

Durham nonprofit redefines teen motherhood

By **Hannah Towey**
Durham VOICE Staff Writer

Angel Hope's first day of class at Hillside High School, a significant event in any teenager's life, was supposed to be Aug. 27, 2015. But the day would soon prove to be even more important as it also turned out to be the day she gave birth to her daughter, Gabrielle, at the age of 15.

Four first days of school and three birthdays later, Hope is on track to graduate high school. The young mother is ranked No. 4 in her class, all while balancing the responsibilities of raising her daughter and working 28 hours a week at her part-time job. She hopes to attend North Carolina Central University in the fall and study neonatal nursing.

For Hope, the perseverance to remain in school while raising her daughter was greater than the 60 percent chance that she would become a high school dropout and the 98 percent chance that she wouldn't complete college before the age of 30 cited by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"I just knew I wanted to graduate high school," said Hope. "I didn't want to be a statistic. And I wanted to go to college to show Gabrielle that no matter what the situation is, you can always be successful."

Hope wasn't alone in her fight against the odds. Helping Each Adolescent Reach Their Spark (H.E.A.R.T.S.), a Durham-based non-

profit dedicated to helping young mothers graduate high school, was by her side every step of the way. With a 100 percent graduation rate and 42 graduates at Hillside alone, the H.E.A.R.T.S. program, now headquartered at ReCity Durham, has a resume as impressive as its members.

Tameka Brown, founder and CEO of H.E.A.R.T.S., was first introduced to the difficulties faced by young mothers when her best friend became pregnant at 15.

"She dropped out of high school," said Brown. "Which is a number one reason I strive to make sure all of our girls graduate. I've seen the damage of a dropout. I know what that does to you personally. Teen pregnancy is not just a one-person

situation. It affects generations to come.

For Hope, that cycle was impossible to ignore. Her mother became pregnant with her at the age of 16 and her father left the family when she was one. Hope, however, says that everything she does is to break "the generational curse" and provide a better life for her daughter.

Including Hope, the eldest of the group, H.E.A.R.T.S. works with 10 young mothers enrolled in Hillside High School—a number that was 16 at the beginning of the year.

The nonprofit is hired by individual schools to consult the affected population by organizing programs and workshops around the four H.E.A.R.T.S. keys: self-development, education, family development and financial awareness.

The sessions include hands-on learning outside of the classroom with partners like Microsoft Office and Hope Her Way.

Semaje Gordon, a 25-year-old student at NCCU and case manager at H.E.A.R.T.S., emphasized that the most important aspect of the organization is

the empowerment it inspires among its members. The program expands beyond an emphasis on academic responsibility by encouraging the girls to be proud of who they are and how far they've come.

According to Gordon, this sense of community provided by both the H.E.A.R.T.S. members and staff is one of the important distinctions between the organization and public social services.

Though H.E.A.R.T.S. can help its members apply for day care scholarships and affordable housing, the true benefits of the program are gained through a long-term commitment to what it stands for.

Unfortunately, Brown said, "A lot of people think they can just come to us just



Angel Hope (19) holds her daughter Gabrielle (3).

to receive child care because they are in a crisis situation. I want to diminish that mindset of that's who H.E.A.R.T.S. is. That's not who we are."

As graduation approaches, Hope continues to work tirelessly to change the statistics surrounding teen motherhood and contribute to a more positive trend. Thanks to programs like H.E.A.R.T.S., Durham Public Schools have reported a 0.3 percent decrease in dropout rates for teen parents.

With 227 Durham high schoolers citing pregnancy or motherhood as a reason for dropping out during the 2017-2018 school year, it's easy to dismiss victories such as Hope's as exceptions. However, according to the State Center for Health Statistics, the total amount of teen pregnancies in Durham County has decreased by 20 percent since 2016 and 62 percent from 1996.

Hope is nothing but optimistic. "With every mistake, there's a lesson. I don't look at my glass as half empty. I look at it as half full," she said.

She tries to get the other girls to see their situations similarly. "There are a lot of teen moms who don't want to see that hope because they don't want to be judged," Hope said.

The moment that lesson clicked for Hope was when she helped deliver a fellow H.E.A.R.T.S. member's child, an experience she cites as the first time she realized she wanted to be a neonatal nurse.

"That's why I picked the career that I picked," said Hope. "It was amazing."

"I've seen the damage of a dropout. I know what that does to you personally. Teen pregnancy is not just a one-person situation. It affects generations to come."

— Tameka Brown