

## *Cycle Busters Aims to Put Teen Moms Back on Track*

**C**assandra Tucker dreamed of going to college one day in hopes of breaking the cycle of poverty that her family has experienced for generations. Adolescent pregnancy interrupted that dream. But thanks to her own determination and a program called Cycle Busters, she is back on track toward her goal.

"I had always wanted to go to college, but when I had Latrisa I didn't think I would finish high school," says Cassandra, who at age 17 gave birth to her child. Cassandra, now 19, is a sophomore at North Carolina State University. She maintained a 3.1 grade point average throughout her freshman year.

The accomplishment is all the more impressive because of Cassandra's background. She grew up in Raleigh housing projects—shuffled from grandparents to mother to aunt and back to mother again. And she never met her father until she was 6 years old. His address was a state prison.

Cassandra learned she was pregnant in August of 1991. She enrolled for her junior year at high school in September. Still living with her mother, Cassandra began to receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) payments, while she prepared for the birth of her child. Meanwhile, the father of the child attempted to talk Cassandra into having an abortion.

"When I first told him I was pregnant, he tried to get me to get an abortion. I told him no, and he disappeared until the day my daughter was born. Then he started to come around and buy her things like clothes and toys."

Cassandra stayed out of school six weeks following the birth of her child, receiving tutoring so she would not fall too

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**Cassandra Tucker  
with daughter  
Latrisa**

## Cycle Busters

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far behind in her class work. Then she returned to school, but stayed only three days because she couldn't find anyone to care for her child. She had no luck with the local department of social services. They would pay for day care for someone returning to work, but not to school. She checked into day care, but it cost more than her \$236 a month welfare check. "I considered dropping out," Cassandra says. "I felt hopeless when I found out how much day care was going to cost."

After being out of school for two weeks, Cassandra's spirits—and her prospects—got a lift. Her high school guidance counselor referred her to the local Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills program, and the program agreed to pay for her child care. Still, going to school *and* raising a child proved almost more than she could handle. Cassandra found it harder to study. Her grades began to suffer, and she had to repeat English during summer school and two more courses—chemistry and computer science—during her senior year.

"It was hard because my schedule was centered around hers [Latrisa's]," says Cassandra. "I would get two to three hours sleep. My social life was reduced to a minimum." Realizing the juggling act Cassandra was trying to pull off, a JOBS employee finally referred Cassandra to Cycle Busters.

The Cycle Busters program is administered through the Wake County Department of Social Services. It is one of 35 programs across North Carolina funded by the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program in the Division of Maternal and Child Health Services, Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources. The program works with first-time adolescent mothers who are on AFDC and live in Wake County, have a family history of adolescent pregnancy, and have dropped out of high school since becoming pregnant. The goals of the program are to prevent teen mothers from having a second pregnancy, to increase graduation from high school, and to reduce welfare dependency.

Through enrichment activities that include contracts with teens, needs assessment, psychological testing, and weekly group meetings,

Cycle Busters hopes to increase employability and economic independence for teen moms and produce welfare savings for the government. Each of the 12 participants are assigned to a mentor. Teen mothers stay in the program until they graduate from high school or become pregnant for the second time.

In September of 1992, Cassandra was approached by Nancy Godwin, the program's director, about joining. "They called me one day and asked me three questions, and I qualified by answering [yes to] two of them," says Cassandra, "Was I on AFDC?" and "Did I ever drop out of school?"

"I was skeptical at first about joining the program, but when I found out that one of my friends was in the program I was more at ease. They made me feel right at home because the people in the program were in the same situation that I was in." Cassandra says she became close friends with her mentor, and talked with her about anything from Latrisa's father, to her new boyfriend, to going to college.

In the Cycle Busters program, Cassandra says she had the opportunity to form new friendships, learn new and helpful parenting skills, and raise her self-esteem to become more motivated to go to college and better herself. Cassandra still keeps in touch with Nancy Godwin, the program director.

Godwin, who has worked with the Cycle Busters program since its inception in 1990, says she got involved because she wanted to help prevent adolescent mothers like Cassandra from dropping out of school. She attributes increases in adolescent pregnancy to low self-esteem and factors such as lack of resources, feelings of hopelessness, and alienation from the mainstream. Having a child can provide a source of immediate gratification and attention, although teens rarely weigh the long-term consequences.

Godwin says the Cycle Busters program's success has been its ability to create a bond of trust between group members. "I think our results are really, really good," she says. "These kids need this opportunity." According to Philliber Research Associates, an organization from New York that compiles annual reports on all Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention programs, Cycle Busters "seems to be having a positive effect on those students that participate in it."

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*Nature has a way  
Of not caring much  
About marriage  
Licenses and such.*

But the neighbors  
and her mother  
Cared very much!

— FROM "S-SSS-SS-SH!"  
*SELECTED POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES*

The agency noted that only 23 percent of the program's students dropped out of school, compared to 86 percent in a control group. There also seemed to be a general increase in appreciation for the value of an education among Cycle Busters participants.

Godwin says she is particularly proud of Cassandra Tucker's progress. "I feel wonderful about that. She would never had gone to State without our help," says Godwin.

Godwin says she hopes to increase awareness of the program because it is helpful to teen mothers who otherwise get lost in the cycle of poverty that many adolescent mothers face. And Cycle Busters participants serve as a resource for even younger adolescents. Recently, for example, members of Cycle Busters participated in a dialogue with members of another APP program, New Horizons. The meeting gave members of New Horizons, who are between the ages of 9 and 14, the chance to ask Cycle Busters members intimate questions about being a teen mother.

Some of those questions included, "How did it feel when your water broke?," asked by a 12-year-old, and, "What was it like to have something growing inside of you?," asked by a 9-year-old. An emotional moment came when a Cycle Busters teen asked how many of the younger children were sexually active. "She is," blurted a 9-year-old, pointing to a 12-year-old New Horizons member. "She's done it twice." As everyone looked at her, the 12-year-old burst into tears.

The Cycle Busters program is funded by the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program. Each program gets between \$12,000 and \$60,000 in start-up money, depending on needs. The funding is spread over a five-year period and decreases during each year of funding. Godwin's program is in its final year.

Godwin says that Wake County Social Services plans to continue to pay for her salary but won't fund the other components of the program, such as excursions, weekly meetings, seminars, and newsletters. She says it costs approximately \$62,000 annually to run Cycle Busters. She plans to approach local foundations for support and hopes that ultimately the General Assembly will pick up some of the funding.

Cycle Busters is intended to help AFDC moms throughout Wake County, but presently it only assists African Americans in Raleigh. One of the program's drawbacks is that its requirements are so rigid. For each member in the program there must be a matching member in the control group participating in the program. The control group consists of all AFDC teen mothers in Wake County who don't participate in Cycle Busters. They are, however, tracked in order to compare their outcomes with members of Cycle Busters. Twelve members of the control group are matched with Cycle Busters participants with similar backgrounds. These outcomes measured include high school graduation rates and second pregnancy rates. Godwin says it is difficult to recruit white or Hispanic teen moms to participate, because it is hard to find a match for the control group. Most of the white teen mothers live in the county, which presents a transportation problem because most activities take place in the city of Raleigh.

Still, participants like Cassandra say the program has been successful for the people it serves. "I want to make it known that this is a great program," she says. "It helped me psychologically, emotionally, and academically. When I had problems with school work, they would find tutors to help. Without the Cycle Busters program, I don't think I would have made it this far."

—Myron Dowell

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*Myron Dowell was a Center intern in the summer of 1994. He is a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh.*