

Source: Community Review, Winnipeg Free Press

December 2001

## **Ma Mawi helps turn pregnant teens into mothers**

An unexpected pregnancy is one of the most frightening things that can happen to a teenage girl.

Many end up feeling terrified and alone, with no idea what to do or how to care for their baby.

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre recognized the seriousness of this issue, and decided to reach out to pregnant teenagers with their Adolescent Parent Support program. The outreach effort is a residential learning centre program, which celebrated its grand opening last June.

With funding from the provincial government, the centre was able to purchase a small apartment building in the North End that can house up to 11 girls.

“We work with the girls toward the goal of independent living. They work at their own pace, there’s not time frame, explained site manager Diane Roussin.

Girls arrive at the centre when they’re between three and six months pregnant. So far, all have been referred by Child and Family Services.

“Our girls are from all kinds of situations. Now that they’re pregnant, either their home environment couldn’t support them or they were living on the street, bouncing from one friend’s couch to another,” Roussin said. “There’s a mood of hope and optimism when a girl comes to us. This is a voluntary program, they have to choose to be here.”

While the program supports choices and tries to offer each participant as many options as possible, Roussin adds that there are some mandatory programs. Each girl must be going to school, whether in a regular classroom situation or a more flexible alternative. They must also participate in 10 weeks each of prenatal and postnatal programming, as well as independent living skills and nutritional programming.

“In the prenatal classes, we teach them the different things that can affect a healthy pregnancy, the importance of exercise, and how to prepare for the hospital,” said Roussin. “In the postnatal, we talk about how to play with baby, how to make their own baby food, who to call when baby is sick.”

The nutritional program is centred around the apartments communal kitchen. Each girl must cook meals and clean up.

“They learn how to cook on a tight budget, how to plan a grocery list, and how to cook things they’ve never tried to make before,” Roussin added.

The independent skills program has five different steps. Each girl is automatically on the first step when they enter the program. As time goes on, program organizers give the girl more responsibility until they are living capably on their own.

Once they’ve achieved this success, the girls graduate from the program and are able to move out of the centre.

“We try to build on family and friend supports. We get each girl to identify who is supportive in her life, and then we pull all those people together,” said Roussin. “We’re not going to be here for them forever, so we don’t want to create a dependency on us.”

Ma Mawi keeps in touch with participants from the program for up to a year after they graduate. “We’ll bring in the girls who have graduated to talk to the girls. The ones who have already been through this process have a lot of gifts to share,” Roussin added. “We try to focus on building their strengths.”

The program is funded by Manitoba Family Services, under the Healthy Child Initiative.