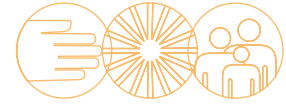


Tashira & Graciela

The Path to Opportunity



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Tashira Velez (21) and Graciela Arellano (18) became mothers while attending Dr. Pedro Alquiiza Campos High School. In May 2014, they both graduated and received diplomas.

"We are here, together, having our own kids and we are graduating," Tashira said with pride. "I'm 21 now; I got here when I was 19. I basically thought there was no hope for me. But I'm going to have a diploma in my hand and I have a beautiful 3 year old."

Tashira said that she will "cry like a baby" if she gets into DePaul this year where she plans to study nutrition and is considering a career as a health educator. Graciela is determined to become a social worker so that she can be there for struggling children.

The dreams of these two young mothers were built at Campos High, an ordinary school with an extraordinary commitment to expectant and parenting youth. The high school takes an alternative approach to embracing pregnant and parenting youth that most traditional school atmosphere would not. At Campos High, young parents are equipped to earn their diploma and empowered to become health advocates.

Tashira, Graciela, and their classmates participate in the Lolita Lebron Family Learning Center (FLC), a unique program within the school that supports the academic progress and achievement of pregnant and parenting youth. In addition to their core curriculum, young parents are provided with early childhood support services, personal academic mentors and courses on prenatal and childhood development.

The FLC was started in 1993 to help women who had dropped out of school to raise their families. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was a program for women ages 14-55, many of whom were struggling with basic needs like shelter and food. To make it easier for struggling mothers, FLC allowed students to come back to earn their high school diploma, even if they had dropped out at some point.



Graciela Arellano and Tashira Velez (l-r)

In 2002 the program was absorbed by the high school to work with only teens. As it is today, the school is small—only 165 students, and 20% of that population is usually parenting students, with an onsite child care for infants 6 weeks to 15 months old.

"When I got here I was really surprised," says Graciela. "To see the teachers, mentors, and the students, it makes you want to come to school more. It makes you want to push for my goal to actually finish school. These people actually care, not like other schools who don't care about you."

A Part of Something

In 2013, Assistant Principal and Director of Lolita Lebron FLC Danette Sokacich received a call for proposals for the annual Healthy Teen Network conference. She saw a chance to share the experience of pregnant and parenting students in a high school setting, an uncommon venue for providers of pregnancy support services. Healthy Teen Network gladly accepted this unique proposal.

Danette had been attending Healthy Teen Network's conference for years. "It's an amazing opportunity for professionals to come together to share best practices about the work that they are doing and exchange ideas in a setting that is very professional but also collegial."

"Being at the conference you feel like you are a part of something," says Danette. "I've gone to other conferences and you feel disconnected, like you are not part of something unless you know somebody in the professional network itself. Whereas at this particular conference, even the staff are very open, friendly, accommodating, and really passionate about the work that they do."

The conference exposed Danette to new models of engagement and understanding which have helped her think critically about how to best support young families. "It opened up avenues for me to begin thinking critically from an education perspective how to best support families in a traditional education setting." In the process, she's been able to transform the way the high school's educators interact with students.

Teaching the Teachers

2013 Healthy Teen Network conference attendees had the chance to learn from two young mothers whose lives had been transformed by participating in the FLC program.

Graciela and Tashira held court: drawing on personal experience from motherhood and their peer educator roles, the duo shared their health education best practices with a receptive audience.

"It was really amazing to see how many people actually care about it, how many want to learn," says Graciela. "It was really amazing to see that people are everywhere that actually care about us."

After the presentation, the young women were approached by health educators from around the nation who applauded their resilience.

"People weren't talking to me, they were going to talk to them, and I think that was really powerful and moving," Danette remarked.

Immersing themselves in the positive energy of the conference gave Tashira and Graciela a newfound sense of confidence. Workshopping aside individuals who have devoted their lives to helping young parents created

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-Tashira Velez**

trust and hope for the future. Conference seminars gave them knowledge to pass along to their peers, their community, and their children. Danette believes the conference redefined how Tashira and Graciela think about their future career paths while helping them to develop both personally and professionally.

"It changed me, to learn something and come practice it at my school or in my life," Tashira says. "It changed me as a mother."

The Story In Numbers

With inspiring presentations from speakers such as Tashira and Graciela, conference attendees gain a new understanding of the incredible promise of pregnant and parenting teens.

"We are seen as just a number, 'Oh, they are going to be a dropout.' We're seen as a dropout rate," says Tashira. "They're pregnant; they've ruined their life."

In reality, hope and opportunity are the defining characteristics of the participants and practitioners in Healthy Teen Network's members' programs. Sharing their stories of resilience reminds us of why Healthy Teen Network is committed evidence-based approaches.

"I want to keep being an advocate for my community," Tashira says. "I want to have a voice for all of these people. There is going to be a time when a person can't have a voice for themselves, and I want to be able to have that voice for them and to really stick up for them."

Healthy Teen Network is about so much more than the statistical analysis, rigorously tested and evaluated methodologies, and hard data often required by policy makers and grantmakers. For members, the conference is an opportunity to discuss better approaches to talking about adolescent health with young adults and increasing capacity to serve. For teens like Tashira and Graciela, Healthy Teen Network is part of the larger support system necessary to rebuild confidence in themselves and their future.



Healthy Teen Network

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