Well we never let any first-time mothers out until they have bathed the baby. You have to show that you can do these things." Very objective, like this is going to prove that I'm a good mother or something.

So I went into the nursery, and I'm looking at all these babies, going, "I don't recognize which one's mine, I sure hope there's a name on it or something." So I found my baby, which did have a name tag on it. It did say Baby Bouvier. And I bathed her and that's when one of the nurses was finally polite to me. She says, "Boy, it looks like you've been around a few babies." And I said "Well yeh, I've got like five nieces and nephews. I have bathed a few of them. And changed lots of them too."

And then, the one nurse who was actually nice to me, she said, "Well we'll be sorry to see her go." And she said that all the babies who are there for a long period of time, a couple of nurses came in every night, and held her and rocked her--every single night. And so they were telling me things, like that she likes to be rocked like this and so forth.

And I was just in Seventh Heaven, I couldn't believe I had this little baby and I was actually going to get to take her home. I actually got to touch her and everything. And

nobody was grabbing her away from me and nobody was just letting me see the top of her head and stuff like that.

I brought her back to the residence but we only stayed there a few days. It was really different, they all treated me really... different. Very obviously, I had shattered their wonderful opinions of me. It didn't seem like an awful lot of people did give their babies up for adoption. A couple of people, but very few. And with all their trying, I was keeping mine anyway.

I found out much later that, after I'd talked to this counsellor, she had phoned my mother. And told my mother how disgusted she was at her that she had forced me to change my mind. And I don't even think that my mother had known that I had changed my mind yet. She had said "You know, you are making her miserable, she doesn't want this baby, she is so unhappy about the decision. But she feels that she has to change her mind just to keep you happy."

And my mom said to me later, she said, "You know, are you sure that this is what you want to do?"

And I said, "Well like, yeh mom, I wasn't expecting you to say that. You're the only one who wanted me to keep it in the first place."

She said, "Well I just wanted to be sure." But this counsellor apparently had her in tears on the telephone, saying how she was such a terrible parent for forcing me to do this.

And Liz was actually extremely supportive and she said later, "Well, I didn't want you to give it up for adoption either but I wanted you to make your own decision."

But I said to them later, her and my sister Diane, I said, "You know, you guys wanted me to make my own decision and with the exception of Harry, by not saying anything, you gave me the impression that you wanted me to give this baby up. Because I would say, 'This is my decision,' and you'd say, 'Well I support that, I support that.' But you see that made me think that's what you wanted me to do. Really what you should have said was, 'This was the decision you made and that's okay. But these were all your options, and they're still all there. You can still decide whatever you want.'" But when I was saying, "Okay this is my decision," and nobody ever mentioned another option again, that made me feel that I didn't have those as an option anymore.

So then when I took her home, it was decided that I would go and live with Harry and his wife Jan, actually. They owned a house and they were near a high school. So they invited me to come and live with them and go to school or whatever I wanted to do. So I said that's what I would do and I went there. It was a bit strange but it was okay. Like, they didn't pass any value whatever. They just tried to be supportive. But they had never had kids yet and didn't know anything about babies really.

I spent most of my time in my little bedroom with this little baby who I was extremely protective of. I was just positive that, any night now, the police were just going to walk in and take this baby away, because I was making the wrong decision--I had decided I was giving her up, that's what I was supposed to do, that was the right thing to do. And now here I was doing this horrible thing, keeping her.

So they could come and take her away at any minute. I had better watch it, I had better make sure I was the most perfect mother in the world, which obviously I couldn't be because I was seventeen years old. I really do think that at seventeen you can't be a perfect mother. I guess you can't be at any age. But at seventeen, you know that everybody's watching you and just waiting for you to screw up, because they're all sure you're going to.

So I tried to make formula when they weren't around. I know Jan's said since then that she couldn't believe how I would just do everything that needed to be done and just be up in the night making the formula. They said, "Oh you used to be in here making formula with the baby in one hand and making the bottle with the other hand." And I was like, "Well yeh, I mean, as a mother, you do these things. Most of them do."

I really wasn't very comfortable there though. I really felt happy, you know, just to have this beautiful, beautiful baby that I might not have ever got to see. And

there she was, just lying there sleeping most of the time, she was really a very good baby. But I was really quite terrified as well. I really was quite scared, like I said, I was worried these guys were going to come in and take her away.

I was scared too because I had really come to rely on Tony. Like if I had a problem, he was the one I liked to talk to, always. And he was under the assumption that I wasn't keeping the baby as well. And I had asked him, once, what he would do if I changed my mind. And he had said, "Well I don't know, because you've made your decision so I don't know what I would do if you changed your mind. But I honestly don't know if I'm ready to be a father, I don't know if I want any kids or anything."

So I thought, he's going to leave me. And he's the only person that knows everything I think and feel now. You know, if I need somebody to talk to, he's the person I go to now. So I was terrified that I was going to lose this person who had just become so important to me at that point. And then being so confused about, should I talk to him about the baby? Should I not talk to him about the baby? I just didn't know, didn't know what to say to him all of a sudden. And I also didn't know completely--like I had all these people telling me that I couldn't be a good mother--so I wasn't overly sure of what I was doing with the baby. I was just basically terrified.

So I'd just sit in my room and watch this baby, just petrified in case I did something wrong. I did check into a few schools, but there weren't any nearby that had a term system. I only needed three more credits to finish off my grade twelve and with a term system I could do that. So I finally said, "Well, I'm going to go live with my mom and dad and finish high school in Sunnyside."

That was in mid-January, so Pearl was only a couple of months old. My mom looked after her all day while I was at school. But I really think I was quite responsible. I seldom went out at night. I came home every day after school and I would look after her all evening and overnight. You know, my mom was a tremendous help, looking after her while I was gone. But I did really look after her myself, it wasn't... like a lot of people just leave them with their mothers and don't actually do it. Don't actually do the work of being the mother. But I did.

And then after I went home, it wasn't that bad anymore. You know, my mom was just, "Well this is what we do with babies, this is how we look after them." And everything just became very matter-of-fact. You know, I felt... comfortable. And quite often my mom would say, "Oh why don't you just let me feed her and you go back to bed." And I was like, "No, no, can't let you do that, because... I have to show all these people that I'm not inadequate, that I can do this." I very much had those feelings that I was

going to prove I was not just dumping my baby off on my mother. I was not making the wrong decision.

Going back to school was really weird. The rumours were still going, that I was pregnant. And I finally said, "I'm not pregnant, I was pregnant, I had a baby!" But the rumours kept up. There was rumours that I had gone away to hide my pregnancy. I said, "No! I was pregnant! I'm admitting it!" Then they said that I had had an abortion. So I told people, "I didn't. I had a baby. I didn't have an abortion, I had a baby." So those rumours went away, and then the latest rumour was that I had had a baby and given it up for adoption and I was never going to tell anybody that I was even pregnant, I was pretending I wasn't! So, I thought, What can I do to get rid of these constant rumours and people whispering about me when I walked by?

So after I had been going to school for about two weeks, I phoned my dad one day. And I said, "Dad, come and pick me up after school tonight, and bring Pearl with you so I can show her off to my teachers." So my mom dressed her up in her sweetest little outfit and my dad brought this baby in. And I walked up and down the halls with my baby! And I'd stop and say, "This is my baby, her name is Pearl. I've had her. I've kept her. She's here, she's mine. And I'm going to school." It's like, Okay, can the rumours stop now? And I really felt that so many people just hated me for doing that. And yet, I was glad I did it, because it

really did just stop all the rumours. Like hey, I did actually just have a baby, and kept it, and I'm not hiding it, I'm not ashamed.

And you know how in high school you sometimes have to talk about yourself or whatever in class. I would quite often say things like, "Oh I got up with Pearl this morning and she was really cranky, but it turned out to be such a great morning 'cause she was laughing before I left." I never hid it, for one thing because I thought, Well who's going to believe that? But also, I really was quite proud of her, I really thought she was an adorably cute little baby.

And then, Tony called. And invited me to Winnipeg a few times. And he set up a little crib in his bedroom. So that made me feel a little more secure, even though I didn't know if we were like together-together, or what. I went through school with him basically being my boyfriend, I didn't go out with anybody else. Everybody kept saying to me at the end of the school year, "Well for your birthday you'll get an engagement ring."

And I said, "No I won't. No, no, no, no, no, I'm going to get earrings or something like that. It'll be a nice present, but I won't get an engagement ring." And I did get an engagement ring. I was honestly quite shocked about it, I really didn't expect it.

Another really great thing was, I ended up finishing grade twelve with my graduating class. I graduated with the same kids I had gone to kindergarten with. I had only actually missed the first half of the grade twelve year of school. A lot of them had only gone for the first half of the year and then had gone to work for the second half. Even going for the second half, I still knew everybody in my classes and still had some of my good friends who were going to classes with me. It was really nice that way.

Of course Tony and I eventually got married. But not right away. Honestly Tony and I were, and still are, I would say, really good friends. We understand each other, we like each other, we enjoy doing things together. After I finished school and left my mom and dad's, Pearl and I shared an apartment with my sister Diane for a year. By that time, Tony and I had started dating. It had become a romance. It was a shock to him when I decided to keep her, and I know that he actually had to take a step back and really figure out if he was still interested in me. His family, his mother mostly, was not very happy about him being with a woman who had a child out of wedlock, but they have just had to learn to live with it. They do really accept me now.

Two years after Tony and I got married, we had Julia. At first, I was afraid to have another baby. I thought, How could I ever love another person as much as I love Danielle?

And I thought that wouldn't be fair to another baby, to not be loved as much as somebody else. And then, I remember after Julia was born, watching her sleep. And thinking that was so amazing, because I really did love her just as much. How can that be? That you actually could love two people, two children, completely?

And this pregnancy was completely different than Pearl's. It was very different sharing the pregnancy with Tony, although he very much shared Pearl's pregnancy as well. Tony got to be with me in the delivery room, instead of pacing downstairs like a 1950s-type father, the way he had to the first time. And the nurse had to let me hold the baby right away--I loved that.

At first I wondered if Tony would treat the two children different, because one was not his blood. But he doesn't. Actually, when I look at them now, I think he gets along with Pearl better than he does with Julia. Him and Pearl are always conferring on things. Because he says, me and Julia are the youngest in our families, so we see it our way. But him and Pearl are the older ones in their families, so they see it their way. He'll be saying, "Now don't be making Pearl clean up Julia's mess. I always had to clean up after Sam, I know what that's like. You tell Julia to clean up her own mess." And I'll be saying, "Yeh but I know what it's like to be little and be deserted when you've got this big mess." So it really seems to work well.

We're not really positive if we're going to have more children or not. Most people assume that we definitely are not. But I haven't decided for sure yet. I had both my children when I was quite young, so if I decided to have another one in, say, seven years, I wouldn't be too old to have it. And I don't know how I'll feel in seven years. I don't see making a final choice on it now just because this isn't the time for it, or because other people think that's enough. Maybe I should just have more babies. We'll see. I think it would be wonderful to have twins--I like babies.

Our lives are pretty normal, I think. We go to his folk's place for dinner every Sunday. We go out to the farm to see my mom and dad every summer and every second Christmas, and we get together with my brothers and sisters who live near us a couple of times a month. I'm actually the one who insists on everybody making the effort to get together, that's sort of my role now. Tony and I own a nice, comfortable home. And when Julia was two, I started university. Now I have a degree in Early Childhood and I work in a daycare. How 'bout that?

Sometimes I still wonder if I robbed Pearl of some fairytale life she might have had, sometimes I still wonder if it would have been better for her if I had given her up. Or something goes wrong in her life and I think, "I have ruined this child's life by keeping her." And yet, I also feel that I have been a good mother to her. Pearl is

basically a happy child with a family that loves her. That I know. And if I had given her up, I would really never know if she was okay, if she was happy.

When I was planning to give her up, I was thinking that her adoptive parents were going to be these perfect people. Well nobody's going to be a perfect parent. Like financially, they could give this baby whatever they wanted. But that doesn't necessarily make you good parents, because you can buy the baby whatever you want.

I have also found out since then that my friend Benny was adopted. And I'd always thought adoptive parents would be so perfect. An adopted child was going to be so special and have such a perfect life. And when I think about it, there was nothing special about Benny's parents, there was nothing special about his life. His parents ended up getting a divorce. His father used to beat his mother, that's why they got the divorce. There was really nothing special about them. But it never occurred to me before that that's the kind of parents that my baby could get.

I do think that most people give up their babies for adoption for valid reasons. But I also think now that if they wanted to keep their babies, they could make good parents. Which I don't think I really thought before. I thought, "Well if you were too young, you were too young, period." I think I'm just not sure now where that line of too young falls. I still probably think eight is too young.

But I don't know--responsible teenagers could probably handle it.

And I think it's a good decision for you if you're making it for the right reason. And I think I was making that decision for some good reasons, but a lot of them were too superficial. Like to get an education. Well I've proven that I can get an education with a baby too. Give my baby up so she would have a good life? Well I think she has a pretty good life anyway. She's around people who love her and who foster her growth. I don't know what else she really needs. And I do think I can still travel, when I'm ready to travel. Like I often say to people, "I'm doing all the things I always wanted to do. I'm just not doing them in that order." I had a baby one year, I graduated the next, and I got married the year after. I did all those things, just not in the same order as everybody else.

At the time though, the only thing really on the side of me keeping her was just her, just that little black head with all that black hair. I don't even think it would have made a difference if I wouldn't have seen the top of her head. I don't think that that would have mattered, it was just the only concrete thing to hold onto. I think I really knew I wanted that baby. I think I really thought to myself, Okay, if this means that I'm not ever going to go to university, well... I can live without it. I want to go to university but it's not that important. I really think I

kept her because deep down inside, I like kids. I wanted that baby. As much as I tried to say I shouldn't want her, I did want her.

Deep down inside, I sort of am glad I got pregnant because I never thought I would have kids and now I was having one. And somehow I felt that it was now or never. Part of me said, "Okay. Last chance. You can have this baby or that's it. You won't have another one." I will never ever get pregnant again. I won't ever, no matter what. I will never have to go through this disgusting labour and delivery stuff again. If I gave this baby up, then my life would go on with the plan. It would be about having the great career and owning nice stuff, being a successful-type person.

But I always really liked children. I was a pretty responsible person, and I didn't mind settling down. So I kept her. I did it. And I'm glad.

It was very hard at the time, but my life didn't end with teenage pregnancy--it just got sidetracked for awhile. Since Pearl's birth, it's almost gone back to what my life was supposed to go like. And I know now that no matter what I would have done, I wouldn't have become that mother with ten kids living on Welfare and thinking of nothing but the next soap opera or whatever. That wasn't me. And it never would have been.

I think when I very first made the decision, it took a little while to decide that yes, this was the right thing for me. But I've known for quite a while now that even if it hadn't worked out-- Worst-case Scenario, even if my parents had said, "Get lost, we don't want you here," even if Tony had left me--I don't think it would have made any difference. I still think keeping her would have been the right choice. Because I think ultimately I made it for the right reasons. And I don't think I ever would have been really happy if I hadn't made that choice.

I know I was awfully young to be having a baby and raising it. But in my heart, I really also feel that I did the right thing. You might not always do what you expected you would do or what you planned to do. But if you do it and you stick with it, and you make the most of it, it will be the right thing to do. Do what you need to do for yourself and it'll work out.

This is Dee.

Dee, the second oldest of five children of an unmarried mother in the 1950's, has had a hard life. Dee is divorced and has lived for several years on Provincial Welfare. A slight, dark woman in her late thirties, she has four children who range in age from seven to nineteen and is currently expecting number five, although this may not at first be apparent. She wears blue jeans, a dark T-shirt, and sneakers.

My meetings with Dee were very low-key. Some parts of her story had obviously already been told elsewhere and she would run through them quickly and matter-of-factly. But often, and especially as time went on, Dee would speak slowly, sometimes seeming to be lost in her own reflections. At times it seemed that she was actually gaining insights about events in her life at the very moment of speaking them.

Today, Dee sits firmly and quietly upright with her legs crossed in the very corner of my gold-checked couch, talking frankly and plainly about her life. Outside our window, several sparrows flit merrily from branch to branch in the sleeping skeletons of winter bushes, a reminder of the tenacity of even small creatures against harsh elements. Dee lights up a long, mentholated cigarette and takes a drag. Her head cocked to one side, she pauses, considering how to begin, and then exhales deeply. She taps her

cigarette deftly against the square, glass ashtray on the end table to her right then, and forges ahead.

Dee's Story: Just Mostly Surviving

I was seventeen, that's when I got pregnant for the first time. Yeh, and that was also when I got married. Then we were married for eight years, and we had four kids. And then we broke up in '84, we got divorced. Hah. Really puts a lot together, eh?

Well, I was still living at home when I met my husband. My Ex, actually, John. My mom didn't like him, and me and my mom got into this huge fight, and I left home. I moved in with John and then in a couple of months I got pregnant and we got married. My mom says I got pregnant on purpose but I didn't.

And then when I was married, my husband used to beat me up a lot but I stayed with him, because I didn't want my kids to have to live without their dad. And he was only abusing me, I thought, so I'll just stick it out. That was before I found out that he was abusing the kids too, and then when I found that out, I left. That was ten years ago now, that I left him and never went back. And then my kids have had a lot of problems since then, and I've been just mostly trying to help my kids deal with it. A lot of what I've been doing in my life is just mostly surviving.

See, when we were kids, my mom used to drink a lot. Well not when we were real little. Then, she was really good, she hardly ever drank. She was more jolly, what you'd call a happy drunk, you know she liked to party and have fun, joke around. Then she married my step-dad when I was about eight years old. He would go away on his job all week and only come home on the week-ends, and at first my mom would only drink when he was gone. But then after awhile she'd just drink all the time. She didn't care whether he knew or not.

