

'I BECAME A MOTHER AT 15'

Now 28, with two children, Tracy Engelbrecht reflects on her life-changing choice to keep her baby when she became pregnant at 14

I grew up in a happy, normal home. My parents had a good marriage, my sister and I got on well and I worked hard at getting good grades. But when I reached high school, I started feeling lost and alone. I didn't want to be a teenager; I was desperate to find my purpose on earth. Then, at 14, I became romantically involved with David, a 19-year-old engineering student. He never pressurised me into sleeping with him; I was fully aware of what I was doing – in fact I had lost my virginity to my previous boyfriend. A few weeks after we started having sex I discovered I was pregnant. I was terrified.

Telling my parents was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. My mom was furious and disappointed. I thought it would be easier to tell my dad because he is usually the more compassionate of the two. But he screamed, and worse – he cried. When I saw my dad break down, everything I had bottled up in the past weeks came out in a flood of tears. I cried until I thought I had nothing left in me. When I told my sister later that evening, she simply put her arms around me and held onto me for a long time.

Abortions weren't legal back then, but anyway, I wanted to keep my baby. My parents agreed to support and look after us – I only understood years later what a selfless move this was. David was shocked but assured me that he

wasn't going to leave me to get through this on my own. But as the days went by he became increasingly emotional about the situation. I felt like I couldn't lean on him for support and a couple of weeks later I broke it off with him. We parted on good terms and he agreed to help pay maintenance, although I never claimed it.

My friends screamed in excitement when I told them I was pregnant. But as the months passed, we grew apart. Our worlds were different. In theirs, make-up and boys ruled, while I was reading pregnancy magazines. And I remember walking with a friend who spotted her mother in the car park and pushed me into a bush – she was ashamed to be seen with me. Many people in my community judged me as bad, dirty, lacking self-control. I found their judgment overwhelming, and withdrew even further. There were times when I felt isolated, but I had always been a loner. And I was excited about the little life growing inside me.

I finished my grade nine year and then started home-schooling, and Steven was born on 11 April 1994. The first time I held him I knew he was my purpose for being on this earth. For the first six months, all I wanted to do was hold him, play with him and love him. Naturally, I struggled with him too, as all mothers do. But not once did I regret my decision to keep him. Steven reminded me

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”

of myself; he was a quiet, reserved, bright baby. I can't describe the happiness I felt when he smiled at me for the first time.

I didn't make friends with other mothers – they were all older than I was and I felt they were looking down on me. My mother became my confidant; we spent our days discussing Steven's development. I'm forever grateful to my parents for their love, support and acceptance. It was a difficult time for my sister, with attention focused on me and the baby, but she loved me unconditionally and we grew even closer.

Now I am 28, a PA, author and a mother of two beautiful children. Looking back, I don't regret 'missing out' on my teenage years. At 14 I felt horribly awkward and desperately wanted that part of my life to be over. When I had Steven at 15, I was catapulted into the next, adult phase of my life; and it felt like that was where I belonged. I was always a serious person, but my son has taught me how to be silly in life. And he's showed me just how strong I am. ■

Tracy Engelbrecht is the author of *The Girl Who Couldn't Say No* (Oshun Books, R130).

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