

Teen turns her life around

'It's hard to believe that all this hard work is starting to pay off'

By JIM MANN
The Daily Inter Lake

Just over two years ago, Shannon St. Onge was scared, confused, homeless and very much pregnant at age 17.

Now she is the mother of a 2-year-old son, the commencement speaker of her graduating class, a freshman at Flathead Valley Community College and the winner of a prestigious award from the National Association of Private Industry Councils.

St. Onge will go to Washington, D.C., Feb. 25-28 to accept her award and meet with congressional delegates.

"It's just hard to believe that all this hard work is starting to pay off," said St. Onge, who was featured in a 1992 Inter Lake report about teen pregnancy and a program designed to help young mothers.

Reflecting on those difficult and often depressing days, St. Onge hardly recognizes herself.

"I was so confused," she says, recalling how for weeks she contemplated giving up her baby for adoption. She was at odds with her parents, and for a while, the baby's father wasn't available to help.

The Adolescent Mothers in Transition Years program sponsored by Northwest Montana Human Resources turned out to be a refuge and a starting point for St. Onge to regain her footing after her son, Shacotta, was born.

The program provided them with an apartment, but it also involved rigid, controlling rules that were difficult to comply with, St. Onge says.

She immersed herself in school, volunteer work, a job-training program and most importantly, caring for her son. She has worked as a baby-sitter, a domestic-care attendant and a landlord's assistant. Over the summer, she was an intern in a job-training program at the Department of Natural Resources, a difficult assignment that helped garner her award.

St. Onge will be the commencement speaker at Kalispell's Laser alternative school later this month, and she is just starting science studies at FVCC. She plans to attend nursing school and ultimately medical school.

Although they are no longer involved, St. Onge says she's had emotional and financial support from the father of her baby and his family. And she's made use of every public assistance program possible to work toward independence.

"Where I'm at now, I couldn't get there without all that help," she said.

With a background of tough life experiences, St. Onge has turned her attention to young women who are walking in her footsteps. She was recently appointed leader of a parent support group sponsored by the Nurturing Center, and she serves on a local steering committee.

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SHANNON ST. ONGE has bold plans for herself and her son Shacotta, starting with her enrollment in science studies at Flathead Valley Community College. Just over two years ago, St. Onge was 17, pregnant and destitute; next month she'll be accepting a national job training award and meeting congressional leaders in Washington, D.C. (Inter Lake photo by Karen Nichols)

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for counseling programs sponsored by the Department of Family Services.

"I do everything I can to help young women who are going through what I've gone through," she said.

At 19, St. Onge is politically astute and socially conscious. Teen pregnancy, she says, is a complicated social problem that has to be curbed. She says teenage girls often turn to sexual relationships out of insecurity,

striving for acceptance.

She says cutting public assistance and investing in orphanages, as Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has suggested, are "scary" proposals.

"I just got my foot in the door, now don't take it away from me," she says. "I'm slowly getting off the system; I just got into college."

But interestingly, St. Onge agrees with many Republican reform proposals and general philosophies.

"I'd be a Republican if I didn't have to receive public assistance," she says. "I'd walk the talk, but I can't do it right now."

She may get a chance to tell lawmakers how she feels. As the Job Training Partnership Act Participant of the Year from Montana, St. Onge is to meet with Montana's congressional delegation, and she'll attend a gathering in Washington, D.C., that will include congressional leaders.