So then my mom used to drink quite heavy, and she'd get pretty violent when she was drinking. She used to beat my brothers up a lot, punch them in the face and everything. She didn't usually hit my sister and me, but sometimes she did. My older sister and I had to look after the younger kids, and she'd go out and she'd drink and come home and be fighting. She'd even let my little brothers drink, she thought that was really funny to see them staggering around and everything. The first drink I ever had, it was my mom that gave it to me too. And she didn't care what she'd say, she'd say really bad things to us, call us terrible names. It was pretty sad, actually.

But I mean my mom, when she was younger, she had a pretty hard life. When she got pregnant with my sister, she was fifteen and she was sixteen when she got pregnant with me. I know that once she was going to get married, but the

guy and his best man both got killed the night before the wedding was supposed to be. They were driving a car and got hit by a train. She had some sort of nervous breakdown after that, they didn't know what to do with her. I'm not sure exactly what happened in my mom's life because she doesn't talk about it, it's just what I've heard. She was abused by a lot of men that she lived with too, or at least she said she was. And then she had five kids, and especially back then in the 1960's, that was a lot for a single person to handle. It's a lot of stress.

When I was in elementary school I was sick a lot and I didn't do very well because I was seldom there. Like I missed about half a year. I flunked a couple of times. My marks were always good, even when I was away a lot. But you have to have a certain percentage of classtime or you just don't pass, eh.

I didn't like being at school because of kids' attitudes. I only had one or two friends. The other kids had their noses in the air, like they were snobby, they were better than you. We wore second-hand clothes. We didn't wear new things, we weren't in fashion. A lot of kids get a real bad attitude about other kids who don't have the same things that they do. I hated it, I hated going to school. I liked to read. I liked doing my homework. I would go to school sometimes, I'd get my assignments and then I'd skip.

You know I'd go to the park or I'd go home and I'd get my work done. But I hated class and I hated being in school.

Basically I was a loner I guess, I didn't like associating with other people at school because of their attitudes. You know, they'd call you names. It'd be like, "Well there's those Michaels kids" and then they'd just go and whisper to themselves. They wouldn't really say a lot to me, but you would hear them whisper. Or say you were in the washroom and they were out washing their hands. And you'd hear them talking about you. Saying uh, my mother was uh, a woman of loose morals because she was living with a guy and she wasn't married. Well they'd say like, Tramp. Town tramp. And uh, well this was my mother they were talking about so I'd get mad over it.

Then they'd say, "Oh you're just nothing but a little bastard."

And I'd go, "I am not!"

And they'd be, "Do you know what a bastard is? It's kids who don't have a father."

So then it's like, "Oh. Well I guess it's true then." Hah. Technically. So I didn't like that.

But when us kids were younger, before she started drinking so much, my mom used to always say to us, you know, "Do the right thing." And she would teach us right and stuff, you know she made us go to church all the time. And to school.

When I was very young, about four or five, I liked going to church and learning to be good and everything. We had a really good Sunday School teacher, and she used to pick us up all the time and take us to Sunday School. She was really nice and we got to go to Bible Camp in the summer and everything. We really liked it.

And then, when I was around seven years old, we hated it. Because then too, my mom was by herself. She was single but she was living with a guy, who wasn't our dad. People used to ridicule us about that, so we really hated going to church or places like that. In those days, not so much now, they used to bug you. People would tease you all the time, you know, about us having no father. They'd say, "Oh so where's your dad?" Usually they'd say that to my brothers, not as much to me. But my brothers got in a lot of fights over stuff like that.

And then, about a couple of years later I guess, I started listening to school and listening to church, and I started believing in it. And I got the idea too that uh, I was going to be good and do the right thing. I wasn't going to have sex before I got married, I was going to get married first and all this stuff. It was very important to me at that time.

So then. I was going through all of this, going to Sunday School and believing in it. And I didn't believe in fooling around and everything, so I wouldn't. Wouldn't do

it at all. And then, with everything happening in my mom's life, she started drinking more and more, and she started calling us names all the time and getting really on our case.

I think the reason we fought so much was basically because she always had the idea that girls are supposed to be Goody Two Shoes and not get involved with men. She wouldn't even let me date. I wasn't sleeping with anybody then. In fact the first person I ever slept with was my boyfriend, that I got married to. But she used to always say, "Ah, you're nothing but a bitch and you're sleeping around," and all this stuff. And it wasn't true. But that's what her idea of it was. I couldn't go out on dates because, you know you're gonna be sleeping around. So I used to sneak out and go anyways, and then she'd get mad at me and we'd get into a fight.

There was one time when I was about fifteen, me and my sister and my brothers went to the park. And there was these guys that knew my brothers. They had a bus that they'd converted into a kind of a trailer. So we were sitting there in the park. We were telling stories and joking around. And uh, we did their dishes for them. We had lunch there, they had given us all lunch and so me and my sister did their dishes. That was about it, basically, we were just having a good time. We weren't doing anything. My mom flipped out and came over and told us to go home. So

we did. Walked into the house and she just smacked me across the head. Said, "You're just a slut, you're running around, getting into trouble with these guys."

And I said, "It's not like that at all." But she didn't care, she figured that's what we were doing over there. And she got mad about it.

I mean at that time, I wouldn't so much as have a cigarette. I didn't believe in it. You know how people say "peer pressure?" Where they put you in a group and say like, you're going to smoke because you're in a group that smokes. I wouldn't! You know, I believed in myself. I said, "No, I'm not smoking, it's bad for you, I'm not going to do it." "Nope. That's not me." And I wouldn't.

But my mom kept saying more of this stuff all the time. And then, well I knew that wasn't right, that wasn't how we were. I didn't believe it. But I started getting so that eventually... I don't know, I think, it matters a great deal to kids when you get told these things all the time. It kind of, um, undermined your feelings about yourself. So then, after awhile I just said, "To hell with it. She says we're like that, I might as well be like that," kind of thing. So when I started going out with my boyfriend, that became my husband, I didn't even care anymore. I figured, "You say I'm like that! I might as well just... Might as well just be it."

So then, me and my mom got into a big fight when I started going out with John because she didn't want me going out with him. I mean we got into a real fight, like a physical fight. Oh yeh and I mean a major fight. My face was all scratched up and I had bruises and everything. That's when I left and I never went back.

Well she had started calling me all kinds of names. All these... terrible names. And she started punching me and gave me a bloody nose. She was calling me names, swearing at me. You know, "You're a slut, you're a whore, you're sleeping around." She was saying stuff like, "Oh you're sleeping with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the countryside."

And I said, "No I'm not. I've got one boyfriend and that's the only one I'm sleeping with." But she wouldn't believe it. And I said, "Well I don't care what you believe." I says, "I'm leaving. I'm not staying around just for you to call me names."

And at that time, I would never hit her back. One incident before this, she'd got mad at me and she called me a slut and I slapped her face. And then it was just like, "Oh wow, what'd I do? I hit my own mom." And then I just stood there. And she really hit on me, eh. But I just stood there and took it, I didn't fight back. Because I didn't believe in that.

But this time, I hit her back. I mean I really did. So it was just like a shock, "Hey, like I actually hit my own mom." She'd hit me or something, and I'd hit her right back. We were fighting, hitting back and forth. She stuck her fingers up my nose and bent her fingers back and made my nose bleed. So I had blood all over my shirt and my pants. And then my brothers were there and they were trying to break it up, but they couldn't 'cause they were just pretty small too.

And we were rolling around the floor. And then she was sitting on top of me. And I was mad, I wanted to hurt her. I guess it was just all those years of taking it, being hit and being called names. Because I would never hit my mom. You know my brothers would hit her back. Well they were just young, eh, just get mad and hit back. And my sister, mom had flipped out on her once and slapped her, and my sister just punched her right in the face and told her, "If you ever hit me again, I'll kill you." And she never did it after that, she left her alone. But I wouldn't hit her, I didn't think that was right.

But then finally, I didn't care then. You know I was mad. She was calling me names and we were fighting and I just started hitting her back. She was hitting me and it was right back to her. And she was pulling my hair, and I was pulling her hair out.

Then she told me I had to go upstairs because she was getting company over. She tried to get me to go up the stairs, but we fell down the stairs together. She couldn't make me go up the stairs because I would dig my fingers into the sides of the steps and I wouldn't move. I said, "I'm not going. Your friends are going to come over, they're going to see me like this, and they're going to know you did it. I don't care."

And then my brothers went and brought my friend from down the street and all of them kind of got ahold of her and hauled her off of me. And they were trying to grab ahold of me, but I was still fighting. But I guess my brother had phoned my boyfriend to come, and he came there and grabbed me and took me out.

She actually threw a knife at my boyfriend in the kitchen when we were leaving. My husband--my Ex--actually has a scar on his shoulder, right here on his shoulder, where my mom threw the knife and it stuck into his shoulder. That was pretty wild.

So that was in July when I was seventeen, and I went and stayed at my sister's place for about two months. And then in September I moved in with my boyfriend. We wanted to get married then, both of us. But we knew that my mom wouldn't give us permission because she hated him so much. I was still going to school, I was in grade ten. And school was important to me, so I thought, "Okay, I'll go on the

pill 'cause I don't want to get pregnant. I want to finish my education before I get involved to that extent."

But then, this one time I got really sick. I had a really bad flu, I couldn't keep anything down. I had to go to the doctor's office. And when I went to see the doctor, who was in the waiting room but my mom! So the next thing I know, she's got me all bundled up and she's taking me home. The doctor told her to give me medicine and all this stuff. So she said, "Well come home with me. I'll look after you for a couple of days." My boyfriend worked all the time so I thought, "Yeh, okay. Let her take care of me." Went home with her.

And then, she started going through my purse and found the birth control pills. Started calling me all these names again. And saying, "Oh I knew you were like that. You're a slut, you're a tramp," and all this.

So I got mad. I said, "To hell with you then." Flushed them all down the toilet. "Whatever happens, happens." And then I ended up pregnant.

My aunt told me one time, "The only reason you got yourself pregnant and got married was to get out of the house."

I said, "No that's not true, that's not why it is."

She goes, "Yeh I think it is."

I thought about that a lot. I think maybe she is right. In a way, I do think it was on purpose. In another

way, maybe it was just consequences. You know, it's like I thought, "Okay, she's mad, she doesn't want me to take them, I won't take them. And if I get pregnant, well we're already engaged anyway." And I did get out of the house, away from my mom. I was with a guy that loved me, he didn't hit me, he didn't abuse me. You know, got away from all that stress. It was like, now I was going to be with him, and it was a lot easier.

But I don't think it really hit home, like the step I was taking. It was like, "I don't care, I'm mad." I just got rid of the pills. And then when I found out I was pregnant, it was like, "Oh God. What did I do? Sure I'm with my boyfriend, like we're engaged. But now, I'm not going to finish school."

I mean, I went to school. I was in grade ten and I actually went until a couple of months before I had the baby. I wanted to finish grade twelve so I could get a job when I was finished. I was taking Business Education and I was doing pretty good in it.

But then my mom didn't help either. Because in January when we first found out I was pregnant, we went to see her. And told her we wanted to get married, because I was pregnant. And she said no, we weren't getting married. She wouldn't sign the permission paper and I was under age. I think she wanted me to stay at home. And she hated my

boyfriend's guts, she had the idea that he was stealing me away from her.

But I mean, she supposedly knew things about him that I didn't know. Things that everybody figured I knew about him anyways, about his behaviour. That he'd been in jail for rape and stuff like this that I found out about years later after I was already married to him. But they just assumed I knew and never actually said anything to me. All she used to say was that, "Ah, he's an asshole, he's no good."

And I just used to think, "Well why's she saying that? Just because she doesn't want me to get involved with him? She doesn't want me to get married, doesn't want me to move away from her?"

So then when I got pregnant, that's when she tried to charge him with statutory rape. He was twenty-five and I was seventeen. And they served him with a summons and we had to go to court. And in court she was saying that he was no good, he was an asshole, he was a rapist and all this. And of course I didn't believe it.

So then my boyfriend told them about the big fight me and my mom had. He was saying, "Well what about her? What about what she did to her, she beat her up. She was all scratched up and black eyes and the whole works. And you say that I'm not capable of looking after her. Like I don't beat her up. She's been living with me here for six months

and we want to get married. It's her mother that's putting a stop to it."

So they turned around to my mom and they said, "Did you know she was living with this guy?" She said yeh. And they said, "Well why didn't you put a stop to this before this ever happened?" And she had no answer, right?

And the judge said to John, off the record, he said that we could get married without my mother's consent because we had been living together for more than six months. And John was looking after me during that time, he was paying my food and that kind of thing. Like they said, if he's looking after your welfare and your upkeep and your mother knew about it, then she can't really do anything if you want to get married. Unless you're extremely young. And my mom hadn't done anything about it so she couldn't stop us.

Well actually she did try to do something. When she first found out I was living with John, she sent the police over there. And the police came in and talked to me. Because she had told them that she thought I was scared of John and I didn't want to be there and he was holding me against my will. So she sent the police there and they came down with, like three police cars. I wanted to run out the back way but John says to me, "No, it'll only get worse if you do." And they talked to him inside the house and they talked to me outside. And they said to me, "If he's holding

you against your will, we'll take you out of here. If you're scared of him."

And I just laughed and I said, "Scared of him? No! I'm not scared of him. He's my boyfriend, I want to be here." I said, "I don't want to be at home, it's my mother I'm scared of."

And they said, "Well that's all we were trying to find out. Because your dad said that if you didn't want to leave, you didn't have to."

So I said, "Hah! I'm staying here." So they left.

And then when she had him charged with statutory rape, the judge told us we could get married if we wanted to, we just had to go to a family court judge. And mom was in court when he told us that. So then she said, "Okay meet me at my house later, I'll phone you with the time." And we got there and here she was having us meet with the minister of our church, and she was letting us get married.

I was thinking to myself that I should just say, "To hell with it. Like I can get married anyways if I want, I don't need your permission. I'm almost eighteen." But on the other hand, now she's trying to be nice, she's trying to get along, so maybe I'll just agree and say, "Okay sign the papers." And maybe that'll cool her off and calm her down, and we can get back together again and start talking. And it would be alright.

So that's what I did, I let her sign. So she went to the wedding, she helped us plan it and everything. She was okay then but she still wouldn't come to see us after.

So then I went to school until about May and my son Johnny was born in June. And we had gotten married in March so I was going to school under my married name. But it got too hard, I felt too weird. Being pregnant, being at school. I thought it was really strange. I mean I was married, it's true, but I mean I didn't feel very comfortable. Well you know people's attitudes, eh? Like, there was one other pregnant girl going too but she got ridiculed quite a bit because she wasn't married or anything. I was married but I really did feel it too. People can say a few mean things, eh, like "knocked up" and stuff like that. Not very nice.

So I quit school and stayed at home. And actually I was happy then. I had a husband, I had a home, I had a family. I was happy. Of course I was scared, when I was going to have my first baby, terrified of giving birth. But then it wasn't as bad as people make out, for myself anyway. I know some people do have a really hard labour, but I didn't. I was very lucky. I always say they scared my son out of me. Because I was two weeks overdue and the doctor said they were going to put me in the hospital the next day and induce me. But I just went into labour on my own and he was born before they had time to do anything to me.

And after the birth, I was just really happy. My son was okay, I was okay, and John came in to see him. Of course as soon as he was born, they just scooped him away from me. I was really really weak. But it was just that dream that I always had, of having a husband and a family. I think a lot of people really want that.

Because when I was living at home with mom and she was always saying, "Well you're a slut, you're a whore, you're a tramp." Well when you're getting told all this bad stuff about yourself, I didn't really feel good about myself. And yet when I was with my husband, and being with him, I felt good. I was away from my mother, I didn't have to worry about what she thought. And I think a lot of it boils down to the fact that, Well here somebody cares about me. They didn't care about my mother. The way I feel about him has nothing to do with my mother, who cares what she thinks?

In one way I think that made me dependent on him, feeling that our mother didn't care what happened to us, but just wanted to knock us down, whether it was true or not. Well then I put that all onto my husband, like, now here's this great guy that thinks the world of me and he knows I'm not like that and he loves me and he cares about me. It was kind of like depending on him for all my self-confidence and all my decisions and this. No questioning him.

So then I stayed at home with my son and I was happy. I wasn't working then, and then my daughter was born,

Darling. I had two kids at home, small ones. And I wanted to be at home with them. Look after the house.

And then my husband started being really controlling, but at first it didn't seem that way. At first it just seemed that I was doing what I wanted. It was only when it got to the point where anytime I wanted anything, I had to ask him. If I wanted to buy something, I had to ask him. Like I didn't have my own spending money. And if I said to him, "Give me ten dollars, I want to go buy something," it was, "Well what for? What do you need?"

If I wanted to go anywhere, go visit my mom or my sister or what-have-you, well there was no gas in my car. We had, like three vehicles sitting in the yard and only one was mine. But that's the one he had taken to drive somewhere and then didn't put any gas in it. And wouldn't give me any money to go buy more gas.

At that time, family allowance was about twenty dollars a month. And he says, "Well you got your own money. What do you need mine for?"

And I'm like, "Twenty dollars, wow! Yeh, I can do a lot with that." So I said, "Well forget it then. I'll go get a job and make my own money."

And then it was like, "Nobody's going to hire you anyway, what are you going to do? You got no education. You got two kids at home, you got to find a sitter." But he said, "Okay, go look." And what happens but I find a job.

That really blew his theory all to hell. So it's like, I got a job. Now what?

But you know when all this trouble started with my Ex was when I started working. That's when it all started. When I went for counselling, I learned this. I was working, I was starting to have my own life, so he was losing control. Which I can see now. At the time I didn't understand it, I didn't understand what was going on.

So then we started fighting. And he knew that my mom used to beat us up all the time. And you know he always used to say, "Well I would never do that to you." You know, "I love you, I care about you. And it's really bad that she does that." And so of course I believed him. I had him up on this big pedestal, I think, at that time. You know, knight in shining armour type of thing. He says it and you believe it.

And at first, everything he said, I believed. I wouldn't talk back to him. If he came home and his supper wasn't on the table--say I just got home from shopping or whatever. He'd be, "Well what the Hell! Is supper not ready yet?" I wouldn't say anything, I wouldn't talk back and I wouldn't go, "Well I just got home," or anything like that. I'd just say, "Okay, never mind. I'm getting it right away, don't worry."

