

LULIA BELLE STEWART CENTER

By Stefanie P. Worth
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Kelly Dawkins wants to be a journalist.

Her small-spoken manner belies an inner strength that shines through in the careful way she phrases her thoughts into sentences, her dreams into words. When you see Dawkins it's pretty apparent that she's 21. She dresses like other young women her age, laughs and talks the way they do. But once you talk to her you realize the naive edge most 21-year-olds still possess has been worn away by a tough adolescence that erased her well-laid teenage plans.

Dawkins was an above average seventh grade student when she became pregnant with her first child. She was 14 years old. The crisis forced her to drop out of school and severed the already distant relationship she had with her mother.

It took six years and another child for Dawkins to decide to do something with her life. At the time she says she had no goals for herself, she didn't know what she wanted to be or where she wanted her life to go. She says she didn't really care. And then a friend persuaded her to get involved with the Lulia Belle Stewart Center.

"When I got here I got a better perspective of what I wanted to do," she reveals. "I had options of what I wanted to be. So now I know for sure what I want to be."

"The center was a big part of me deciding what to do."
"The LULIA BELLE STEWART CENTER was borne of a community's desire to take care of its own."

In 1972, there was no community entity designed to meet the needs of young, Black, unwed mothers who traditionally chose to keep their babies. The Florence Crittendon Maternity Center was open to Blacks but served primarily Whites and, therefore, did not perceive the special needs of Blacks as a priority.

So Lulia Belle was created under the guidance of its co-founder Eloise Whitten. Working with the United Community Services Study Committee on Services for Single Parents, Whitten found that, contrary to popular beliefs of the time, Black families were open to adoption.

In fact, they tended to adopt at a higher rate than other ethnic groups when not restricted by outside regulations and policies. The cultural adoption process for the Black community was simply more informal.

The first materialization, then, of the initiative to support pregnant and parenting teens was Homes for Black Children. Lulia Belle was opened four years later and Emily Palmer was brought aboard as the center's executive director — a position she still holds today.

Making a way for teen moms to succeed

nancies, complete their educations, become capable parents of their children and become self-supporting adults.

Palmer says a core ingredient of the center's programs is counseling.

She says that for most families the reality of a pregnant teen creates a traumatic situation. One of the center's goals is to assist the entire family in dealing with the teen's pregnancy.

"The young woman and the family need help handling the decision of what to do about the pregnancy," Palmer says.

She stresses that the counselors at Lulia Belle are professionals, most with master's degrees, and all options open to the young mother are fully explored. The decision is hers to make, but the center is there for her on whatever road she travels.

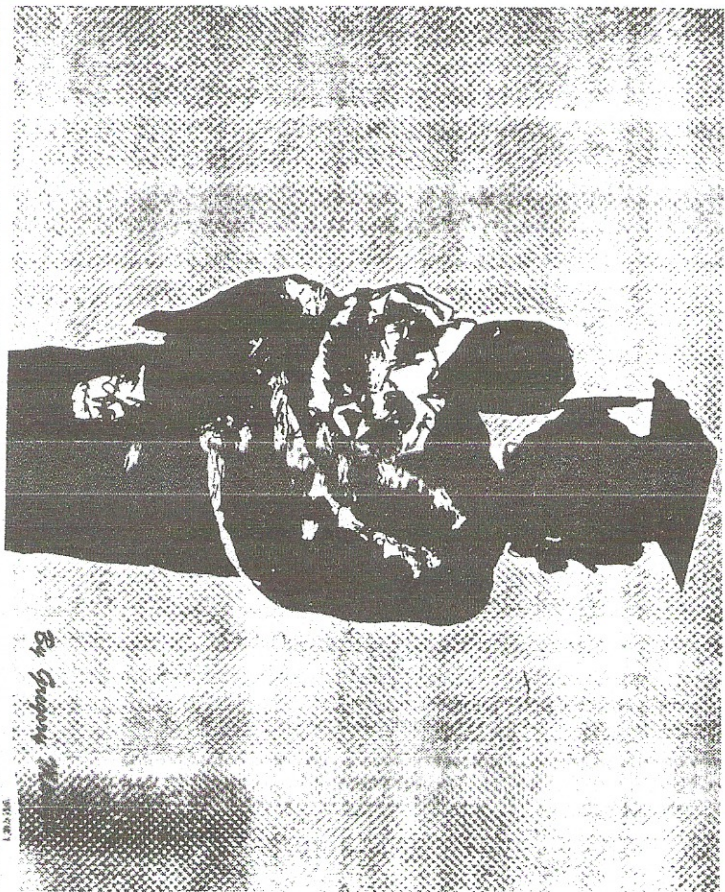
In addition to broad-range counseling, the center also provides referrals and follow-up for medical care, continuing education, job training, employment, financial assistance, temporary residential

care, career guidance, child care and permanent housing.

Nearly 600 young mothers and mothers-to-be take part in Lulia Belle's programs each year. Services range from single parent, protective service, foster care and day care programs to parenting skills and teen father programs and the Delaying Early Sex-ual Involvement and Pregnancy (DESEP) Project.

EDUCATING ITS CLIENTS is a top priority of Lulia Belle's. Staff, teachers and counselors, therefore, aim to make learning exciting, convenient and accessible. Classes feature computers, thanks to foundation grants, which enable students to learn at a more rapid pace. And to help students get to the computers, the center has two vans for client transportation as well as arrangements with DOT and local cab companies to transport youngsters to and from Lulia Belle.

Palmer attributes the center's low attrition rate in its schooling programs to caring teachers who are dedicated to seeing their students succeed.



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Dawkins agrees. "The teachers here are great," she enthuses. "They are like friends, mothers and counselors. I've gone to them for just about everything. They're average people, but they're here to help."

Because Dawkins' education was interrupted relatively early, she started in the center's Career Enhancement Program, designed for students whose reading skills are tested to be below the fifth grade level. Palmer says within six months, most students advance two grade levels, Dawkins was one of those students.

For students who don't make this rapid advancement, there is the Adult Basic Education program which is geared to students whose reading is at the seventh grade level.

Dawkins moved directly into the GED program and is currently finishing up her studies. She has already taken three of the five tests required to receive the high school equivalency degree and says she's excited, but nervous, about actually completing the program that will put her on the path to college.

After Dawkins completes two years at Wayne County Community College, she plans to transfer to Wayne State University and pursue whatever educational venues necessary to reach her goals. She also hopes to teach while she's working on her degree.

Program Coordinator LeRoy Bywaters says the move to higher education is a positive trend for the center's graduates in recent years. Palmer affirms this assessment noting that one of the clients in the shared living facility Lulia Belle operates is currently a senior-year engineering major at Wayne State University. Palmer and Bywaters expect that she'll be doing very well for herself in the not-too-distant future.

Dawkins is determined to do well for herself and her two children as well. Though she says she loves her sons very much and doesn't regret having them, she does wish she'd had more time to think about becoming a mother. She also wishes she could have talked to her mother about the confusion she was going through at the time.

Palmer admits that young women who come to the center with family support often fare better than those who are struggling alone. But Dawkins is one who wasn't deterred by the many obstacles strewn in her pathway.

"If you're not a teen mother, and you're sexually active, you should be prepared for the responsibilities of your actions," Dawkins advises. "But if you are a teen mother, don't get discouraged. There's help out there."

"You can't just put your head down because you're on AIC and you're just in school," she says. "I just keep my head high and keep trying."