

A teenage couple learns important life skills and grows to take care of themselves with help from their local community health centre.

When Josh and April met selling anti-drug cookies in their early teens and moved in together, their future didn't look very promising. Josh, 17, and April, 15, had dropped out of school, neither had a job and they relied on social assistance. The burden of financial difficulties placed a strain on their relationship. They began to wonder if they even had each other anymore.

To escape they would visit a centre for youth in their community, to forget about life for an afternoon. The Youth Centre, a community health centre, provides counselling, primary health care services and health promotion activities for Ajax and Pickering teens. In addition it offers special workshops and programs such as Anger Management, Stress Management and a positive body image class, with the aim of helping teens grow into healthy adults.

Josh and April's first visits were to the drop-in where they would play pool and participate in movie nights with hopes to meet other teens in the community. "I'd be stuck at home all the time," April says. "It gave me a place to go to." A community youth worker on staff suggested they join The Dinner Club, a unique program for teens who are independent or are on their way to living on their own. The couple enjoyed a night out and a hot meal once a week and learned how to prepare nutritious, inexpensive meals for themselves.

"When you're on social assistance, who knows what could happen next"

Over time, their visits became routine and they began to trust and confide in the youth worker. April and Josh told her they were struggling to make ends meet and needed help budgeting their money. The youth worker sat with them, worked out the figures and encouraged them to cut out the luxury spending and concentrate on the bare necessities of survival. As their priorities became clearer and their financial situation improved the couple began to direct their energy to saving their relationship with each other. With encouragement, they took advantage of the centre's counselling services and met privately with the social worker. April complained Josh was not contributing to the household responsibilities. Through individual meetings with both partners, April and Josh began to rebuild what they once had, which in turn kept them together.

With their relationship on the mend, Josh was anxious to find employment. He wanted to be a mechanic, hoping he could make enough money to support the two of them. When he expressed his ambition to the youth worker, she referred him to an auto body training program. Josh first needed to complete his Grade 12 diploma and a staff member worked with him to arrange for the necessary evening courses. Prepared for his auto body program, he spent the following six months studying his new-found profession. With hard work and a little help from the youth worker, he landed a placement at a Nissan dealership near their home. Shortly after Josh was hired as a full-time mechanic.

A Place To Grow

With one of them working, things became a little bit easier. April had time to herself and took the initiative to find a job babysitting for families in the area. The youth worker helped April design flyers to advertise her child care services and she began to work part time for \$10 a day. Although she admits \$50 a week "was nothing" and only enough to buy bread, milk, eggs and put gas in the car, it helped. With his job, and her extra money, the couple were able to get off social assistance and start to provide for themselves. Their future was beginning to look brighter.

But then April became pregnant. "We were not trying to (conceive) but we were not trying not to," she says. She had miscarried two babies in the past and was told she couldn't have children. After the second miscarriage, she was convinced her doctor's word was the truth. Josh admits he was very skeptical, yet afraid at the same time. "I didn't know what to do." But abortion was not an option for them. Josh and April had discussed it in the past and decided it was the wrong path for them to take. They both wanted to keep this baby.

"The Youth Centre is the place to come when you need someone to talk to"

Four months later, April was confident she would carry this baby to term. Because Josh was working, he says he could see a future for the soon-to-be three of them. "When you're on social assistance, who knows what could happen next," he says. The couple told the youth worker they were expecting and she suggested they enroll in the centre's pre-natal classes to learn about pregnancy, labour and caring for a baby. April was anemic and very tired throughout her pregnancy. The class inspired her to share her fears and concerns with other young mothers and get the medical attention she required. They then joined the Food 4 Thought program, supplying them with vitamins, fresh milk, yogurt, orange juice and fruits and vegetables to keep the expectant mom well-nourished.

In June the couple, now 21 and 20 years old, gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby girl with a full head of dark curly hair. They named her Emily. Now four months old, Emily is content, full of smiles and her brown eyes sparkle as her proud father holds her in his strong arms. He leaves the room to change her and April admits he has been "amazing" with their daughter. He prepares her bottles, feeds her, changes her and even lets mom sleep in on Saturday mornings.

They still visit The Youth Centre Monday evenings for the Food 4 Thought program. Josh usually stops by after work to play a game of pool. April socializes with the other moms, and tells them about a new television and VCR they bought, still spending a little on luxuries. Staff at the centre greet the couple warmly. To Josh and April, The Youth Centre has been their family. "They are very friendly, compassionate and understanding people, and I could go on," Kevin says. "It's the place to come when you need someone to talk to - if you're curious about something or just bored." And for this young couple, The Youth Centre has filled all of those needs.