But then I got bored. Being at home with the kids all the time. He would go out with his buddies, out drinking

and stuff. Keeping my car out of gas so I could never go anywhere. And controlling the money, his money, as he always said. If I wanted to go grocery shopping, he'd count out so much and I'd have to get whatever with that amount of money. Then he'd say, "Well this is my cheque, I do what I want with it."

I'd go, "Well yeh, I know." And if there was something else I wanted, I had to explain to him why I wanted it. But mind you, he could go out and buy himself whatever. Never had to check it with me. Well what would I say? It's his money, right?

So when I got a job, I was like, "Hey, this is my money. I'll do what I want with it."

And then actually that's when it started going downhill. We started fighting, he started getting violent. And I was thinking about leaving him at the time.

But then, my mom didn't help either, eh. She was just like, "Well you made your bed. You lay in it." And always it came back to me, because my mom wasn't married and it was really hard for her. Us kids didn't have a dad, and that really had a great impact on our lives. So I said, "No, I'm not doing that to my kids. I'm going to stick it out. It'll get better."

And then, I was working. And things started getting worse, and worse and worse. First of all it was when he was drinking, he'd fight with me and punch me. Give me a black

eye, a fat lip, what-have-you. And I'd just put up with it. It was never in front of the kids. It was always when they were sleeping or not around. And I just stuck it out because he didn't touch them, just me. So it was okay. If he had have ever abused my kids, I would have left him right there. And he knew that. So he never did.

Mind you, Hah, in the long run, when it all came out, he was abusing them anyways. Physically and also sexually. But not that I would see it, it was when I wasn't home. And when I started going for all this counselling, that's when I understood. It was like, his authority was undermined and he wanted to get that authority back so he started taking it out on the kids.

So we were married, oh Heavens, for ten years. And it kept getting worse and worse and worse. I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't do anything. He'd get mad and then he'd say that I was out running around, I was sleeping around on him. Beat me up.

One time, I was working, waitressing, and I got home late. And we had people in late, a big group that came in right at closing time. So we had to stay and clean up and so I got home late. And as soon as I walked through the door, he punched me. He said I was out fucking around on him, that's why I was late. And I said, "No, no, I'm not. Like I just came from work," I said. "You can phone and

find out. We had people in late, and we had to stay late and clean up." But he wouldn't believe me.

He used to be really jealous like that. If I was an hour late getting home from work, or a half hour, I was up to no good, I was fucking around on him. Any time I went anywhere, he'd be, "Well, who you been with? Where you been? Who you been fucking?"

And then I just got really flippant. I'd go, "Oh just normal old Joe Blow, uptown there. Yeh, I was there for a few drinks and did it." Well then he got mad and he'd hit me.

But I mean, you had to be constantly defending yourself. And here it was the same thing as my mother before I left home, I always had to be constantly defending myself. About what I was doing, where I was. That I wasn't the town slut running around. And then it was the same with my Ex. "So who was it this time? Bla, bla, bla." I got awfully tired of it, so I started being really flippant. He goes, "Was he better than me?"

I go, "Oh yes." So then that made it worse, eh.

So then finally this one time, he'd gone out. And I knew he was with someone, a female, and I knew they were fooling around. And I sat up all night waiting for him to come home. And I confronted him with it when he came in. I said, "The reason you're always accusing me of sleeping around is because you're sleeping around. And I know it. I

seen you." And so this started a big fight, and he beat me up real bad that time. And I ended up in the hospital.

And then I left. But I didn't take my kids with me. I had no money, no place to go, no clothing, nothing. Actually, what happened was, when I got home the next day from the hospital, he sent me to go get him a case of beer. Yep, he wanted to drink. So he gives me this money to get him a case of beer. And I took the money and I went on the bus and I left. I went to my sister's. So we split up for about five months.

But then I went to court to get my kids. And I, couldn't get the kids because they said I had deserted. Didn't matter what reason I left or what had happened. They just said I deserted so I couldn't have my kids. So my lawyer told me, off the record, he said, "You go back til everything's dropped. And then once everything's dropped, take your kids and take off." So that's what I did. I went back. With the intentions of just grabbing my kids after a certain amount of time.

But then when I came back, he was all changed, eh. He was all nicy-nicy now. He went for counselling and we never fought or anything. So it was all different. So then I stayed. And then I got pregnant with my third child, Bobby. And I stayed. And it worked really well. We were getting along pretty good. I was at home, I wasn't working so he didn't have that to flip out about. I was just staying home

with the kids. And he went out and did whatever, went out with his buddies. Back to the same old routine. Yep. So that was pretty wild. That was around ten years ago.

Then about a year later, my husband got arrested. For sexually assaulting a little girl. Police came to the door, picked him up, left. I found out that he had sexually assaulted this, this little girl. And actually, things for us were going pretty good, I thought. He wasn't hitting me. We were getting along, I wasn't working, he had a good job. And we weren't fighting anymore.

So when I found out that he had sexually assaulted another little girl--she was seven years old--this started a big investigation. Because my daughter was seven years old. So I had to get my daughter checked out. And I found out he sexually assaulted her too. I went to see him at the jail and I says to him, "Well did you touch our daughter?"

He goes, "No! What kind of father do you think I am?"

I says to him, "Because I'll find out so you might as well tell the truth."

So he looks at me and he goes, "Prove it." Yep. "Prove it." That's what he said.

So then, that was it. "Hah," I said, "I'm leaving." He was in jail anyway. I filed for a separation, and got a restraining order against him, so he couldn't come around us. And then I moved. Because he was always coming around, when he was waiting for his court date. And they said that

if he came around, they would apprehend my kids and put them in a foster home. Because they were thinking I was letting him come around.

When my husband and I first split up, when all the sexual abuse came out, I was, uh... Like I thought I was handling it pretty well. I was keeping it all bottled inside, I wouldn't let myself cry or anything, I wouldn't talk about him. And then one day I broke out in this real horrible rash all over my whole body. I just woke up and I'm like, "What's wrong with my legs?" That's the first thing I noticed. I was wearing a housecoat and I looked down and my legs are just big blotches all over, eh. And I was, "Hoo, what's wrong with me?" And then I looked, and it was on my hands. I looked, and it was on my face. I was just covered with this rash, eh? And I was like, "Well what have I got?"

So I went to the doctor. And he says, "It's your nerves," and put me on nerve pills.

So then, I found out I was pregnant again, pregnant with my fourth child. And it was like, "Oh God, has that effected the baby or something"? So I had to go back and find the bottle, because we had moved by this time. It was a different doctor. So I found the bottle, got the name of the drug, and the doctor looked it up and said that it hadn't affected the baby. So that was a big relief. That was pretty wild. Scary. It was scary.

So anyways, I was pregnant. And I had no intentions of getting back with my husband, so the doctor said, "Well you should have an abortion then." And he's just like, "There's no big deal. You know, people do that all the time." So I was going to. I remember him saying, "Well what do you want with four kids? You got three now, no husband, you're by yourself. You're on welfare."

And I thought, "Well yeh, you know that's true. How am I going to raise three kids, let alone four? By myself." So I set the appointment up, I went to it and everything. Like, they have to do an assessment first, to find out whether they allow it. So I went for that and they said that because of the circumstances and all that, I didn't need consent from my husband to have the abortion. So I set up the appointment, I was going to go.

But then, I just couldn't go through with it. There was no way. Because I just never believed in having an abortion. I just wouldn't do it. It was the doctor, trying to convince me to have it. His idea was, "You have three kids. Why do you want another one? You have no intention of getting back with your husband. Why in the world do you want a child?" You know, truthfully, it does make sense in a way. But you know, I wouldn't. I couldn't. I would never have been able to live with myself, I don't think.

So then my fourth child was born, Kenny. And that was alright but I mean I was totally stressed out, I was sick

all the time. Had a hard time with him. I think it makes a lot of difference whether you're happy or not, how you manage when you're pregnant. I was a nervous wreck.

So then here I was with three kids. I was pregnant. I was going to school, taking my grades ten to twelve. And I was working. Daycare for the kids and you know, I had to study and everything. It was really hard. But it was worth it. It kept my mind busy, that was the most important thing.

I figured, I'm sitting on welfare, on Provincial, I might as well do something. Instead of just sitting here, getting this money and raising the kids, I might as well do something. So that when I do go off welfare, when they get older or whatever, when things change, then I'll have at least something to fall back on.

But Provincial's whole attitude is not very good. Like I know these women right now who are at home with one kid or whatever. And Provincial is pushing them out to go get a job, go get an education. And they're saying, "Oh they're making me go to school, they're making me do this, or they're making me do that."

And it's so weird, because when I was first on Provincial, I asked them to send me to school, asked them to get me into a course. And they wouldn't do it. They kept hum-hawing, hum-hawing and making up excuses as to why I couldn't go. Finally I talked to this one guy at the

agency, and he said to me, "You know what? This is off the record. Go register at the school, go for three months, and then tell them you're going." Hah. So that's what I did.

And then sometimes the teachers didn't have a great attitude either. When I went to school, this one science teacher said, "Two thirds of you people aren't going to be here by the time this term is over. And most of you are going to be women." No kidding, that's what he said!

So then, one time I had to write a test and my son had to go for a cardiogram. So I stayed up all night and I studied. My class started at nine thirty and my son's appointment was at ten. And it was about six blocks down. So by the time I got my other kids off to school and daycare, I was late. So here I go walking in, I'm late, test has already started. So I grab my test paper, I walk back and I sit down. Zipped through about six pages in five or ten minutes. Went up and handed it in.

He just looks at me, "You finished?"

"Yep. I'll see you later." So he just gave me this dirty look. I walked out and took my son down for his appointment. Three days later, test results came back. And he just looked at me, didn't say a word when he handed the paper back. I thought, "Oh jeez, I blew it. I flunked, eh?" Then I'm looking at my paper, "I got a hundred percent!" Couldn't believe it. But yet, that was basically

true, what he said, because about half the people did drop out.

But that was something, going to school. Come home and give the kids supper, clean up a bit. And if I didn't have time to clean up, I would just leave it. Sometimes the house was a total disaster. You're sitting there studying, you're up til five o'clock in the morning.

Some people used to get really ignorant though. They'd come over, "God! What did you do to your house?"

I said, "If you came over to look at the house, leave." Like, right now I'm going to school. And my schoolwork is more important than the housework. I'll do the housework when I have time. The studying, I have to get done before the test. So I says, "If you don't like the way my house looks, just get the hell out, I don't really care about it." It's your priorities, eh? You got to set them where you want them.

But that was a pretty crazy time. Because for a couple of years after my husband was arrested and I found out about him sexually abusing our kids I was just dealing with all their problems. I was going to school and working, and then taking the kids to counsellors. I was taking my daughter to play therapy, getting my son into counselling. I was just handling it, all the problems, trying to help my kids.

And you see for myself, at that time anyways, I kind of buried it down, so I didn't feel anything. Everybody was

saying, "Oh you're handling it so well." And, "You're doing so good. I don't know how you manage. Everything the kids need, you're right there." You know, I was handling it just fine.

And doing all the stuff for them took time. And I was handling it, I was watching the kids, I was making sure they didn't get into trouble. I was giving them everything they needed, I was talking to them and explaining things to them. Time just went by.

And then, it was a couple of years after I broke up with my Ex, actually, that this other stuff came out about my son Johnny. And I was so naive, eh, that I didn't even recognize what was happening.

See, he had come home a couple times and he had marks on his arms. And I asked him, what happened? What's going on? "Oh I got in a fight at school, this boy beat me up." And I just believed it. And this happened a couple of times that I would notice these marks on him. So then one time it got really bad. And his arms, from his shoulders to his wrists, were all cut up and everything.

I said, "Well that's it. This is enough." Like I still believed him that this other kid was doing it. So I phoned the principal at his school and I said, "Look at. I want a meeting with you and the counsellor and his teacher. And I want to come see you."

And he says, "Oh that is such a coincidence because we want to talk to you too."

So we went down for this meeting. And the principal says, "Well did you notice the marks on Johnny's arms?" And I said that's exactly what I wanted to talk to them about. He goes, "Oh. Well how do you think that happened?" I said he told me he got into a fight. He said, "Well I have to let you know, we found razor blades in Johnny's pocket."

And I just went, "Well what does that mean?"

Well then he starts asking me all these questions about my son's homelife and our situation. So then I told them about my husband being arrested and finding out about him abusing the kids and everything. And then he says, "Do you think Tommy would ever harm himself?"

And I went, "Well why would he do that? Huh. Like, why in the world would my son start hurting himself?"

But then I got it. That he was cutting his own arms up with razor blades. And I'm just... that was it hey? I just lost it. It was like, "No. Not my son. He wouldn't do that, he couldn't do that eh? He's not, you know, losing it here." And I just broke down, eh? This was like... I couldn't believe it. So then they referred me to go and get some help for myself, eh, to deal with it. Because I had just been handling it all that time, helping the kids and not really letting myself feel it. But after that, finding

out about my son, that's when I had to go and get some help for myself.

And Johnny, my son, has had a lot more problems since then too. He's been in fights, he's tried to commit suicide because he feels so guilty about what he saw, he's been in the Youth Centre. And a lot of that is just dealing with what was done to him. He'll be dealing with that for the rest of his life. That's why I always say, my husband, my Ex, he went to jail. He did his time and now he's out. But my kids, they got life. They'll be dealing with this for the rest of their lives.

And yet, some people believed that I knew about the abuse and just never said anything. They didn't believe that it wasn't my fault. Their attitude was that the woman, the wife, should know what's going on in the kid's life. Mostly it was the social worker who was like, "Oh you must have known. Why didn't you know? You must have known and you just turned a blind eye to it." That was their whole attitude. That's why they sent me for mandatory counselling.

The police, when the charges came down and they found that my daughter had been sexually abused, they told me that I knew about the sexual abuse. Because when I first got married to my Ex, he had been in jail. Well I knew that he was in jail, but I never went to the courts or anything because I was pregnant with my first son. And apparently,

he was charged with rape at that time. And he went to jail for it. Well I knew he was in jail, but I just heard that it was for other charges, for driving while disqualified. But nobody ever notified me what he was there for, and I just took his word for it.

But then when this all came out, they just assumed that I knew. So they put a mandatory supervisory order on me for a year, saying that I had to go for counselling. And I had to have a restraining order against my husband and get my separation and everything. To make sure I was going to listen to them. Otherwise, they were going to take my kids away and put them in a home.

So then when I went for this mandatory counselling, they said I was handling it fine. I'd go there for an hour a week and I'd talk about it. I wouldn't break down, I was calm, I was cool. But here, what I did was I just blocked it all out. It was almost like it was somebody else, not myself. So then I wouldn't have to deal with it. If I didn't talk about it and I didn't let my emotions get involved, it wouldn't affect me. I just buried down the emotions and I just talked about it like it was a fact of life, that it just happened and that's all there was to it. So I went to that counselling until I had my fourth child and that's when I quit.

But when I found out that my son was hurting himself and trying to commit suicide, that's when I totally lost

control for awhile. That's when I had the meeting at his school and I was crying and everything and they said it didn't seem that I was handling it very well. So then they put me in touch with a parent support group and I went there for years.

All the people in that group had had husbands that abused their kids or had their kids abused by outsiders. And that group was a lot of help because we talked about it. Like I learned about the cycle of violence when I went for counselling before, but it was like I was numb to it almost, eh.

Because at the time when I first broke up with my Ex, my main thought was, "You have to be strong for the kids. You can't break down. You can't lose control." If I lose control, then what's going to happen? I'm going to have a nervous breakdown, I'm going to end up in hospital, then they're going to take the kids anyway you know. So I was holding it all in. I was talking to the kids, I was making plans. That's how I got through the whole thing, "Don't think about it. My kids are with me, their dad's in jail, and that's all there is to it."

But when I found out about my son being suicidal, I couldn't handle anymore, I couldn't handle it anymore. Like I had been working, going to school, looking after the kids. I didn't think about it, I was busy, eh? When you're not busy, you think too much.

But then also, I did blame myself. For years and years and years, I blamed myself. "Oh why didn't I see it happening? What kind of mother am I, that I didn't notice the signs?" But if you don't know what to look for, how do you know? You don't know. But you bang your head against the wall. "Well why didn't you see, why didn't you see?"

And then the police were saying, "Oh you let your husband babysit the kids?"

I go, "What do you think? We were married. Those were our kids. Does your wife let you look after the kids?"

They go, "Well of course."

I go, "Well there you go." That is such a stupid attitude. I got way mad at him, I just kind of flipped out. Like as if a person would go, "Oh he's an abuser, don't leave your kids with him." You don't think that way.

But then, after I found out about the abuse, I was just suspicious of men, all men. One time I was at my sister's and her husband had picked up my daughter and was tickling her. And I just flipped out on him, eh? Like, "Put her down!" My sister got way mad. But I said, "I don't care." Well it was so traumatic, I mean, this guy that you've been married to for ten years. Was abusing your daughter and you didn't know. So then to my mind, everybody was the same. All the men are the same. So it took me a long time to get over that.

Everybody was telling me, "Oh you got a chip on your shoulder."

I go, "Well you ain't gonna be the one to knock it off."

And then, my sister used to try to get me to go out with people. She'd take me out, we'd go to the bar. And me, I was totally against guys. I wouldn't have nothing to do with them. Like, I'd go to the bar but I'd buy my own drinks. I'm not letting anybody buy my drinks. Because they think right away that you owe them something for it.

There was this one guy, my sister tried to set me up with. I said, "No way."

She said, "You better knock that chip off your shoulder. He's a real nice guy."

I said, "Well tell him to go be nice to somebody else. Because I don't need him being nice to me." So she got real mad at me but I said, "I don't give a shit. I don't care. I'm not getting involved with anybody. I don't want to get involved with anybody." So it took me a while.

