

Cecilia, an immigrant teenage mother finds support and counselling to overcome the traumas of violence, abuse and rejection from her family enabling her to find her own way .

I was born in Nicaragua. My life began to change when I was only 11 years old. That was when children were being recruited to become soldiers. My parents were afraid for our lives and we wanted to keep my older brother who was 14 from being conscripted into the war. The political unrest changed the peaceful, beautiful country that I had grown to love. My mom, brother, sister and I left for Canada in the fall of 1988. My father had to stay behind (the plan was for him to arrive later). Without any idea of what this new country would bring we arrived in Ottawa, via Montreal. We could not speak any English yet my mother managed to settle us into a friend's apartment temporarily. We eventually were put into a two bedroom apartment and enrolled into school. I remember missing my country terribly and I still do.

English was not a hard language to learn, but I was different then other children and I was very shy so making friends became very difficult. Other children made jokes and laughed at me. As a family we stayed home a lot and we grew to become even more lonely in this new place. We did not have very much money so when my father finally arrived, my parents began to work evenings and weekends to survive. When I finally started high school, I began to face even more issues. My mother and father were drinking heavily (probably to deal with all the pain they had experienced). Work and pressures of a new country started to separate our family, we no longer spent any time together. This was a big change.

"Work and pressures of a new country started to separate our family"

Then at the end of grade 9, I met a young man from El Salvador. He had only been here two years. We were young and in love and eight months later I was pregnant and terrified. We did not know what to do but we wanted to keep the baby. I chose to tell my mother soon after and that is when "hell erupted". She was furious and wanted me to "get rid" of my baby and forget about my boyfriend. Her drinking became uncontrollable and the physical abuse escalated. I remember one time she was throwing things at me. I had shamed her in front of everyone and so my mom wanted me disowned from my family. I guess appearances matter most to some people. I moved in with my boyfriend's mother. Despite the chaos around me, I knew I wanted this baby and I wanted everything to be alright for him. That is where I think my strength came from.

At school, my so called friends avoided me. I was sick during the pregnancy and needed help. I went to see my guidance counselor to adjust my school schedule. She worked with me and I continued to see her regularly. Finishing school was as important to me as was this new life inside me. My boyfriend and I moved into our own apartment several months later. Many days and nights, I spent alone in my apartment, without friends or family. Nicaragua and my childhood seemed so much farther away. The world I once knew had changed forever.

The Path Home

On April 1, 1994, my baby boy was born. The moment I saw him, I knew my life was not about me anymore. I was now responsible for the well being of this tiny, innocent little baby. It was not his fault that he was brought into this world. I was so tired and alone. I was full of so much anger, I remember thinking how much I wanted my own mother to be sharing this time with me. How could my own mother not be there for me when I needed her so much? I felt so much love towards this little baby, I couldn't understand how my own mother could reject this beautiful boy. It was now no longer just me that she had disowned, but also a rejection of my son.

My school guidance counselor referred me to a Community Health Centre in South-East Ottawa. She told me that she could get help for me in my own language (Spanish). I met with the social worker and we started to talk. She helped me work through the emotional guilt I was feeling but most importantly, she helped me realize and accept that I could not change my mother and who she was. The social worker talked with the youth coordinator in the Centre. Together we looked at what I needed for support and care of my child and myself. I met with the youth coordinator the next day and joined the summer youth program. The Centre runs a summer program for youth like me who were experiencing difficulty in their lives. I guess being a teenage mother, disowned from my family and living with the after effects of separation from a war helped me qualify. I started the program in July of 95.

"Finishing school was as important to me as was this new life inside me"

Everyday, I attended the group. Slowly, my insecurities were diminishing. The workers and people in the group supported each other and I gradually gained more self-confidence. I learned new ways of dealing with everyday problems and it helped me secure stability for my child. The people and program at SEOCHC helped me learn a lot about myself and who I really was. Alone I was lost and afraid, through the Centre I learned and was able to find myself.

Being a mother was one of the most difficult things I had and will ever do. The centre connected me to different places for support in all aspects of my life. I finally reached a point in my life where I felt I needed to help other youth who had experienced similar pain. With the youth program I began to volunteer working with other young moms in school and in the community. Things seemed to start getting better and a little easier. Eventually, I got a part time job as a youth worker with the Centre. I continued to go to school and my boyfriend and I had successfully gone through counseling together through the Centre. Working at South-East Ottawa CHC helped make me a stronger person.

In fall of 1995, I was married. I still hoped my mother would come. She didn't. My father and sister were there. The anger and hurt resurfaced, but now through the Centre's help, I had gained enough self-esteem, skill and strength to deal with yet another disappointment. On one of the happiest days in my life, it was strangers who took their place and wished us well. I am proud of who and what I have done. I am a different person than who I was five years ago.

I am 19 years old now and have just graduated from high school. Next year, a new chapter begins. I start college. Life will present many surprises, some good, some not so good, but I will work it through. My mother finally found help. I met with my mom for the first time a few weeks ago. She is slowly coming around but its going to take time. In my chaos came my peace and for myself and my child I had to learn to find my way. The Centre gave me the opportunity to follow my path and