

A young woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a white short-sleeved top, is pushing a black and blue stroller on a paved sidewalk. A baby is seated in the stroller. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a utility pole.

Young woman gets HELP

from Pregnancy
Crisis Aid

>> Nancy and her son Anthony, who will celebrate his first birthday on July 10.

by John Hogan | Photos by Jonathan Tramontana



A

s a high school dropout who didn't always make the best choices for herself, Nancy Ruiz did not have a promising outlook a few years ago, despite a loving

family and access to opportunities her parents did not have.

In 2008, her situation became more complicated when Ruiz, now 20, learned she was pregnant.

Afraid to tell her parents, Ruiz walked several blocks from her Northwest Side home to a Catholic-run pregnancy resource center on Bridge Street NW where she sought help.

Ruiz found support, guidance and a deeper understanding of how everything works out for those with faith.

"I can't believe I was so scared to go there on my first day," Ruiz said of her initial visit to HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid, 705 Bridge St. NW. "The people there were supportive and non-judgmental. They helped me in so many ways to experience the love of Jesus."

Today, Ruiz is optimistic about her future. She's forged ties with the church, the pregnancy center and her family that are strong and enduring.

But the focus of her life now is son Anthony, a bright-eyed, curious and active boy who celebrates his first birthday July 10. His arrival has brought Nancy closer to

her parents, Nicolas and Anita Ruiz and her 16-year-old sister, Elizabeth.

"They have helped me out so much, I cannot ever begin to repay them," Ruiz said. "And they just love Anthony so much; talk about doting grand-parents and a doting aunt."

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Starting over

With support from family and HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid, Ruiz returned to the classroom last fall to complete her high school education.

"I dropped out for a couple of years," she said. "After I had my son, I knew I needed an education to succeed. It was so hard because I practically had to do three years in one."

Starting in September, she began 12 hours of schooling each day, a few blocks from home. Classes were 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

"No one thought I was going to do this," Ruiz said. "My counselor even said no one has ever completed so many classes in one year, but she said I could go ahead and try."

In early April, Ruiz completed her classes. She will



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receive her GED at a commencement ceremony this June.

“My greatest inspiration and motivation was my son,” Ruiz said. “It was hard not being able to spend time with him when I was in class 12 hours a day, but the sacrifice was worth it.”

Among those likely attending the June commencement is Judy Dunst, co-director of the pregnancy center. Dunst, who began volunteering at the center two years ago following a 23-year career as a special education teacher, beams when talking about Ruiz.

“She was like a scared child when she first came in, but determined to do anything to help her baby,” Dunst said. “She was always looking at the future and how she could better herself.”

Faith in action

Since its inception nearly 36 years ago, HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid Inc. has become a community resource for expectant mothers. The non-profit’s HELP center makes referrals to adoption

HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid, Inc.

>> HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid, Inc. is a Catholic, non-profit organization dedicated to helping pregnant women carry their babies to term by offering them support and alternatives to abortion, regardless of their faith, origin or background. The organization’s goal is to empower pregnant women and young mothers in a Christ-like manner. Services and programs include:

- free and confidential pregnancy tests
- limited ultrasound services
- maternity clothing program
- layette program, providing pregnant women with baby essentials that enable her to feel prepared to take the baby home
- *Loving Arms program*; instructional DVDs on topics that include health, sexual integrity, child care and development
- emergency material assistance program, which offers provisions of new and like-new baby items, including baby formula, food, diapers, clothing, and other essentials
- community resource links to pre- and postnatal care, housing, adoption, food pantries, and legal or social services

>> HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid is located at 705 Bridge St. NW, in downtown Grand Rapids. To seek help or more information call **616.459.9139**, **info@helppregnancy.org** or go to **helpgrandrapids.wordpress.com**.

agencies and offers baby supplies to women who think they might not be able to afford having a child.

“For many clients, the information received has been just what they needed to be more equipped to handle the everyday challenges of parenthood,” Dunst said.

Women assisted by HELP Pregnancy Crisis Aid Inc. can also select items from its Loving Arms boutique using points earned through the incentive-based program, Dunst said.

The organization’s latest project – called The Wright Connection Program – is taking shape in a vacant part of the Bridge Street building. It aims to connect professionals with new and expectant mothers facing serious issues such as dysfunctional behavior and harmful relationships. It is named in honor of Susan Jane (Haadsma) Wright, a nurse

and alumni of Catholic Central High School who died Christmas eve, 1999.

“It is our goal that the participants will come to recognize Jesus Christ’s great love for each of them and will begin to, or continue to, place their trust in God to direct their lives through increased understanding and faith,” Dunst said.

Ruiz’s faith life has certainly increased – be it quiet prayer at home or visits to St. James Catholic Church on Bridge Street NW.

“Before I would go to Mass, but not as often as I should,” Ruiz said. “I wasn’t that into it. Now I see how much that part of my life was missing.

“Through my struggles and the birth of Anthony, I reconnected with God.” ☩



>> Nancy and her son Anthony with her parents, Anita and Nicolas, who have been supportive in helping Nancy as she raises her son and attends school.