I guess you can't live by yourself forever. But I lived just with my kids there for about three years and I was just fine. I really enjoyed it, enjoyed my independence, coming and going when I feel like it. I liked it, I liked living by myself.

That was the same when I started going out with my boyfriend, Darcy, the one I'm going to get married to this

summer. The first time I went out with Darcy was through my girlfriend, she's his sister. I'd go to her place for coffee and he'd be there, we'd talk. So then I was on a community centre group and I needed a date for this supper I was going to. And it was like, "Who do I ask for this thing?" So I asked him if he'd go with me. And I said to him, "Look, this is not a date. It is just to take someone with me. But you get a free meal you know, a free drink. Come along."

So he said yeh and we went, and then we just started going out every once in a while for coffee. I didn't see him very often at first. Then more often, and then he was over a lot.

Then we got more serious and he'd ask me to marry him and I'd say, "Nope. I'm not getting married." And he'd ask me like every other week. I says, "No I told ya. I'm not getting married again. Nobody's owning me again."

And that was my whole attitude. It's like when you get married this whole stamp of ownership goes on you. Well it's not but at the time that's how I felt.

And then Darcy seemed to get along okay with the two younger kids, but my two older ones didn't like him. They hated the fact that he was coming over, they hated the fact that I was going out with him. And kind of in the back of my mind too I was thinking the same thing. Like I'm not going to push it on them, I know how they're feeling. I'm

not going to get involved to that extent with anybody because I know they're not going to like him because that's not their dad.

So then one time I sat them down and I talked to them. I said, "Look. You guys have your friends. You do whatever you want, you stay overnight. You have a boyfriend, a girlfriend, whatever. It's the same thing with me. I'm not with your dad. I have no intentions of getting back together with him. He has no intentions of getting back together with me. I need somebody to go out with."

And they thought about it. And they said, "Yeh, I guess you're right." So it was okay.

But still, I didn't feel right about getting married again. It didn't feel right, I was uncomfortable with it.

I really trusted him. 'Cause like when things got really bad with my son, trying to kill himself, I just lost it again for awhile there. Darcy would help out. I had to take sleeping pills at night to sleep, but I couldn't take them with nobody there. I was scared to in case there was a fire or something, or in case my son tried to hurt himself again. So I said to my boyfriend, "You want to come over and spend the night? The doctor gave me sleeping pills and I can't take them when there's nobody here to watch the kids." So yeh, he'd come over. He helped out, and he was really good about it. When I was going to school, he'd come

over and watch the kids when I was studying. He was pretty good that way.

For a while there the two older kids would be really snotty with him. "You're not my dad, I don't have to listen to you." And in a way too that's why I wouldn't marry him. It's like, my kids hate my boyfriend. The boyfriend wants to get along with the kids but they don't want nothing to do with him. And to me in a way, he was trying to push himself on them. Because he wanted to get along with them, he wanted to marry me, he wanted us to be together.

So he was, "Well hi. How are you doing?" Trying to be all nice to them and get them over to his side. And they didn't like that, they hated it. Darcy would go, "Well here. Here's ten bucks, you know, go to the show."

And Johnny would be like, "Well I don't want his money. What is he trying to be so nice for?"

I said, "Well he's just trying to be nice. But if you don't want it, don't take it." Because I always told my kids I'm not going to be like my mother and force them onto somebody they didn't like. I don't believe in that. If they have some reason why they don't like him, I'm not going to push them. They'll get to know him and they'll change their mind, or they'll turn against him worse if you try to push it.

So then after awhile it was really weird, they just started changing. They started getting along with him and

liking him. My oldest daughter would help my boyfriend work on his car. Or my boyfriend would help my son work on the bikes or whatever. And the two youngest ones always did like him, eh, because they don't remember their dad. Darcy's the only dad they know.

So then, actually, it didn't change for me until, until the baby I'm pregnant with now. Even once in awhile I thought about getting married. I thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad. And then I'd think back to my marriage, and I thought, "No way. I can't do that."

My family, his family, they all said, "Why aren't you guys getting married? You've been together for five, six years. Why aren't you making it legal?"

I said, "Who needs it, I don't need it to be legal. We don't need to have it legal to be together."

Then I found out I was pregnant. And once in awhile it would pass through my mind, "Why am I killing myself over the situation. Here I am, still bitter and angry about what happened, and I won't get involved with somebody again in that way because of everything that happened. And here even my Ex is Mr. Happy-go-lucky. He's remarried and he has a child, and a nice family life there." And I thought, "That's not really fair. Why should he be all happy and remarried, and here I am in a situation and I'm too scared to change it because I don't want to take that step." So I

got a little bit kind of mad about it and thought, "No, that's not right. I shouldn't be doing this to myself."

Then also, when I got pregnant with this baby, Bobby and Kenny my two younger sons, were always saying to me, "Well how come you and dad don't get married? Don't you love him?"

And I remember when I was growing up with mom, people would always say that she was a woman of loose morals, because she was living with guys that she wasn't married to. And to me, like I didn't really care before that. But then with the baby and all, it was like, "Jeez why the hell not? Sure let's get married already. Darcy wants to, the only one that holding back is myself."

Of course then I wasn't sure how the two older kids were going to feel about it. But I told them and they said, "Well it's about time." Which, I guess if I had decided and they didn't like it, I would have done it anyway. But you like to have their vote of confidence on it. Johnny is even standing up with Darcy, he's going to be our best man.

And then, now my daughter Darling is pregnant. She's seventeen. I don't know. I've known she was having sex for awhile now and I always told her, "Don't be stupid. Don't get pregnant when you're too young. Get an education, have a life. You be smart, use birth control." And I told that to her boyfriend too. I says, "It's not just the girl's

responsibility." But now here she is, her baby's due about a month after mine.

But I guess it depends on your parents too. Like if they're there to help you, you have the extra help, and it's not so bad. Like my friend said to me once--her daughter got pregnant--and she said, "Oh, I'm going to kick the little bitch out of the house and she's never coming back again."

And I just said to her right then and there, I said, "That's a terrible attitude. She's still your daughter, whether she's pregnant or not."

She turned around and she said to me, "Just wait'll your daughter gets pregnant. You'll see what I'm talking about."

I said, "No. Excuse me. I'll never be that way. I will never kick my daughter out just because she's pregnant. That's totally different."

"Oh you say that, but wait 'til it's you."

I says, "No. I say it and I know it. I would not do that to my daughter. If she needs help, I'll help her out. I'm not going to bad-mouth her just because she's pregnant. Whatever happens, she's still your family."

All you can just keep telling a young girl is what you went through. But a person has their own opinions anyway. And you can tell people all you want to tell them. But it's up to them to listen.

It's the same with Darling. I'd tell her all the stuff that I went through and how I feel about it. You know like, "Wait 'til you get older to get pregnant, wait til you're older to have a family. Get an education first." But, it's her option. It was her option whether she chose to listen to me or not. And all I can say to her now is, "If you need help, I'm there. You know, I'll do what I can for you, but that's all I can do." Like I told her, "I'm not going to raise that baby for you, but I will help you. Now it's your responsibility."

Not that there's anything wrong with having kids, or even not being married. Maybe years ago there was, people would look down on you, but it's not really like that anymore. It's been really hard having my kids by myself and raising them, especially with all the stuff we've gone through. But I wouldn't change that to not have them, I can't imagine a life without them. I think I'd be pretty lonely and empty. I think I would just wait 'til I was older to have them, but I would still have them.

I think things are going pretty well for us now. I was on my own, I put myself through school, I finally took the secretarial course. And then I had a job for six months, a six-month term. But now I'm pregnant, I'm having a baby. And then I'm back to work after that. Like Darcy works, I'm going to be working. So with both of our incomes, we'll make a go of it. I'm not worried about that. I mean, if it

gets down to the nitty-gritty, and it turns out that I don't get a job, you can still fall back on Welfare. Heaven forbid, I don't want to find myself back in that situation. But that's what it's there for.

I think my life has been so traumatic up 'til now. It just, it's always been about surviving. Before, all I did was survive. Before it was just one worry after another. Like, what next? What's going to happen now, what's going to happen to the kids? It was just a constant worry.

But now, I'm trying to put my life back together. I mean now, it's not just a survival thing anymore. It's actually enjoying life now again. Now, you still have to worry about them, especially those two older kids, Johnny and Darling. But I'm not so worried about it. I mean before, that's all I thought about was surviving. Get up one day and then the next. And raising my kids. Making sure they had a life where they didn't have to be abused and beat up, and seeing their mother beat up.

Yeh, I guess it really was about surviving. That's even what my kids told me once. We were sitting down, talking about some of the stuff we've been through. And my son said to me, "Mom. You're the one that got us through. You managed to keep us all together."

And this is Helen. (Buckle up).

Helen starts early and moves fast. She was up bright and early this morning picking berries and digging vegetables in her garden before driving the fifty miles into the city for our visit. She arrives still fresh, casually dressed in pink shorts and an airy blouse, and laden with harvest gifts for me--zucchini and carrots and an ice-cream pail of large, perfect strawberries.

Helen is close to forty. She has been a grade one teacher for twelve years. She is married and her three children, aged nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one, have all left home.

Helen is well prepared for our meetings. In fact, she has jotted down some organizing questions ahead of time, and it is readily apparent that she has been thinking about her story and its meanings for some time before today.

Listening to Helen is like going for a fast ride down smooth paved blacktop, maybe a joyride. I started using the fast-driving metaphor while creating Helen's story and she liked it so much that we decided to use it in the title too. It seemed a good image on several levels, both because precociousness--starting very early to be very good--emerges as an important theme in Helen's story, and because of Helen's lifestyle--she does a great deal of highway driving. Listening to Helen, I also often felt like the passenger in a fast red car, one which was expertly handled.

Our time together was relaxed and easy, we often seemed to be smiling together at her insights and observations. There was a sense of sharing and comfort between us and of real understanding. A great deal of laughter accompanies Helen's story, some wry comments, and also some profound silences. So do up your seatbelt, sit back, and enjoy the ride.

Helen's Story: Cruisin' for Home on #1

It's so interesting that now is when you asked to hear my life story. Because I guess I do tend to think a lot about my life. I've been trying to figure it out and sort of explain myself to myself over the years. I guess I have felt the need to do that at least partly because I felt that I did do something that was unconventional in having my children so young. And I wish I would have written it down as I went along, you know, just so I could see my explanation at different points. Because I think it changes. So this is, I think, what I would call my current explanation.

I had my children when I was very young. I left home in 1972 when I was sixteen. And then I started getting pregnant. I had Belle in 1973, Bess in '74, and Charles in '76. And it was like BOOM, we had them, and then BOOM, they were gone. Belle left in 1991, Bess in '92, and Charles was

gone last year, in '94. Those are the important moments in my life, right? The births and the leavings.

Of course there have been many changes in between the births and the leavings, but with me change seems to happen real fast. With me, it tends to be more breaks. Just sudden, definite breaks. Like when I changed from someone who was part of my parents' family when I was fourteen to someone who was not. Like moving to Regina and becoming that different person there when I was sixteen, being part of the couple with Stan and becoming a mother. And then moving back here five years later, finishing university and becoming a teacher. Having the kids and then having them gone.

And I think I'm in the midst of one of those changes now too. My kids have all left home, and I can see that there are things changing again about who I am and what's happening in my life. There are changes happening in my relationship with Stan, and lately these experiences with depression and anxiety have been becoming stronger and demanding to be addressed.

I had the opportunity to reflect on this a good deal this summer when I spent a couple of weeks driving out to Alberta with my sister Ruthie and her three children. We spent hours and hours just driving through this gorgeous countryside and I find that you are able to think about a

lot like that, just sitting there watching the scene change around you.

I had also met a friend of mine in Calgary. Actually, we were best friends as girls, but we hadn't seen each other in twenty-five years. We started talking about our lives and where we're at these days. And here we were in this crowded room, we were at a car show in the hospitality room. And there we are, gabbing away about approaching forty and menopause and all this stuff, right in the midst of this table full of total strangers.

But what was amazing to both of us was that we had, in some ways, so much in common even though on the surface our lives have been almost completely different. She's childless--her husband didn't want children and she has been very involved in her career. And I was a teenaged mother. And yet at this time of our lives, we seem to have so many of the same issues and feelings. You know, satisfactions and also questions. Questions about the choices we have made and the directions we have taken.

And then on the drive back, Ruthie drove one car and I had her three kids in the back of the station wagon. The days were so full, you know, there wasn't any time for being depressed. And I remember one evening, it was about eight o'clock, driving along and I glanced in the rearview mirror. And there the three children were all konked out in the back.

And I remember thinking, "Well this is what it used to be like. This was my life." I had done absolutely essential work all day long. Never really had to make a decision about myself or what I would do because I was leaving it up to the kids. Just responding to what they wanted and what they needed. My life was totally child-centred,

I was thinking about all this, as I was getting ready to come and tell my story. And so these are the questions that I've been reflecting on. Why did I choose to have children at age sixteen? What factors made that choice so successful for me? And how has it influenced me, what difference has it made?

I chose to have children at age sixteen because I was ready to be an adult. Before that I think I was very much like a model child in a lot of ways. You know, I was quiet and responsible, so I was given a lot of responsibility by my parents and a lot of trust. I loved to do childcare and by the time I was twelve, I'd spend my summers going to whoever'd had the latest baby, my aunts or friends of my parents, looking after their children. And by the time I was fourteen, I was looking after my younger siblings, basically running the household during the summer when mom was working.

And I loved it! I really did. That was my choice to go out and look after people's kids. I thought it was great

and I just loved them. I've always just really loved babies, and actually children of just about any age.

Mom and dad would go away for the weekend when I was fourteen and I would be in charge, I would look after the house and kids and all that kind of stuff. And I just remember never resenting it. When Ruthie was a baby, my brother George and I used to fight about who got to play with her first in the morning. It would be this race to see who got to her room first.

You know I had a lot of power as the oldest kid in the family. But probably what it did for me, although I was a very shy kid socially, was that it made me feel like a very competent person in a lot of ways. And academically I was advanced, I was a year ahead in school too. So I always felt very confident scholastically as well.

And I guess what happened as I got older was that all my friends were older than I was. Like even my best friends would be a year or two older. And then the guys that we would hang around with would be a year or two older than them. So I was always with people older than myself, unless I was the babysitter. I think that made a difference too.

And when I got to be fourteen, I didn't feel fourteen at all. I felt much older than that. And started doing things that I would have cringed at my fourteen year old doing. When I was fourteen, that's when I started dating. And it didn't take long until I was into the drinking and

smoking and all that kind of stuff. And skipping school-- the academics just went right downhill that year. That was my grade ten year. It sort of happened to me and my friends at the same time, we just all rebelled in that way. And I mean we really played the system, we really did that whole bit for that whole year.

My parents I think sort of chose to ignore that it was happening and never dealt with it directly. Like I would literally come home, drunk. And dad might say, "Are you drinking?"

I'd say, "No!" and go to bed. And I'd be obviously, you know like, quite drunk! Or the next morning, quite hungover. But it wasn't until my brother got to that stage that they seemed to recognize what was going on.

I'm sure in teenage time it would seem to happen slowly, but for my parents, it probably happened over a space of two months. And with me being the oldest one, they may have had absolutely no idea what to do. Like I remember when I was fifteen, my mother having this heart to heart talk about me being careful with guys or something. And this was about four months after I'd started sleeping with Stan! So now looking back I don't know if they were really as naive as they seemed to be and didn't see it or whether they just chose to ignore it and hope it would go away, or what.

But it wasn't any easier for me either, because although the lifestyle that I was leading was mild by today's standards, it was still a little bit scary to me. And what bothered me most was this constant deceit, this constant lying that I was doing all the time, about where I was and what I was doing. And it bothered me that I wasn't brave enough to just come out and say, "Well I'm going to do this. You know like, to hell with you." I just didn't have that kind of personality.

I remember having this one little flash one time, where I thought things were going to work out alright, and then after that giving up with my parents. But I mean my poor parents. When I look back, I think "Oh Jeez. The things I did to them."

This one Saturday, I'd gotten together with a bunch of friends and we were going to return a whole bunch of empty beer bottles. So we went walking into the local hotel. And my dad used to do coffee in the restaurant part of the hotel. So here's his fourteen year old teenage daughter, walking in with an armload of empties and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. This is in front of all of his colleagues and coffee buddies. It's the kind of thing you can't ignore.

So when I got home, then I knew that this time they weren't going to be able to ignore this one. And I can

remember my mother saying to me, "Well we can't stop you from smoking."

And I can remember this little flashlight going on in my head, thinking, "Wow! She realizes that, she realizes that she can't stop me from doing this." And to me, it was such a positive moment, I thought it was like an acknowledgement of some kind, that I'm going to get treated like an adult.

And in the next breath, she says, "If we ever catch you again, you're grounded for da-da-da-da-da."

You know, so then my immediate next thought is, "Fine, you won't catch me anymore." Like the classic teenage rebellion thing. So that was the end of it. After that I just laid low, and they ignored everything possible that they could ignore.

The one thing that's done for me is that I've made sure that I know my kids, I hope, better than what they did. I won't let it go. And I'm much more inclined to confront them. Like if Charles came home and I thought he'd been drinking, and I said, "Have you been drinking?" And he said No, I'd say, "Breathe on me." Like I have actually done that. "Breathe on me. This smell isn't from a friend you gave a ride home an hour ago. Just breathe on me." And then he admits to it you know. I won't let it go, I won't sort of let it slide.

So looking back it's really odd. At fourteen, yeh, I was just smokin' through the whole year. And then by the time I was fifteen, it was like I was ready to settle down. By the time fifteen came, I was tired of being a teenager. Tired of always being worried I was going to get caught. Tired of doing what I wasn't supposed to do.

And Stan at that time had a lot less money than a lot of our friends did. So when I started going out with him, we didn't do the party scene, simply because we couldn't afford it. And he just wasn't into it either. He wanted to socialize and meet people, but his father was an alcoholic and so he was much more careful about alcohol. He was also older, and more mature. I mean he was out of school, he was having to support himself. And I guess a lot of what I was looking for was a little bit more stability too.

