

A special Compass report:

Student moms rise to the challenge of the struggle to realize their dreams

by Yushawnda Thomas

In a society that looks down on unwed mothers, ECSU's student parents are working hard to change their lives for themselves and their children.

Instead of using early parenthood as a reason not to succeed, student parents—like senior Gloria Bates—are combating the statistics of drop outs and federal aid.

Bates said she refuses to let pregnancy change her goals.

"People see pregnancy as a stumbling block and they think you won't complete your goals. I'm a senior. I'm graduating. My pregnancy is not stopping me from doing anything. I also feel that although I was supposed to go to grad school right away it has to wait. Right now I have to worry about loans, jobs, and my child.

Bates said that being pregnant has changed her life.

"I stay tired a lot and my sleeping habits have changed," she said. "It seems as if everything has to be planned and scheduled. I'm holding down two jobs, classes, and I plan to graduate on time."

Bates said that having a child out of wedlock isn't the end of the world.

"It's something between me, my maker and the father of my child. A child out of wedlock isn't a mistake—my child is a blessing from God."

Mothers and pregnant mothers say they feel more pressure to succeed for themselves and the benefit of their children.

ECSU senior Tabettha Summerlin said she thought she was one of the few pregnant women on campus when she was pregnant with her daughter Brianna.

"The first thing I thought to do was drop out," Summerlin said.

Summerlin completed that semester, however, and returned the following semester—still pregnant. Her baby was due in December but came in November. Summerlin had already requested I's in her courses so that she would have the opportunity to complete her work.

Summerlin didn't return until the following fall.

She said that the birth of her child helped her redefine her goals and set limitations.

"I can't just up and move. I know I have to make a life for me and my child."

Summerlin said she has received a lot of support from home. "My mother has given up two and a half years to help me with my baby."

Summerlin said all campuses need child care to be available to students with children.

"This is the nineties. They need to publicize and tell students that the laboratory school is available."

Senior Cindy Smith said that her four-year old daughter doesn't affect her work but the distance between them affects their relationship. Smith's mother keeps her daughter during the week.

"Becoming a mother gave me a sense of direction and helped me to revise my goals," said Smith. "After I had her I decided to go back to college."

Smith also credits "support from home" with helping her cope with the pressures of being a student mom.

"I do pretty much anything I need to do as far as school is concerned. Even if there is a weekend my mother steps up and takes care of my daughter for me."

Keneeka Chavis, a senior, said that after she told her parents that she was pregnant her father told her she wasn't

going back to school. Chavis sat out for an entire year before her parents would fund her education again.

"My father told me to stay home and work and take care of my responsibilities," Chavis said.

Her mother still encouraged her to return to college. She enrolled her daughter first at Martin Community College and then back at ECSU.

Chavis spends weekends with her daughter, Jo'neeka. Her daughter keeps her focused and goal-oriented.

"I knew I couldn't play around any more," she said. "I had someone depending on me. I'm glad my mother let me come back."

Chavis advised pregnant students not to think their lives are over and not to refuse help.

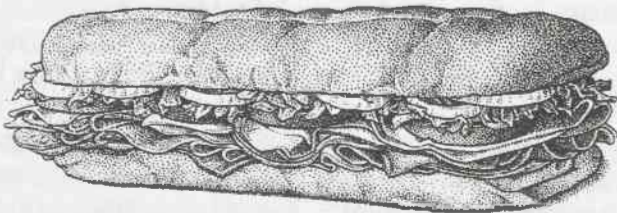
"You can still have a life and get your education," Chavis said. "And if the father is willing to help let him help. Don't use the child as a pawn in problems between yourself and the father."

Chavis said the University needed counseling services to assist student parents:

"It would have helped me to talk to someone who had been through the same situation."

The world just became a more beautiful place.

(At least this lucky little piece of it did.)



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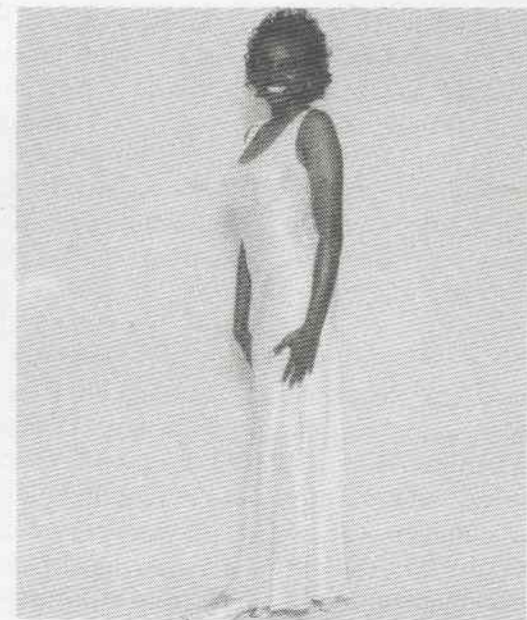
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