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The long way home

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Megan Ogilvie

The ultimate goal for HARP nurses is to get a homeless pregnant woman healthy, housed and mothering her baby. Not all clients can – or want to – bring home their child. But most of those who do have to prove to a child-protection worker that they are capable of parenting.

The HARP team works closely with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto through its pregnancy and aftercare program, a voluntary counselling service for women who request help.

HARP nurses advise clients who want to be parents and whose past behaviour raises red flags – a previous baby has been apprehended, for example, or they have been clean for only a few weeks – to introduce themselves to the CAS while still pregnant. Those who agree are assigned a pregnancy and aftercare worker who follows them throughout the pregnancy.

(Children's Aid does not have the right to intervene in any pregnancy, but when alerted to a birth involving a high-risk parent, it has licence to make an assessment about the mother's or parents' fitness.)



HARP nurse Cheryl Dillon holds 3-month-old Cameron, whose mother, Ruby, gave up crack addiction while pregnant in order to keep him.

RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

Alice Gorman, a public health nurse and manager of the HARP team, says an early relationship with the CAS increases the chances of a client to keep her baby. The client finds out exactly what she needs to do, while the CAS worker sees first-hand how the woman is faring.

Nurses have to choose the right time to speak with their clients about a potential relationship with Children's Aid. Many women initially mistrust the CAS – some had poor experiences with the agency when they were children – and believe inviting a worker into their lives will lead to their baby being apprehended at birth.

Ruby wakes early every day to nurse and hold her infant son. The 33-year-old can hardly believe how much her life has changed in the last 12 months.

Up until August, Ruby was selling sex and smoking crack cocaine near the intersection of Queen St. W. and Strachan Ave., a part of Toronto she calls "the core of Satan itself," a place where crack rocks are just as easy to get as a bag of chips from a corner store.

Ruby never thought she would end up cracked out and on the street. She says she was raised by a regular, hard-working family and was, for a time, a good mother to her four other children, who now range in age from 10 to 18 and live with their respective fathers or Ruby's mother. But then her life spiralled out of control. An abusive relationship – her partner would hogtie, then beat her – drove Ruby to the streets four years ago and to the memory-obliterating fog of drugs.

She decided to leave the street on the day she found out she was five months pregnant.

"In my head and my heart I knew I didn't belong there," says Ruby, who has not smoked crack or drunk alcohol since learning she carried a baby boy. "I knew something would happen to take me out."

HARP nurse Cheryl Dillon met Ruby in September and worked quickly to get her client healthy. Three years of daily crack use had ravaged her body: Ruby weighed less than 100 pounds, and her teeth, grey and crumbling, had been eaten away by crack.

A pregnancy and aftercare worker from the Children's Aid Society monitored Ruby's progress during the remainder of her pregnancy. Dillon says Ruby did everything she was asked – often before being told to do it – from staying clean to getting her own apartment. And when she gave birth to a healthy 7 1/2-pound baby boy on Dec. 9, Ruby got to take her son, Cameron, home.

Few clients do as well as quickly as Ruby. But Dillon says nurses work just as hard with their clients when they know a baby will be apprehended at birth. The result is a healthier pregnancy and baby.

"For these ladies, they are always a mom, even if it's just for nine months," Dillon says. "Some people believe that if you're using drugs and alcohol you don't love your baby. And that's just not the case."

Dillon, 34 and married with two children, loves the challenge of her job, but says it can be overwhelming to see so many women have such hard, beaten-down lives.

"It's very traumatizing to hear those stories over and over again. It makes me hug my kids that much more. As a mom, you worry a lot more. You know how easy it is to get in the wrong position."

Dillon beams when she sees Ruby happy and well in the fifth-floor Scarborough apartment where she lives with her partner and their son. The new family has been there only a week, but Ruby has already made it into a home. Framed photos of Cameron line a small shelf. A single candle burns on the second-hand dining table. A roast is in the oven.

"You've done so well, Miss Ruby," Dillon says, cradling Cameron on her lap.

Ruby reaches over and pulls her baby to her chest.

"I'm joyous now," she says, dimples showing at the corner of a wide smile. "Because I'm a mom again."