Also most of these boys were such dingbats! You'd be someplace with them. They'd forget that they had given you a ride, drive away and leave you, forget to take you home. Like totally unreliable characters. Or they'd get drunk and sick all over the place. So Stan had done a bit of that, never a whole lot, but he was just sort of past it. I imagine my parents had concerns about me going out with him, especially when they found out that he was six years older than I was. But compared to what I had been going out with, he probably was that breath of fresh air for my parents too in a lot of ways.

He was twenty-one when we first started dating and I had just turned fifteen. Well I was always very physically mature. When I was twelve, I could pass for sixteen. So at fifteen, when we started dating, he thought I was older than I was, and I thought he was younger than he was. And it was too late by the time we found out how old we were because we were already committed.

But things changed, like right away. I quit smoking when I started going out with him. He didn't smoke and he didn't like the smell of it, and that was no big hardship for me to quit because when you're fourteen you can't smoke in a lot of places anyway. We still did the party thing a little bit, but basically we became a couple.

I guess the thing is that I felt really committed to him, especially once we started having sex. But once again, it had to be secretive. And it bothered me so much. I just thought that I didn't want to deal with the possibility of somebody calling me on it. I felt really strongly about that, that this was an adult decision I was making, and that nobody'd better stand in my way. And yet, to be living in my parents' household where they knew nothing about this kind of relationship meant it had to be secretive all the time. So to move away was such a relief, to get it all out in the open--this is what's going on. You know this was sort of, taking over my own life in a way.

I left home in a strange way I guess. When I look back, I have a hard time accepting what I did to my mother. Because I just did really run away from home. I packed all my stuff up, left one Sunday when mom and dad weren't there, and never came back. I'd been sixteen for about a month. And what had happened was that it was just awful economically in Manitoba at the time. And Stan was really having a tough go of it, like finding a job and keeping it. A job that paid a reasonable rate. So he felt he had to leave the province to get work. And I decided I was going with him.

I still had a year of grade twelve left, I was in between grade eleven and grade twelve. And I never for a moment considered quitting school, I knew I would just go away with him and then continue my schooling. Sometimes I sort of shudder now, and I think, Well he took on a lot, he took on the financial responsibility for me, and I just assumed he would. It wasn't something I even asked him, if he wanted me to go. It was just, "Oh if you're going, I'm going too."

So I just left, packed up my stuff and left when mom and dad weren't around. And went into a total state of denial. You know, for somebody who was still fairly family oriented--I had spent the whole summer looking after my little sisters and was very close to them. I left home and honestly, I don't think a thought of my family crossed my

mind for two weeks. You know, what's going on there, are they worried about me? Just not a thought.

I knew my parents would eventually find out where I was because they knew Stan's parents. And his parents knew that he was going to Regina. They didn't know that I was going with him, but as soon as I went missing of course, my parents contacted his family and found out that he had moved to Regina to get a job. So they did know, they knew where I was. But they had no way of contacting me.

Eventually they did get in contact with somebody else they knew was out there that we probably would get around to contacting. So it was about two weeks after I left that this person came and said to me, "Helen, you're supposed to call your parents." So then I phoned them.

But you know I just didn't want to deal with it. And for the same reason I couldn't have told them ahead of time that I was doing this. They would have said no for one thing and then we would have been into a fight. And I didn't fight with them, I didn't fight. I did things behind their backs but I never, never came right out and disobeyed. Or said, "No, this is what I'm going to do." Wish I could have done that, you know, it's much more honest.

But anyway, I guess probably they thought that I had left because I was pregnant, which I wasn't at that time. It was a fairly calm sort of conversation that we had over the phone. I said, "I've left and I'm not coming home. I'm

enrolled in school." And they didn't push it, although my brother told me later that they had checked to see if they could make me come home and found out they couldn't because I was sixteen already.

But I couldn't just give him up, I couldn't just let him go to Regina by himself. Because to me, and he's said the same thing too, it would have been very hard to continue the relationship and we probably would have just drifted apart. And for me, we might as well have been married from the time I was fifteen and a half. When I became sexually involved with him, then that was it. I didn't feel at all badly about premarital sex, but if that relationship would have broken off, I would have felt terrible. I think about that with my girls now though. I tell them, "Go ahead. Sleep with him. Have babies with him. Just keep it unattached." A little cynical as you get older.

So once we had moved, it was very shortly after that that Stan came up with this thing one night. He said, "You know what? We could have a baby." It wasn't something that I had thought of, you know. I was thinking, "I'm going to get my grade twelve, I'll go to university, I'll still continue on with that part of my life." But I guess when he said, "Let's have a baby," it was like, Yeh, if I have a baby, my parents will know that this is for real. They won't be sitting there waiting for me to come home. It was sort of almost like the equivalent of an engagement ring or

something like that. Looking back on it, that's really the way I see it now. Like, I'll have this baby, and everybody will know that it's for real. That I'm not just fooling around.

I really felt that having that baby would legitimize our relationship and my status as an adult. I was in love, I was sexually involved, and felt very committed to that relationship. And I was worried that that would be trivialized, by others or by myself.

Also, in having a baby, I felt that in a way I was escaping from family expectations where there was no room for talking about relationships, only careers. I always knew that I would have children, but that definitely wasn't the immediate plan for me. And it wasn't something that got talked about in the same way that, you know, what I would take in university and all that kind of stuff got talked about. I just found when I got to my teenage years that the whole relationship part, boyfriends and stuff like that, was just not seen as important at all. It wasn't something I could talk about with my parents.

And I always assumed that Stan and I were going to have kids anyhow. It wasn't like we sat down and said, "Well do you think we should have children some time?" It was more just, "Well what will we name the first one?" That was our attitude.

So we did sort of plan Belle. And I got pregnant, like right away. I think looking back that it's a wonder that I didn't get pregnant earlier, it really is. Because when we started out having sex, we were very careful. I had had excellent information on birth control, mom had made sure of that. Like via a pamphlet that she left laying around. But it was really good information on women's fertility cycles. I knew about fertile periods, when you can and can't get pregnant.

So when we first started, we only had sex with a condom, and only during my safe period. Just those two together. But then towards the end, like after three or four months, it got to the point where we only used a condom if it wasn't my safe period!

I probably knew within two weeks that I was pregnant. My first signal with my pregnancies was always getting sick in the mornings, I had morning sickness before I even missed a period. But with Belle being the first one, I didn't know for sure what it was. And I didn't go to the doctor for a long time. Which was probably a mistake because I did have to get some help with the morning sickness, and had I gone earlier, I might not have been as sick.

But neither of us told our parents until about two months before she was born. And then, only because both sets of parents decided to come and visit us. In fact, I don't think Stan told his parents until they were there. By

that point he didn't have to tell them--I think they walked in and there I was, pregnant.

I did tell mine. I knew they were coming to visit, and I knew they were coming during Spring Break. I kept thinking there was still time to tell them and all of a sudden it ends up that the Spring Break in Manitoba was a week earlier than the Spring Break in Saskatchewan. And, "Oh my God, they'll be here in three days and I still haven't told them!" So I think I ended up telling them by phone.

Anyway, I got through my first term of grade twelve, even with this terrible morning sickness and missing half my morning classes because I was sick. Or sitting there in the middle of class, trying not to throw up.

I had this one class, a French class, where there was just a small number of students, and a teacher who actually got to know you personally. The others were these fairly large, anonymous classes. I didn't show very much, so nobody could have known I was pregnant until I was about six months anyhow. But in that class, they sort of knew my living circumstances, because part of it was, you know, talking in French. So I was fairly up-front, I'd say, "J'habite avec mon ami," you know, "I'm living with my boyfriend."

I had the same teacher the second term for German. It was kind of neat actually, because they had this German

supper at the end of the year where they cooked German food, and he had it at his house. And they ended up turning it into a sort of a baby shower for me. Like this grade twelve class, and they gave me a couple of sleepers and blankets and stuff like that.

And then, it happened to work out that they had final exams at the end of June. Belle was born June third and the first two or three weeks of June were study period, it was sort of optional whether you went or not. So it suited me fine, I just didn't go. I stayed at home with her and studied, and then I took my final exams at the end of the month. I had a really easy academic year and I got great marks and yet I really felt that I did virtually nothing. So it was lucky, I mean that part was lucky.

In retrospect though, it troubles me that the school knew I was living on my own and pregnant, and yet they didn't offer me any guidance. I think the Guidance Counsellor, when she finally realized I was pregnant, did call me in one day and ask me a couple of questions, mainly did I have someone to drive me to the hospital when it was time to have my baby. That was it, basically I was left alone.

In a way, I think that was fine for me. Like for my own sake, I'm glad everybody left me alone. But I think that as a school, or any people dealing with teenagers, they could have done more just to find that out. I worry if

things hadn't been going so well for me. Like what would have happened if things weren't working out between Stan and me, and I would have been too scared to go back home? I could have been in pretty serious trouble and not have had any place to turn to.

Looking back on it now, I wonder what the perceptions of other people were. I didn't really think about it at the time, but now I wonder. Like I remember during the optional two weeks in June, I took Belle in one afternoon to my French class to show her off. And I remember standing at my locker with this baby in my arms, just glowing. And some teacher was coming down the hall. And just walked right past me without saying a word. It was such an impersonal high school.

I can remember being really excited about having a baby, not having any reservations. Or worries about how we were going to do it. We weren't in great economic circumstances but Stan had a steady job. We knew we had a roof over our heads. And babies don't cost much until they get older--then they cost money. So I don't remember even having financial concerns really about it.

As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I went out and bought a book, because that's how I deal with new experiences, and we went to a pre-natal class. It was basically a positive experience, although the birth was much more painful than I thought it was going to be. And then at

the second birth, I was much more frightened of the pain, because I knew what to expect. And I mean they were so close together--they were only sixteen months apart--so I could actually remember. But then Bess was a smaller baby, and it turned out there was nothing to it. It was just like, "Hey, my baby's here! I feel great."

But even with Belle, I felt fully prepared to look after a baby, babies didn't scare me at all. I had done lots of babysitting and I had no qualms about my own ability to look after babies and small children. And then of course Belle ended up being such an easy baby to look after too, like she was healthy. Bess had allergies really bad and was more of a demanding baby to look after. You had to spend a lot more time at night with her, and she didn't sleep so well. But with Belle it was just, "This is what having babies is all about. Let's have lots!"

In a lot of ways, I didn't really feel stigmatized or judged. I remember hearing from other people, this one other girl in particular, she had her first baby the same age as I had. And maybe there was no father or whatever, but I remember her telling me about the pressure, you know to see a counsellor or somebody, and maybe talk about giving the baby up. But I never went through any of that, never had to deal with any of that stuff.

Partly I have a feeling the doctor thought I was married, right from day one. We weren't but he thought we

were and that seemed to make a difference to him. And then in the end he found out that we weren't really married. I think his attitude might have been that if you have a husband, everything is okay. Which in a lot of ways, is probably the attitude most people have. But we never had to have any contact with social workers or whatever, where you start to have some feedback that tells you to doubt yourself, and doubt what you're doing. What we got, for the most part, was positive. I think in part that's what made parenting at sixteen successful for me.

And even our families, surprisingly enough in a way, nobody told us we shouldn't be doing this. And yet, I was always scared to tell mom I was pregnant. Even with the second and third ones! I'd always wait til the last minute to tell her. But yet when we'd tell them, it wasn't as if anybody ever told us that we shouldn't be, or that we were being wrong or silly, they would never interfere. In a way we were sort of treated as adults. But I think we were fairly guarded with our parents anyway. It was like we didn't want to hear it if they were disappointed or whatever.

That's what really helped--they were supportive but from a distance. For instance, it was mom who gave me the information about the correspondence courses that I wound up taking for the next several years. In her own way, she still encouraged me to keep on at that, and certainly they

offered to pay my tuition. Their big concern was that I still do that part of my life, and that was what I wanted to do too so it worked out.

It could have been really easy for them just to cut me off. You know they could have said, "You made your bed, you lie in it. We don't want to hear from you." That would have been dreadful, it really would. And yet, they didn't do that.

This has really been brought back to me now with our children. When our son was going through that rebellious teenage time, my husband would sometimes just act like, "You're out of my life." And I just thought, no, you don't do that. You don't do that to your kids, no matter what they do. You don't take that kind of attitude towards them. Stan's parents didn't take it with us, and my parents didn't. Maybe my dad came close, but my mom kept him in line.

And yet, the grandchildren were welcome from the moment they were born, and treated royally by both sets of grandparents. Whatever their other feelings were, they were just delighted with babies. But we do have that kind of family, we love babies.

On the other hand, the distance part comes in too. I just think, Thank God we went as far away from home as we did, because it let us do our own thing and put some distance between us and them. They weren't around to give

us unwanted advice, we had to figure things out on our own. They could have put a real strain on our relationship at the time, and the distance alleviated that. We communicated what we wanted to communicate by letter and everybody sort of left it at that.

The other way that distance made parenting successful for me was that it would have been difficult if we had been living in the same town with all my parents' friends, and with my friends and everybody knowing. The small town atmosphere and the judgement that would have been passed, well we just avoided all that. Moving to a city, we could pretend to be married and no one would question us. I had left home in September and we didn't get married until May, but if we decided to say we were married, nobody questioned us. We could do whatever was convenient or whatever fit the situation. If we were wanting to rent an apartment, yes we're married. And nobody knew how old I was, so they just assumed I was old enough.

You never know, you look back and you think, how much of it was luck? There were a lot of lucky things that happened. Fortunately, Stan was able to get a job and we didn't have to ever come back home like a failure. Fortunately, our kids were born fairly healthy. And you know fortunately, the timing worked out that I could write my exams. There was just little things that made a difference that were very lucky.

And the other thing that really helped me was peer groups of other mothers of young children. I went to this Parents Day Program in Regina for several years, starting right around when my second one was born. It was part discussion group and part nursery school for the little kids and it was a wonderful experience for me. The thing that it gave me was the knowledge that here's all these other mothers who are older than I am, but we all have the same problems. Like I'm not having problems because I am younger. That was really important validation for me, to find out that as far as being a mother was concerned, I was no different than anybody else. Even though I was several years younger.

I felt accepted and equal because I was physically mature enough to pass for whatever age any other mother was. Nobody knew my age unless I chose to tell them. As long as people around me didn't know how old I was, they would treat me according to whatever image I presented myself. There was nothing to indicate that I was as young as I was so for people in this group, I think I was just another mother with a toddler. I can't remember if my age ever even came up. But the validation that I got from that was just sort of an internal thing for me.

In other settings too, getting to know people in the park with other young kids, that was the way you'd do it. You had young kids and lots of us were new in the city, we

were all looking for friends who were in the same situation. And I sort of had my validation that what I was doing was the same as what everybody else was doing, and I wasn't making mistakes out of ignorance just because I was young.

And those are the days that I remember, so many busy, good days. I would do my laundry and my typical houseworky type things. I did a lot of the extra things like baking bread, and I sewed all the kids' clothes, that kind of thing. I really liked doing that. And yet I had a lot of time to spend with the kids so we'd usually go to a nearby park. We spent a lot of time at the park, and there'd be other young mothers and kids. Sometimes you'd meet people casually, sometimes you'd arrange to meet people there.

The park was about two blocks away. I remember walking along there--I'd have my lawnchair and a book and my bag full of stuff for the kids. Belle would take her little ride-on horse and she'd ride and I had a backpack for Bess. After awhile I had a double stroller for them. And we'd spend long hours in that park, long hours. Sometimes we'd take our lunch along and have a picnic. And it was good. It was really good mothering.

I enjoyed it. And I read a lot. I was taking correspondence courses so sometimes my reading was reading for my course but I also just read fiction a lot. We went to the library once a week at least. I wrote letters, I can remember I was writing letters home a lot, to my mom and

friends. And probably, I worked it out so that almost every day I would go to somebody's place for coffee or they'd come to my place for coffee.

Stan worked shiftwork so it really varied. Sometimes, if he was working and it was Sunday so the library was closed, well that could get pretty long and boring because the kids went to bed at 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock. But the correspondence courses really helped and I had lots of time to do them. And then, I'd spend time playing with the kids, reading to the kids, taking them to the zoo or whatever was free.

We didn't know people to babysit, but I did have this arrangement with this other woman for awhile where Monday afternoons she took my kids, and then one afternoon a week I took hers. Just so we had this total time to ourselves. Often, I would leave and walk down to the library and listen to classical music on the headphones. That was nice. I didn't really feel the need to get away from the kids that much, but I did feel the need to just be by myself. Just not have the responsibility of being with them all the time.

Stan's days off would be our shopping days. And we spent a lot of time walking, we would have the babies in the stroller or the backpack and we spent a lot of time just walking all over Regina. We weren't well-off so we didn't do things that would cost a lot of money. Our idea of entertainment was to go for a drive and get out of the city.

We had a station wagon and we'd put the kids in the back, or we'd go to drive-ins so we could put sleeping bags in the back for the kids.

It was the early years in our marriage so we spent a lot of time talking to each other, getting to know each other. Going for long drives into the countryside. And then when the kids were a little bit older, when Charles was a baby, we started camping. And that of course was a tradition in my family, so when we moved back to Manitoba, that just really continued.

So then, Belle was such an easy, easy baby, she was just the perfect child that she always has been. So I just thought that if I was at home with one baby, I might as well have another one. And the same was with Charles. By then Bess was two and a half already, and we knew we wanted more. And I knew that I wanted to continue on with my university, I was getting rather impatient that I could only take one or two classes a year, and I think I just felt like if I had another baby now, that would complete our family and I could get on with things.

I was always kind of driven that way. It was the same with university, it was going slow when you want it to go fast. It's only now that I'm close to forty that I say to myself, "Slow down already, it's all going to be there ten years from now."

So really when I look back at those early years, they were pretty good. The only hard part was the pregnancy with Charles, I was really quite sick that time. And I think that was just because of the spacing, they were so close together. If there was anything that I would change, it would just be to wait awhile for Charles. But the rest of it, I often look back and I think, "Now those were good years." They were good years.

Then when Charles was still pre-school in 1977, we moved back to Manitoba, to a little town near Winnipeg called Poplarview. That was a good move for us. It wasn't a good move financially, but it was a good move in terms of lifestyle. We were living in the country, we had space, we had good neighbours, and we were close enough that my family could really help us out.

I spent a couple of years finishing off my Education degree. I could always do courses in the evenings or during intersession or by correspondence, it was flexible enough. And especially during intersession, my mom could take Charles for a week or two. Or I could leave him with some friends on the week-ends so that I could do assignments.

And actually, as I was doing it, people would say to me, "This is nuts. Slow down." But it worked so well with pre-school children because I didn't have to worry about finding sitters. The only killer for me with being out in the country was the extra two hours a day I put in

travelling, just driving that fifty miles of blacktop twice a day. But it was a lifestyle that worked really well. I felt like a stay-at-home mother for the most part.

When we first moved to Poplarview, I started volunteering at this private nursery school. And then, just after I had completed my Education degree a paid position came up there, so of course it was natural that I started working there. It was two years later that I got my job in Winnipeg teaching grade one.

So when I started working fulltime, Belle was nine, Bess was seven, and Charles was six, and I used to leave them on their own in the mornings. I couldn't do that now or they'd take my children away from me, but in those days you could. I'd have to start my drive to work half an hour before they left for school. So I'd have them all ready, like I'd braid hair and that but they were on their own til school time.

I'd set the timer on the stove, and they'd wait for the timer to ding, and that's when they'd leave for school. There was a list taped to the door of things they had to do, you know put the cat out, turn lights off, make sure your teeth are brushed. And there was a neighbour who was home, an emergency phone number that they could call, but they never did. And I let the school know that this is what was happening so they could let me know if there were any problems.

Since I've been teaching, I've certainly seen children who are sort of street kids in a way, and I've realized that my children were left on their own but with very explicit guidelines and structure. And that it's very different for children who are just left to fend for themselves. My children were never left to fend for themselves even though they were on their own to do these certain things.

Belle and I have been talking about this quite a bit lately, because she's been so interested to hear about this research and what I'm going to say about my life. We both look back on it and feel that, as children, we were given a lot of responsibility. And we both feel good about it, it was enjoyable for the most part. It helped us feel confident about ourselves and develop competencies that we have to this day.

But we had a very child-centred house, we always made sure that they had lots of paper and dress-up clothes. We read to them everyday, we talked to them everyday. And there was no part of the house they couldn't go, nothing in the house that they couldn't use. Belle was talking about this too. She said, "Everything you did, we were with you. If you were baking cookies, we were baking cookies. If dad was on the roof, we were on the roof." She said, "Everything you did, you were so very child-centred."

But not in that we weren't doing what we needed to do, there wasn't a big separation between adult and child

activities. It was just what the family did and out of that came a whole bunch of child-centred activities that were natural.

Belle says to me, "Mom, the way you tell it, it's just like first we were little and then we were big. There's nothing in between." Well and I'm thinking as I look back to that period, in a way, that's almost the way I would say it. They were little and then they were big.

And when I look back I think, "God they were there for such a short time." Like, people told me they would soon be gone but I didn't believe it. Now I believe it and I think, "God they were there with me for such a short time. I'm glad, I'm glad I really threw myself into it." We would play on those long evenings when Stan was working evening shift. For years, we played. They played and I played with them.

And I think that's a positive part of being a young mother. To have the energy to do that, and the willingness. And also it's extended right into my teaching career. I love children's literature. And I pass those books right along to my kids, that I'm teaching. "These books mean something to me, these pictures mean something to me. It's not just that I'm a teacher." I guess I'm just a kid-oriented person.

And then around 1989, that's when I started having a lot of problems with depression. And then anxiety attacks

and stuff like that which wasn't really a part of my life before. But I guess since the kids have been older and haven't needed as much attention, I've had more time to read and to think about myself, you know. So that's sort of the stage that I'm at now.

Their leaving seemed to happen so rapidly, you know having them close together like that, then they all leave at once too. So now, I'm on the verge of a new thing, I look at it as middle-age. Like I'm almost moving into menopausal years, but in a fairly positive way, as long as I can keep a handle on the depression and that kind of stuff.

I guess the depressions did coincide with the kids leaving home and yet it was what I thought of even at the time as a good year--1988. Things just seemed to come together. I had been working for about seven years and I was using some new programs at work and I was getting a lot of positive feedback on my abilities. That was really exciting.

And my girls, well Belle had just turned sixteen and she was such a beautiful, competent girl, and Bess would have been about fifteen. They were at a really interesting stage and we'd talk. Like talk and talk and talk until late at night. I just really enjoyed their company. Things were really going right at home, things were really going right at work. You know a whole bunch of things just came together.

It wasn't so bad when the girls moved out. You know I missed them but there was still Charles there to talk to for the next couple of years, and I didn't worry so much about the girls because they were sharing an apartment together in the city, and they were always less of a worry. They didn't get into the kind of dangerous situations that Charles did when he first left. He definitely has a more cavalier attitude toward life than most of our family. It was really when Charles was preparing to leave that I started having the other problem, getting anxiety attacks and just this overpowering sense of worry and dread.

Being depressed is really hard. I tend to be the kind of person who is feeling and thinking all the time. And when I'm depressed, I just shut down, really withdraw. Don't talk. I can remember this one time, standing at the kitchen window, looking out at the yard. Blank. Thinking nothing, feeling nothing. And knowing there was something terribly wrong, but I had no idea what it was or how to explain it or why. The worst thing about depression is not knowing where it comes from. If you've got a reason, okay fine, then you don't feel crazy.

It's really just been the last two years or so that I started to try different things to address these problems, before that I just ignored it. Like I've tried medication, and also counselling and a support group. And I also read self-help books and now I'm keeping a journal.

And the anxiety, well at least I know that it has to do with the kids. It has to do with the idea of not knowing where they are. I can't remember it being this way when they were really young, it's probably lucky for them because I do get really overprotective. But now, they're old enough that I can tell myself, "Well this is silly. I'm not going to know they're all home in their beds, sleeping, safe and sound." And yet, sometimes I just feel this panic, sheer panic, like where are they? Are they okay? So I'm trying to deal with that.

I guess I sort of see connection in this. Like I was young to have kids, and I'm young to have my kids leaving. I said something to my husband the other night about how it feels sort of strange to be coming to the end of my reproductive years. Like I have noticed a lot of changes in the last six months, you know, that I'm sort of pre-menopausal. And he said something about, "Oh is your biological clock ticking a bit? Do you want another baby?"

I said, "No! It rang three times, thanks!" Like there are no problems that way.

And yet when I think about it, for most of my life I have been focussing on children. I can remember when my little sisters were born, just leaping into the responsibility of looking after these two little girls. You know, it was sort of expected and yet it was what I really wanted too. Like I was saying to Stan, I became pregnant

almost immediately after leaving home. And those few months are probably the only time in my whole life that I've ever lived without children around. So it's no wonder it feels kind of strange.

I'm looking forward to being a grandparent but none of my kids are planning on children right away. It really feels to me like there is a hole between the generations, but for now, this is where I am.

What difference has it made? How have I been influenced by the choice I made to become a mother at age sixteen? It has been the unconventional part of my life. It has been both a source of pride and embarrassment to various members of my family. And it has caused some dissonance and yet some connections in relationships.

I think this has really been a large unresolved issue between me and my mother. My mother is not a person to stick to the straight-and-narrow, I would say that she admires unconventionality. And comparing myself to this best friend of mine that I mentioned earlier, I can remember at one point happening to overhear a conversation that my mother was having with a friend of hers about my friend. My friend had been quite wild as a teenager, was into the drug scene and all this kind of stuff. And I don't know if that would have been harder for my parents to deal with or not. Like that kind of wildness, you know was sort of what you expected.

But for a person like my mother, who is so career-oriented, to have her oldest daughter leave home and set up housekeeping and have babies at age sixteen... If I would have been three or four years older, nobody would have given it a second thought, but at that age, that may have been in a way the most rebellious thing that I could have done. I don't know if it was or not, and I don't know how much of that entered into my behaviour at the time. But in a way, looking back, my mom was very much into the feminist issues and the whole thing, and what's her daughter doing? She's there in a totally conventional relationship, staying home looking after children. Not being a professional, not pursuing a career for quite awhile.

I don't know how things have changed for mom over the years but I don't think she has any qualms about it now. As soon as I went back to university, and when I got my degree, I think then she could see that it would be okay. Today, my mom and I actually share a lot as professionals, and I think she's very pleased with what I do. It's a kind of neat relationship and more and more we seem to be becoming professional peers. I think at some point she must have decided that what I had done was actually quite remarkable. I'm sure she didn't think so at the beginning though.

I see this as well in what I perceive as my children's reactions to me being a young parent. When they got to be about thirteen or fourteen and realized that their mother

had been sixteen when she had had her first baby, and then as they started reaching those ages that I had been when I had them, you could just see the wheels turning in their heads. And they've been really different in the ways they have reacted to it.

My oldest daughter Belle is, I don't know if 'proud' is the right word to use, but she uses it, she uses the fact that she has had an unconventional mother. If somebody brings up the topic of teenaged mothers or whatever, and starts really denigrating it, she'll say, "Well just a minute here. My mother was sixteen when she had me, and I don't think there's anything wrong with us." Like, she'll go to bat that way and say, "No, don't make judgements based on a person's age." Belle is totally comfortable with the fact that she has had a teenaged mother. It's like it makes her unconventional too.

Bess on the other hand, is I think mildly embarrassed. I don't think it's that she would say I shouldn't have done it. She just looks at it like, why would you do that to yourself? But then, she tends to be more of a conforming kid, outwardly at least. She doesn't like to draw attention or be different.

The other difference that it's made for me is that now I miss, and maybe to some extent, want to relive the teenager/ young unattached adult stage of life. Stan and I have had some problems over the past year that at first I

thought were just coming out of our dealings with Charles' teenage rebellion situation. But I've sort of been recognizing that it's a lot more than that, and here again I'm wondering if it has to do with my young age.

As I said, when Stan and I got together I was ready to be an adult. But there were still things I needed a parent for and he did that for me. Lots of things he did really well, like he was a wonderful economic support throughout the years. But in other ways too, he's really been a good emotional support. When I first left home, he was a good person for me to deal with when I would get homesick.

But now with the kids leaving home, it's been really hard for us to deal with, because we felt so differently about it. And I guess I've been tending to feel more and more put in this child position with him, and feeling like a teenager again, rebelling against it.

For instance, with all the problems I've been having with anxiety and depression, I started thinking that maybe I would start smoking again because I thought that seems to really have a calming effect on me. So I brought this up with Stan one day. And at first I sort of brought it up hypothetically, like I said that this was something I was thinking of doing. And he said that if I started smoking, he would leave me.

So then the next day I'm thinking, "What the Hell's going on here? I'm not a kid." So I went back and I said to

him, "Dear, let me put it this way. I have started smoking, I have already done it. So now it's your decision. Are you going?"

Well he's sort of come to terms with it. Like I called his bluff and he had to decide if he was going to leave on that day, or not. Now he's decided that it's my body and he guesses I can do that if I want to. But we still run into situations like that right now where I feel that I am in the child position and he is acting like the parent.

I guess it's much more on the surface now, I'm much more aware at least of what's going on, and somehow we'll resolve this issue. But it's been a really difficult time in our marriage and whether that would be any different if we would have waited longer or not, I don't know. I wonder whether we sort of let ourselves into some of these patterns because I was so much younger than him. On the other hand, I see lots of women in the same patterns where they're exactly the same age as their partner. I can see parallels with it being a male/ female cultural thing, as much as having anything to do with my age and his age.

Sometimes I think that I may have been unfair to myself. I look at my own kids and I think they may be dealing with some things about being independent and finding themselves because they don't have these other children to focus on. Sometimes I feel that maybe I did myself a disservice by doing that. My girls are making different

mini-career choices as they go along and bigger choices too, and it's stuff I didn't really do at that age. And I do find myself sort of thinking that maybe if I would have done more of that at that age, it might be different now. On the other hand, I figure I'm just doing it in a different order. I had my kids before, I'm finding myself now.

And I remind myself about the talk I had with my friend who's had quite a different life, and that she feels a lot of the same things that I do. Maybe the uncertainties are just something that's a part of my life now that would have been here anyhow. You know it's that transition time. Because we both seem to be at this stage of evaluation.

She's looking at some separation things with her parents and seeing them in a new light, doing some work for herself in that way. We almost got this sense that we're both at this dividing line. I thought it was because my kids have left home, but then talking to her I realized that it happens to other people too. I don't have to blame this all on being an adolescent mother, or being too young to have my kids leave, or some sort of Empty Nest Syndrome. There are other things in a person's life too.

So I can sort of see it both ways. And I can see that children, besides being loved, have served certain functions in my life. They have kept me busy, they have kept me company. And most physical contact in my family, most loving touch, takes place between children and adults, not

between adults. I've been aware of this even with my own children, that we touch less as they get older. I know too that it has always been much easier for me to be assertive on behalf of children than it is for myself, and I think that this relates to my depressions. Now that the kids are gone, I can see that I have a hard time focussing in a positive way on myself and my needs. I can see that I have really thrown myself into having children.

But there too, I also use my work to keep myself busy. I do throw myself completely into my work, and I did that with my education too. I've been talking a lot about addiction with both my husband and my children, different kinds of addictions, and I can see my work almost as being an addiction too. More so than the kids ever were in a way, because with kids, it's essential that you do these things for them, that's part of it. Whereas with work it's a voluntary choice to put more and more of myself into it.

I think it's that intensity that I have, that total way in which I take things on, that makes me what I am. My willingness to do that is what makes me a high achiever at whatever I do. Like I tell my husband, "Hey, sometimes you seem to want to change me into something different." And I tell him, "But you can't change that part without changing this part too."

And if this is a transition time, well transitions aren't always easy. Like when I left home, I just felt like

I was sort of squeezed. In most ways it felt really good and yet there was also sadness. I was dealing with the homesickness and being away from home and the stress that goes with it. Looking back, I was pregnant, it was my first year away from home, first year in a relationship and it was natural that I had unhappy times. Especially on those days when Stan was working or if I was feeling sick, I would cry and cry and just be really homesick.

Looking back, it was perfectly natural to feel that way at that time, it was so much all at once. And I think too that the loneliness I feel now is like the homesickness I felt then. There I was, just starting out on this wonderful new part of my life, and yet I missed the ones I was leaving behind. And now today too, here I am sometimes just numb, or sometimes so anxious and upset. Maybe that's just because of that hole that's opening up in my life, and because it's a big change.

Reflecting on my story, I find myself thinking of these connections. That my life has sort of revolved around family and children, and that they've revolved around me. The whole thing that I'm really part of a family system, that's a theme of my whole life. I guess having children was a way to create my part of that family system. And when I look at the future, that's the most important thing that I look to, is being this person that's within this family system. I don't have a whole lot of identification with

being a totally independent out-there-all-by-myself person. That's part of it.

A big part of it too is I guess that I see myself as having done things differently, but having done them well. Maybe there's a whole societal message in there too, I would like to think that as a society we need to see that people can do things differently and do them well. Hey, I like that--maybe I'll make a little needle-point sampler that says, "I did it differently, but I did it well."

I was also thinking about this idea of being precocious. Perhaps I was precocious sexually but also in other ways I tend to do things early and to really throw myself into things. That is me. My husband says to me, "You know you're always looking for a quick fix, you're looking for a quick answer."

And I say, "Yes. I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right, and I'm going to do it now." And I try to tell him too that that's my strength. It's what got me where I am today. Professionally as well as with my kids. It's a strength, but maybe it can be somewhat detrimental to myself in ways. My doctor says that this is me and that I have some work to do because of the way I am, but not that I necessarily have to change. I like that way of putting it.

I was thinking of this as I was driving home the other day. It's such a familiar drive, I have really spent a significant number of hours on that stretch of road. The

thing that's really characteristic of that drive for me is the fact that I can be between Hectar and Eclairé, or between Eclairé and home, and not have a clue where I am. It happens to other people too because it's such a featureless land at that point. You look around you and it all looks the same either way.

But there's this single tree, out in the middle of this field on Highway One. It's a huge old tree and there's not another tree near the road for miles in either direction. For years as I've been driving back and forth, it's happened so many times that the sun would set right behind that tree just as I was approaching it. And that's always when I would find my bearings, I'd see the tree and I'd know that I was almost home.

And I am left with this sort of image of my family and me as being trees in a bunch that are there for each other. You know, no matter where we are, even if we're apart, that we're this unit that can stand there and protect. That even though sometimes I don't know where I am in some ways, I always know where I am relationship-wise. And those trees in the bunch give comfort and show the way home.

CONCLUSION

What Was The Question?

Reading these stories, one is struck by the lack of emphasis on "the problem of adolescent motherhood." For Helen and Dee, pregnancy was not a problem so much as it was part of a solution. For Helen, the problem was how to become an adult; for Dee, it was how to escape a home where she did not feel respected or loved for herself. For Felicia, although the pregnancy began as a problem, it was soon overshadowed by a larger problem; her desire, but seeming inability, to change her mind and keep the baby.

Also striking is the richness and variedness of the accounts. Although there are some important connections and shared themes, these are very different stories. Felicia's story is about a revelation: an unmarried teen struggles with unplanned pregnancy, finally realizing that she cannot choose a best solution for her child until she learns to focus in on her own real desire. In Dee's story, a discouraged and unhappy young woman escapes an abusive home by hanging all her hopes on a man, only to discover that she has gone 'from the frying pan into the fire' and then to continue the struggle to keep both herself and her children surviving. And Helen's story is about an adolescent, always precocious and independent, who decides early to become an adult by leaving home and starting a family.

In structuring her story, each participant was guided by her own set of questions; some of these questions were obvious and stated, while others were subtextual. To begin with, Felicia's story is organized around the question, "Why did I get pregnant as a teenager?" The answer lies in who she is, which she tells us we can only know by knowing her family. She was lonely as a child, she craved attention and always wanted to be special. She was sexually molested and this taught her to seek attention through sex. Furthermore, her sense of her ordinariness, her unspecialness, led her to believe that she could not possibly become pregnant.

After she gets pregnant, the organizing question changes to "Why did I keep the baby?" Interestingly, however, what emerges is a litany of reasons for not keeping the baby. Felicia wants to do the right thing, to act maturely, responsibly, and morally. She wants to do what is best for the baby, what is best for her family, what others will respect, and what is best in their eyes. This will make her feel special and, she admits, will make things much easier for her because it will allow her to pursue a fulfilling life for herself.

When it comes down to it, though, Felicia cannot give the baby up. Why not? The answer to that question is embedded in the first part of her story. She comes from a family where children are welcome, where family members can count on each other, where family is appreciated and

enjoyed, and where, even if you don't really like everyone, you still love them. You don't turn away from them. Felicia's story goes on to explain why, in retrospect, her decision actually was the right one.

Dee's story followed the events of her life, addressing the question, "What all have I survived so far?" Dee has had to struggle a great deal with hardship; as a child she was stigmatized because she was poor and because her mother was unmarried, she was abused both physically and verbally--as a child by her mother, and then as an adult by her husband. After the shock of finding out that her husband was a child rapist, Dee left him and then turned her efforts to helping her children deal with the effects of their own abuse. Dee also described experiences of happiness, much less plentiful than the times of hardship. These include the early years of motherhood and marriage, living as a single mother while going to school, and the current period in which she is expecting another baby and planning to give marriage another chance. Dee's secondary question seems to be, "How do I get beyond survival to a truly good life?"

Helen constructed the question as a series of questions. "Why did I choose to have children at age sixteen? Why was it so important at the time to be an adult? What factors made parenting successful for me? And, what influence has it had, what difference has it made?" The answer to each question leads to the posing of the next.

Helen chose to have children at age sixteen because she was always good with children, her life revolved around them, they gave her pleasure and a sense of personal efficacy. She was tired of being a teenager, and having a child would give her adult status. It would also cement her relationship with Stan and make a statement that human connections are just as important as career goals. She was ready to become an adult because she was always precocious and independent, and she was not afraid to sidestep societal expectations about when, and under what circumstances, a person should become a mother. She saw having a baby at that age as a desirable and unconventional act of rebellion.

Parenting was successful for Helen because she had a great deal of experience with children, because her parents offered just the right balance between giving support and maintaining distance, and because her move to another city as well as her mature appearance allowed her to avoid being stigmatized and thrown into doubt about her abilities or her choices. She also does not discount the importance of luck. Having had this experience has helped Helen connect with other people and also, perhaps, has provided some unique stresses and rewards.

Themes of the Stories

Important shared themes of these stories emerged. Some of the more common themes were: the importance of caring relationships and of sustaining connections among people; the importance of the woman's mother; a sense of the self as being different from others; the expectation and acceptance of change in one's life; and the importance of the desire to choose the morally and personally right course. This last theme is what I refer to as "doing the right thing."

Relationship: Connection and Caring

The importance of creating and sustaining connections among people suffuses these stories. At times, the primacy of relationships is overtly stated but everywhere, it is an undercurrent, a fluid presence which influences while carrying the stories onward.

In her now-famous work, Gilligan (1982) asserted that women's psychological and moral development is different from men's. She said that although men often make choices and decisions based on an ethic of rights, women seem to prefer an ethic of care. Women's thinking tends to organize itself around relationships, of which they have extensive experience and knowledge. Women value relationships and connections among people. Rather than being guided by abstract moral principles, women are led by a sense of

responsibility to others, and their solutions tend to be found by responding to people.

All of the women in my study valued their connections with children. They had, as well, what might be described as a certain attitude toward, or philosophy of, children. They liked children and, when considering their own children, their siblings, or even themselves as children, they tended to be able and willing to take the child's point-of-view. They understood children. They placed importance on children's thinking and on the legitimacy of their needs. And each woman specifically talked about the importance of children and of family in her life.

Even as a young child, Felicia's world was one of connection within family. Her mother, through stories, taught Felicia the importance of brothers and sisters and, through example, showed the importance of caring. Family members may be different from each other, but they stick together and help each other out. We see the workings of this family ethic in Felicia's life, both during her pregnancy and after her decision to keep the baby. The practical and moral support of family members is a source of real assistance to her. As an adult, Felicia places great value on continuing connections among family members, and she gives her mother credit for making them "a very together type of family."

The decision to keep the baby may be seen as a powerful step for Felicia in the sense of affirming the value of connection. If she had given the baby up for adoption--thus breaking the connection between herself and the child--her life could have gone on with "the plan." This plan for her life involved being a separate person, a different sort of person from her mother or other family members. She would be a single person--not connected to family--who could be successful and "have things."

By keeping the baby, Felicia not only chose against separation from her child, but also facilitated continued connection between the child and her extended family, which she says she herself had missed. The birth of her baby became a crossroads for Felicia; she had to choose what kind of person she would be and which direction her life would take. In the end, she decided against separateness and for connection.

In Dee's family-of-origin, caring for children and cherishing relationships was noteworthy in its absence. Connections between mother and children were often painful, and breaking those connections seemed productive. But connections within Dee's created family are very strong, and Dee's life seems to be structured around caring for her children, continuing and strengthening relationships with them.

Helen identified connections to family as one of the most important themes in her life. Part of what made her parenting experience successful was the continued connection with her parents, and relationships with her children and husband also continue to be important to her. Helen values continuing family connections. She pointed out that generationality is an important theme in her story, and in her metaphor of the bunch of trees that stand together and protect, she is the middle tree, branching out to connect the generations.

The Importance of Mom

In each of the stories, the woman's mother was a main character. This was always the case in childhood, but often the mother continued as an important influence in adulthood. Felicia and Helen both continue to have close, mutual relationships with their mothers. For all three women, the mother was particularly important at the point of the first pregnancy, and becoming pregnant presented an indirect conflict or crisis between mother and daughter. The act of telling her mother that she was pregnant, or in fact of not telling her, became a problem. Their mother's opinion, not just her response, counted. Both Felicia and Helen said that if their mother disapproved or was disappointed in them, they just didn't want to know. Telling Dee's mother

about her pregnancy precipitated added stress in that it led to the arrest of her boyfriend, John.

Felicia often made reference to the importance of the work her mother did within the family. In fact, she uses the ability and willingness to see things from her mother's point-of-view as a measure of maturity in her siblings. She emphasized as well that her mother was "the only one" that wanted her to keep the baby, which as she sees it now, was actually the only right decision.

Helen's mother was an important support and a model for her. She attributes her parents' helpfulness after she left home mostly to her mother's good sense. She sees that without the informational and financial and other support which her mother made available to her, she may not have been able to continue her education and pursue a rewarding career. Understanding her mother's perspective and experiences has become very important to Helen, especially now that her own children have grown.

Dee's mother was also very important, but in contrast to the other women, Dee's mother was the one who wore her down, made her doubt herself, and threw stumbling blocks in her way. Even after her marriage, her mother's opinion and her continued criticism had a part in Dee's decision to stay in an abusive situation. For Dee, her mother's positive influence was perhaps more in being a model of what she did not want to become. Often in describing her supportiveness

with her own children, Dee points out that she will not do what her mother used to do to her.

Each of the stories also chronicles adult identity development, as each of the women goes from being the daughter in the mother-child relationship to being the mother. Felicia takes over her mother's role of being the one who keeps everyone together. Dee refuses to reproduce her mother's brand of mothering; instead she cares for her kids, responding appropriately to their needs, and caring about how her decisions affect their lives. And Helen continues the connection with her children and, as her mother did before her, she respects her children's choices even though they differ from her own.

Being Different

Each of the women described herself as being different. Felicia, although she spoke of not feeling special, also often pointed out ways in which she differed from other people. Whether in terms of her level of education, or her standards for interacting with children or spouses, she often named a sister, her mother, or her husband as a standard to which she compared herself, thereby fleshing out her individuality or even her superiority. Dee used this comparison method of self-definition as well, most often comparing herself to her mother. Helen described herself as precocious, independent, and unconventional.

All of the women value themselves as mothers, and carry their differentness over to their ways of being mothers, as well as to other adult roles. Felicia has decided that in spite of being a teenaged mother, she has done better than some older mothers she knows. Dee emphasizes that she will not reject her pregnant daughter, as her friend and her own mother did in that situation. Helen delights in the thought that her children are "special" because they have had an unconventional mother, and she also describes herself as a perfectionist in her work.

Interestingly, neither Dee nor Helen would have used the expression "adolescent mother" to describe herself. Perhaps this is related to having been involved with a man at the time of the pregnancy, but it also may be an indication of their sense of the legitimacy of their choices. This lack of identification also may be a way of dealing with a stigmatized experience. By not including themselves in the category "adolescent mother," they avoided, as Helen puts it, "being thrown into doubt" about their experience. They did this by constructing their own definition of who they were and what they were doing.

Working With Change: Life And Self As 'In Progress'

Change is a strong theme in the stories. As an adolescent, Felicia was adamant that she did not want children and that she would proceed, unswerving, on the road

to an easy life. When she chose to keep her baby, she accepted that her life would not proceed as planned, and felt for awhile that in choosing the baby, she was giving up all the things she had previously hoped for. Today, she observes that it wasn't an either/or choice; that she is a mother, but also has a good education and a career.

Helen has gone through many changes. She thinks of her life as being in stages, and she charts her growth from one to the other. Helen expects change as part of growth, in the lives of children and in her own life. She expects and accepts that change will happen in relationships. For her, she said, "change tends to be breaks, very sudden," and she is aware that she is in the midst of a big change now.

Helen is aware of herself as approaching menopause, and she sees her problems with depression and anxiety as part of that change. She described the depressions as "a hole that's opening up." To follow the driving metaphor from Helen's story, perhaps this hole is like a pothole. And potholes can be dangerous at high speeds. Fortunately, Helen is an alert driver who has clocked many hours on the highway. Metaphorically, Helen's expertise with self-awareness, precocity, and responding to sudden changes will be an asset in negotiating her current position on her developmental path.

In her life, Dee has also learned to deal with change. The importance of holding principles, and at times of

revising those principles, is so common in Dee's story that I originally considered entitling it, "Drawing the Line, and Crossing It." Dee often spoke of things she "didn't believe in," things that "weren't right." There was a moral line that should not be crossed. For instance, she didn't believe in a kid hitting their mother back and she didn't believe in premarital sex.

And yet Dee often did these things, she often crossed the line. She seemed to come to a point where she just would not take anymore and had to act in her own defense. Looking back she sees those actions--defending herself against her mother, having sex with her boyfriend--not as satisfying her own legitimate needs, but rather as giving in to overwhelming forces, as acting against better principles. She wishes now that she had not crossed that line, because she still feels that her original principles were right.

Sometimes Dee did hold the line and refuse to let go of her own principles. Examples include deciding not to have an abortion with her fourth child, and continuing to be there for her daughter now that she is pregnant. For Dee, working with change means continuing to become more aware of her own beliefs and values and having the strength to stand by them. Dee has spent a great deal of her life putting her children's actual physical survival needs ahead of her own needs. She is now working to get to a place where life is

enjoyable for her and she can get some of her own needs met--which is such a nice change to get used to.

Each of the stories showed a woman working graciously with change; accepting, refusing, or revising what life brings her. Over time, both Felicia and Dee changed their understanding of who they were and why they were doing what they are doing. This change of mind seems to be an aspect of greater maturity. Helen is aware as well that she is still changing and she now needs to focus on mothering herself as well as she has mothered others.

Doing the Right Thing

The importance of doing the right thing was such a strong theme in Felicia's story that it became the title, but it could well have been the title of any of the three stories. In making decisions about their lives, each one of these women thought a great deal about doing the right thing--not the easiest thing, but the right thing for both herself and others. When Felicia got pregnant and had to make a decision whether to keep the baby or give her up for adoption, she wanted to do the right thing. When Dee was living with an abusive man whom she believed her children needed as a father, she wanted to do the right thing. When Helen, at the age of fifteen, looked ahead to the life laid out for her and did not see love or connection or surprise, she wanted to do the right thing. Each woman discovered a

tension between what she needed for herself and what was best for others.

Gilligan (1982) described three very general stages in women's psychological development. She said that in the first stage, usually as little girls, people's decisions are based in care for the self, and doing the right thing means doing what is right for oneself. In the second stage, girls and women make decisions based in what is best for others, to the exclusion of their own needs. In the third stage, which even some adult women do not use often, a balance is found among the needs of many people. The important distinction between stages two and three is in the response to the self; in stage three, even though others' needs are taken seriously, people also see the legitimacy of their own needs. They bring themselves into the community of those whose needs and wants and desires they take into account.

The tension between one's own needs and those of others in these stories might be seen as signalling the transition to Gilligan's (1982) third stage. In planning to give her baby up for adoption, Felicia considered the opinions of others. Apart from her mother, "everyone" seemed to think she should give the baby up and, in view of her situation, she wanted to appear "exceptionally mature" and responsible in their eyes. Being unlike the other girls at the Rez in making this unusually responsible decision made Felicia feel special.

What kept Felicia from going through with the decision was only "that little black head," the baby herself. Although she had not planned on having a baby now, or on having children at all for that matter, Felicia discovered that the baby was actually what she wanted. The baby, her own child, became her desire. In deciding to keep the baby, Felicia acknowledged that her own interests and her happiness were important too. Furthermore, when she took that step to answer her own needs, she found that maybe she had also done what was best for her child. As Felicia commented in our final interview, "I'll never know for sure, but although Pearl might have been happy if I had given her up, I never would have been. This way, we can both be happy."

Dee left her mother's home and married John in order to find some happiness for herself, but soon she found herself increasingly the victim of his physical and emotional abuse. Dee knew that what he was doing was not right, and she considered leaving him. But at that point she firmly believed that her children needed their father. Dee did not want to put her children through the stigma, disadvantage, and hurt that she herself had experienced. She decided that her children's need of their father was more important than her need not to be abused, and she decided to "stick it out," hoping that "it'll get better."

The thing that finally made Dee leave the situation was not attention to her own needs but rather the discovery that her husband had been abusing her children. She could not leave for her own sake, but she could leave for the good of her children. Out of this decision, however, came a better life for Dee. Though she now thinks that she over-reacted at the time, Dee decided that she wanted nothing more to do with men, and she spent the next several years thinking mostly about her children's needs. When she did finally decide to explore an adult relationship with Darcy, it had to be on her terms.

Dee's eventual discovery of the seriousness of her son's problems somehow functioned as a catalyst, causing her to acknowledge that she could no longer put her own emotional needs on hold. Instead of "burying things down," which she referred to as "handling it," Dee realized that she had to "get some help for (herself)" in order to "deal with it."

Dee's assigning primacy to either her children's or her own needs seemed to alternate, depending on which needs were the most compelling at the time. This assessment of whose is the greater need in moral decision-making has been identified in research with American inner-city Black adolescents and has been referred to as an "ethic of need" (Gilligan, 1988).

The connection between her own and others' needs was also important in Helen's story. Even as a teenager, Helen had a strong sense of what was right for her. She knew that she was ready for adult roles and responsibilities and, when Stan suggested having a baby, she knew immediately that this was the right decision. In satisfying the needs of young children, Helen was also satisfying her own needs. Because Helen's partner and parents were supportive of her choices, she did not experience a crisis between her own needs and the needs of others when her children are young. However, now that Helen is approaching menopause, she wonders if, in answering those needs at that time in that way, she may have been denying herself the fulfillment of other legitimate needs. In the end, Helen feels that no choice is without its trade-offs.

The stories seem to illustrate the complementarity of needs. For the women in this study, their own happiness was contingent upon their connections to family and their responses to others' needs. Similarly, attention to the needs of others about whom they cared seemed to be related to the women's own need fulfillment.

A final concept from the work of Gilligan (1982, 1990, 1991) and her colleagues is relevant here. Gilligan suggested that, although young girls often are strongly connected with their own needs and desires, they learn that in order to survive in a society that devalues connections,

they must give up those needs. In teenage years, young women also often have a sense of the inferiority of their thinking. They learn to ignore their own needs and turn away from authentic communication in relationships, in the process silencing the authentic self. Gilligan (1990, 1991) identified continued authentic connections to others and the pursuit of one's own needs in adolescence as acts of resistance.

In these stories, we can hear that voice of resistance. All three women had a sense of being different as teenagers. Although their circumstances were so dissimilar, their stories somehow present them as similarly independent and, in some ways, assertive. They are spirited and headstrong--stubbornly insisting on their own knowledge and making decisions accordingly. In her own way, each woman is unwilling to be like everybody else or do what others want, instead insisting on following some standard she keeps within.

Final Reflections

What do these stories tell us about adolescent motherhood? My literature review revealed that adolescent motherhood is often conceived as a tragedy with sure and dire consequences. In these stories, however, becoming a mother at a young age is just a part of the woman's life, not necessarily defining it. Even when unplanned, being an

adolescent mother is just one piece of a bigger picture, and the totality of the larger context is what determines the role that experience will play.

Writers on adolescent motherhood suggest several motivations for becoming an adolescent mother. Common beliefs are that teenagers are sexually promiscuous and lacking in birth control knowledge (Barth, Schinke, & Maxwell, 1983), that they have babies simply to qualify for welfare (Dillard & Pol, 1982) or to get a husband (Hayes, 1987), or that they just want a baby so that somebody will love them (Musick, 1992).

Looking back, the women in my study were sometimes genuinely mystified about what they were thinking in getting pregnant when they did. As Felicia readily admitted, the irrational belief that she was somehow immune played a part in her unplanned pregnancy. Dee threw out her birth control pills in reaction to a spat with her mother, not really considering the implications until it was too late. Helen's first pregnancy was planned, but the next two followed too soon because of lapses in practices intended for conception control.

However, to say that the women got pregnant when they did because of a lack of birth control education would be truly simplistic. In each case, along with certain errors of thinking most likely related to adolescent egocentrism, there was also a certain sense of throwing caution to the

wind. And although for Dee, as for Helen, the pregnancy did strengthen the bond with her partner, "snagging" him was not the point.

To the charge of wanting a baby to love, perhaps all these women must plead guilty. Their stories show again and again that they value children and family connections. They demonstrate, as well, a similar kind of philosophy or attitude about children; a tendency to see things from a child's perspective and to recognize and respect the legitimacy of children's needs. At some point in our interviews, each of these women specifically said that they "just love babies" in her family.

As for "teenage fathers" (Barret & Robinson, 1982), my study failed to find any. This is consistent with the suggestion that a large percentage of the men involved with pregnant adolescent women are in fact adults (Males, 1994). Possibly because of their own precociousness, both Dee and Helen were seriously involved in mutual relationships with adult men, and these men continued to be committed to them after the pregnancy and eventually married them. In Felicia's case, the man certainly may be said to have been taking advantage of a young girl.

The personalities and self-concepts of the women in this study may also offer some clarification to the ambiguous findings on adolescent motherhood and self-esteem (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). A very strong, positive sense

of self is characteristic of all the women. Both as adolescents and as adults, they see themselves as different from others, maybe even better. When this healthy self-esteem tells a young woman to follow her own sense of right, to include her own needs when trying to do the right thing, and when her own needs include family relationships of connection and caring, then she might decide to resist societal expectations for appropriate the child-bearing age. In this sense, positive self-esteem could certainly be related to becoming a mother very young.

Social Class And Its Relevance

Close attention to the women's stories may shed light on the demonstrated relationship between adolescent motherhood and SES (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). Felicia comes from a rural farm family, has a university education, and is married to a skilled labourer. Dee comes from a poor rural family, has little education, and has spent several years as a single mother on social assistance. And Helen comes from a rural professional-class family, has a university degree, is married to a working-class man, and has a profession. Although the women's social class designations vary considerably, they all had children in their teen years.

While their social class did not decide their motherhood status, it may have contributed to some aspects

of their experience. Helen, for instance, had access to financial and other resources which made a positive difference to her ability to continue her studies and attain a good career while also parenting small children. Practical benefits were available as a result of having parents who were both able and willing to help her.

SES also seemed to mediate how others responded to the women. Because of Dee's financial situation, she had to rely on social service agencies to help her and her children after separating from her husband. Social services and other professional people, who have a great deal of power in Dee's life, often seemed to be biased and harsh in their dealings with her. Felicia had access to many resources and sources of help, not because of affluence, but as a benefit of having such a large and "together" family.

Nothing from the stories supported or clarified the research on the supposed negative characteristics of adolescent mothers as parents, or the connection between certain parenting practices and low SES. Each of the women was consistently interested in her children, in their social as well as physical needs and development. All of the women strongly stated an aversion to physical punishments and all forms of abuse of children. Both Dee and Helen, who have teenaged children, talked frankly with their children about sex, relationships, and birth control. And although Dee's daughter Darling is now to become an adolescent mother

herself, her experience will likely not be as hard as her mother's because she has something her mother did not have--an encouraging, supportive, connected mother to help her out.

One commonality shared by all three women is that they come from rural areas. The relevance of this fact is unclear, but it is possible that their rural origins are related to some of the values and attitudes the women espouse. The effects of social class in many cases are thought to be mediated by a rural, versus urban, environment (Li, 1988).

Several aspects of the women's experiences illustrated the link between experiences and marital status for single mothers (Eichler, 1993). Although Dee was from a poor family and her husband was sometimes unemployed, it was only after her separation from him that she truly suffered from poverty and had to become a client to several of the helping professions. Felicia's experience of being expected to give her baby up, along with her need to live at the Rez, was likely related to being unmarried. And Helen observed that one of the reasons she did not feel stigmatized was because of people's assumption that she was married, and therefore that "everything was alright."

Because of the relationship between low SES and adolescent motherhood, it is often conjectured that adolescent motherhood causes poverty. The women in this

study generally retain the same social class level with which they were born. Felicia and Tony own a home in a working-class neighbourhood. Helen and Stan are able to have a middle-class lifestyle, but Helen suggested that this was only as a result of her work in a profession. Dee certainly lives well beneath the poverty line, but then her family has lived in poverty for several generations. Probably, Dee would have been poor regardless of when, or if, she had children.

Young Mothers: Really Doing It

Taken as a whole, the literature directs a great deal of effort to assessing, and trying to manipulate, the sexual attitudes and practices of adolescent females (Chilman, 1980b, 1989). This preoccupation with, and response to, teenage women's sexuality is what I characterize as a focus on "doing it." Young women's reproductive decisions and mothering potential are also pathologized (Chilman, 1988b, 1989). Studies of the correlates of adolescent motherhood place negative value on each of the choices that leads to adolescent motherhood (e.g., Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990). Becoming pregnant, continuing the pregnancy rather than terminating, keeping the baby rather than relinquishing; at each point in the process, the choice for separation--and against motherhood--is seen as the more desirable and

responsible choice. The fundamental assumption is that the act of becoming an adolescent mother shows irresponsibility.

These unhealthy conceptions of adolescent mothers are not born out in the life stories. Certainly, the women had sex and got pregnant. Looking back, they often saw that this was ill-advised. However, in spite of circumstances that were sometimes very difficult, these women showed strength and grace in responding to them. Whether or not the baby's father or their own parents acted responsibly, they did. In choosing to follow through with the pregnancy and stay connected, they were not abdicating responsibility, but taking it. Day-in and day-out, they took care of children, took care of households, worked, played, and went to school. They mustered the willpower and energy to do what had to be done. I refer to this ability to come up with the goods in a tough situation as "really doing it."

Listen: Implications and Further Research

For these women, becoming a mother while young, although not without its trade-offs, was a positive experience in the longrun. The stories attest to the legitimacy of the choices that they made. In fact, the concept of choices is woven throughout the stories. Helen structured her entire story around the idea of adolescent motherhood as a conscious choice. Dee pointed out that young women must have "options" from which to choose and

that, even when adults don't agree with the options they pick, those choices are still valid. Felicia insisted that even when a person has seemingly chosen one "option," it must remain clear that "all those options are still there."

The importance of choices is not confined to what is usually conceived as reproductive choice, but applies to other situations where important and often mutually-exclusive decisions must be made. When choices are real, one decision should be equally as possible and valued as another. The stories emphasize that in order to have their choices legitimized, women must receive support and validation for whatever decisions they make.

In the final interview, I asked the participants how people such as parents, partners, or professionals can help adolescent mothers. Each of the women emphasized that in order to help adolescent mothers, people must, first, listen to them, and then support their choices. Addressing professionals in particular, Helen responded,

I think the biggest, biggest, biggest thing that we don't do that we need to do is listen, listen, listen, listen. We need to listen to what they're saying. And then we can start exploring with them, if they're having problems, what do they need? I think that so often, we charge in there with what we think they need, and give it to them whether they want to or not... I

really think that it's the listening part that all these people need to start by becoming better at.

Dee offered similar advice, and emphasized that support for a young woman's choices should not be contingent upon agreeing with them.

I think the main thing there is just to be there and not put them down. Like, listen to them... I know people were always saying to me, 'Oh you made your bed, you got to lay in it.' Well that's the wrong attitude. Kids don't need that, people in that situation don't need that. They need a friend that they can talk to, but not somebody that's going to get mad if you don't take their advice... They need to be given those options and be able to choose those options. Help them choose those options. And don't say that's the wrong choice.

For Felicia, the need for listening begins with the young woman herself and being honest about what she wants.

I think my biggest advice would be to be honest with herself. I pretended to myself that this love affair with Jake was so wonderful, and once I got pregnant I did become a little more honest, and said, 'Let's face it, it wasn't all that great'... But I think it's important to be honest--whether you feel you have to keep this baby and you don't really want to, or if you want to keep it and you don't think you should... I

think you should spend lots of time thinking and soul-searching and trying to decide who you are. And make the decision for yourself, not for other people. You have to take into consideration other people's opinions and what they want you to do, but make your own decision.

For helpers, Felicia emphasized the importance of listening and questioning in order to help clarify a young woman's thinking, and also the importance of helpers being objective and keeping their own biases out of the process.

I think the most important thing is really listen, so that you can really hear what they're saying. Like if somebody had really listened to me when I was saying that I would give the baby up because somebody else could give her everything she needs, if somebody had asked me, 'Well how do you mean that? What can't you give this baby that somebody else can'... I did end up thinking about it and choosing anyway, but I may have made that decision much quicker and easier... So listen, really listen. And help them through their thinking process. And no matter what kind of decision they're making, whether you agree with it or not, just try and make sure that they're clear in their thinking.

According to the study's participants, teachers, counsellors, social workers and other front-line workers have responsibilities because they have both power and

influence in people's lives. Professional people are important in these stories, and one good person--one person who listens and supports--can turn the tide. For Felicia, it was the young, inexperienced social worker. Dee found validation and personal help among the members of a support group. Helen's French and German teacher offered real human connection in an otherwise impersonal environment. But professionals also play negative roles in the stories. The kind of role they play seems to be determined by whether or not they treat people with respect, whether they listen to and believe the women, whether they care.

These stories have something to say about the need for further research. They point to a real need for research which accesses the knowledge, insights, and perspectives of adolescent mothers themselves. A good starting point would be in constructing life stories of specific groups of adolescent mothers, for instance, women who are Aboriginal, married, or middle-class, or those who live in rural areas, the North, or the inner-city. Some of these factors are evident among some of my study's participants, but the nature of their influence is still unclear.

It is also important that those who research "motherhood" attend to the issue of which kind of mother they are selecting. Research with various groups of marginalized and non-marginalized mothers will increase

understanding of the commonalities and differences in mothering experiences for specific groups of women.

As I suggested earlier, the stories in my study are different from each other because the women's lives are different. Having this difference so clearly conveyed is the result of eschewing the artificially narrow focus of so much of the research on adolescent motherhood. Life story methodology allows one to hear about an experience in the context of the whole life.

Although qualitative studies will be important in bringing definition and clarity to the understanding of adolescent motherhood, quantitative studies are also needed. Studies which use large numbers of subjects to determine the stated needs of various populations of adolescent mothers would be helpful, as would those which use valid criteria to assess the quality of interventive and support programmes.

Whatever the methodology, it is imperative that research begin by questioning the assumptions and mindsets which seem to drive so many studies. Qualitative research is not immune to these problems. For example, a recent study using qualitative methods and the same assumptions of the pathology of adolescent motherhood seems to have found support for the same old thesis (Musick, 1992). Musick (1992), while acknowledging young mothers' views that having a baby served important and often positive functions in their lives, used psychological theories to support her case

that these women suffer from weak ego strength and a lack of maturity.

What is needed now is research which does the right thing by refusing these long-standing biases. Researchers must be able to look participants in the eye as they begin afresh with honest questions. We must be prepared to, as Helen says, "listen, listen, listen, listen." Then, and only then, can we draw some tentative conclusions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter of Introduction

Date

Dear

My name is Eunice Lavell. I am a graduate student in Educational Psychology at the University of Manitoba. I am conducting a research project which focusses on women who became mothers when they were quite young. I feel that it is important to hear about this experience from people's own perspectives, so I am interviewing women in order to create their life stories. I believe that this kind of understanding can be used to help other young mothers and their families.

Life stories vary in length, depending upon how much detail is given. We can begin by recording important dates and events on a lifeline (I'll show you how later on). I will come and interview you several times, for about an hour to an hour-and-a-half each time, and you can tell me about your experiences. We can start right back in your childhood, or we can start closer to the time when you first got pregnant, whichever you prefer.

I will be tape recording our visits so that I don't miss or forget any of your story. I will be the only one who will listen to the tapes, and after the project is over, I will either destroy the tapes or give them to you. I will also be typing out our conversations and I would ask you first before letting anybody else read them. If it happens

at some point in the interviews that certain topics are too personal, we can shut off the tape recorder for awhile.

Occasionally, as I am putting together your life story, I will bring you what I have written so that you can tell me whether I have left out something important or if I have misunderstood anything. Although I may sometimes have different ways of explaining things, I will try to make the story say what you mean it to say. After all, it's your story.

Yours truly,

Eunice Lavell

(Telephone #)

Appendix 2: Letter of Consent
LIFE EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERS PROJECT
CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a series of interviews about my life experiences. I will participate in the interviews under the following conditions.

-I will allow the interviews to be tape recorded. I understand that the interviews are being taped so that nothing is missed and so my words are not changed or misunderstood. I can turn off the recorder anytime during the interviews.

-I can withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

-I agree to allow Eunice Lavell to use the information from the interview in the research project, report, and publication. However, I understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected by giving me a different name (a pseudonym) and by disguising other identifying information.

-I understand that I have a right to receive and review written transcripts of the interviews, as well as my written life story as it is developing. After reviewing and discussing the transcripts with Eunice, I can suggest modifications for accuracy, for clarity or to include new information.

Signature of Consent _____

Date _____

Signature of Researcher_____

For further information about the study, please contact Eunice
Lavell at .

Appendix 3: Handouts for Final Interview

Specific Questions: Felicia

- 1 You asked me to remind you to come back to the topic of the conversation in the parking lot. You said, "What most adolescent mothers have working against them is people's attitudes." Also the talk show you saw on adolescent mothers. You said, "The real bottom line with these girls is that they wanted somebody to love."
- 2 Why could you not tell your parents you were pregnant? You said you weren't afraid of them.
- 3 You said to come back to questions about our phone conversation on Carol Gilligan's theory, you said you definitely think it is applicable.
- 4 Describe your thinking and feeling during the crisis time between assuming you wouldn't keep the baby and deciding to keep her.
- 5 Sounds like Liz really took over at the time you first got pregnant. How did you feel about that then? How do you feel about it now?

Specific Questions: Dee

1 Start off with catching up with other plans and happenings in your life. Last time we talked, you finished off with several stories about not wanting anything to do with men. Now you're getting married and having a baby.

Sounds like things have changed?

2 Could you explain the difference between "dealing with it" and "handling it"? What would it mean to say that you have really "dealt with it" now? Have you, or are you planning to? How will it change things or change you?

3 Talk about the relationship development with your fiance.

4 Why did you decide to go back to school, plus work, at that time?

5 Why did you quit the counselling? You said, "I quit and never went back." Did it not help?

6 Transcript, Page 9. Please explain about hating it, liking it, and believing it. Clarify what "it" is.

7 Transcript, Page 12. So mom didn't beat the kids alot?

8 Page 13. You said, "At one point, though, I was going to do that." Do what? And why didn't you?

Specific Questions: Helen.

- 1 Talk some more about your friend who is the same age, and the conversation you had last year.
- 2 Why was two children not enough? Why was three children enough?
- 3 You talked a lot about the depressions and anxieties at this time of your life. What place do they have in your life story?
- 4 Talk about the fast driving metaphor we discussed, and why it's so right. How would it be used in your story?

General Questions

- 1 Explore your thoughts on Birth Control. Philosophically, and then your own use or not, and why.
- 2 Explore thoughts on Abortion. On adoption. Philosophically, and for yourself. What was your thinking in your own first pregnancy?
- 3 Explore thoughts on marriage. "Single motherhood". What would or do you tell your own daughter?
- 4 Explore thoughts on sex and teenagers.
- 5 Explore thoughts on optimum family size. What's perfect, generally and for yourself. Why do people have large families?
- 6 What is your thinking on learning/ schooling? Why did you choose to go to school/ university after having children? F, H, Why education and early childhood?
- 7 Say you knew of a young girl today who is in the same situation you were in when you first got pregnant. Any advice for her?
- 8 Do you have any advice for people who want to help a young person in the situation you were in? (Parents, siblings and friends. Schools, social workers, counsellors, health workers. Programs and government agencies.)

Your final say.

1 Now that we are telling your story, what do you say is the bottom line? What is the meaning of this experience to you?

Main ideas of my reading of the stories so far:

After reading each story, this is my understanding of how the three stories are connected and what the experience of motherhood under these circumstances seems to mean to the women. I would appreciate your comments, especially if you have noticed something that I haven't, or if you disagree or strongly agree with my assessment.

Themes of the Stories:

1 Themes of Connection and Caring (in all 3 stories)

Dr. Carol Gilligan of Harvard University has described women's psychological and moral development as different from men's. She says that although men often make choices and decisions based on rights, women seem to make decisions of caring based in relationships, that is connections to other people.

Dr. Gilligan described three stages in women's development. In stage 1, usually as little girls, people's decisions were based in care for the self and doing the right thing meant doing what was right for yourself. In stage 2, girls made decisions based in what was best for others, at the exclusion of their own needs. In stage 3, which even some adult women don't use often, women found a balance between the needs of many people. The important difference between stages 2 and 3 are that, in stage 3, even though others' needs are taken seriously, people become able

to see that they themselves have legitimate needs. They bring themselves into the community of people whose needs and wants and desires they take into account.

-exploring themes of connection and caring in the stories.

-seeing a tension between stages 2 and 3 in the stories.

2 Themes of "Doing the Right Thing" (especially Felicia and Dee)

3 Seeing their own mother's point of view (especially Helen and Felicia)

-identity development.

-changing one's mind as an aspect of maturing (Felicia and Dee) (Helen, aware that she is still changing and mothering herself)

-"becoming the mother" (especially Felicia and Helen) centrality of the mother in the story until the birth of the child, and then where is the mother?

4 Themes of Expectations

Stigma (external negative expectations) and how each woman dealt with it. (All 3) -by not including themselves in the category

Own (internal) expectations, knowing them, changing them, making your own way. (All)

5 Self-concept as a rebel -Being different (Felicia), not being like my mother (Dee), being unconventional (Helen)

-Resistance in adolescents. Related to self-esteem?

Is it a good sign?

6 The theme of choice (especially Helen)

7 The theme of negotiating relationships with family,
negotiating changes (esp/ Helen and Felicia)

-the importance of children and family