

single mother adjusts to society's norms, child's needs

by alice hrnicek

Monica had her first abortion at the age of seventeen. Three years later she had her second abortion.

By the time she was 26, Monica was into her fifth pregnancy as a single adult. Her relationship with the father had been going on for almost 10 years. This time Monica did not follow her own precedent.

"I felt completely different about myself than ever before with that pregnancy," she said. "I decided I could handle being a single parent."

The decision Monica had to make is one faced by thousands of single, pregnant females across the country. Options available for these women usually include aborting the child, giving it up for adoption or raising the child themselves. In some instances, the woman may be lucky enough to have a relative who will assist or take full responsibility for the child. But in others, the choices available may be even more limited.

Monica, whose name was changed to protect her anonymity, admits that her experience may not typify that of the majority of single parents. However, many of the problems she has incurred are encountered by others.

For Rebecca's father, Monica holds no hostile feelings. "I have a lot of empathy for him," she said. "He didn't choose to be a father."

Rebecca's father sends letters and contacts them by phone. "We are aware of him here," Monica said. "But she (Rebecca) hasn't seen him for a year and a half."

For several years, Monica worked with a group of women in Chicago who performed legal abortions. In Lincoln for her fifth pregnancy, she felt removed from the support of her home community. The fact that her daughter was born three months premature, before Monica had taken Lamaze classes and completed other preparatory measures, added to the "incredible shock" which she experienced.

"I became very defensive," Monica said. The experience of being a single mother in the hospital on Mother's Day was devastating. "They close the curtains while everyone else has visitors."

After living in a small apartment for two months, the two moved into a communal system for a year. Monica said the

situation was "good for a single mother because there are a lot of supportive people."

"I didn't intend to be on welfare," she said. "My intentions were totally opposite. But (Rebecca) was premature so I had to deal with it right away."

The economic consequences have hit Monica in numerous and unforeseen ways. She owns no car. She rents a house for \$85 a month. She classifies herself as "low income."

She quickly learned that "children cost money," she said. Out of necessity she has acquired almost everything secondhand.

"I get along real well with welfare," she stated. For some women, however, welfare is a comedown and is likely to make them resent being a single parent, she said.

Through a state funded program, Vocational Rehabilitation, Monica is currently completing the requirements for a degree in English at UNL. She entered college in 1966 and having shifted among three institutions, she hopes to graduate in 1979.

Part of the reason she is getting an education, she said, is a "desire to do well." The public often complains about people abusing welfare, she said. "I'm not using public assistance for that purpose."

In the future, Monica would like to live in another group environment with single mothers. "Single parents need to be around sympathetic adults," she commented. However, she added that the mothers would suffer financially because their welfare needs would be reevaluated.

Some single parents "feel really locked in" by the restrictions regarding the use of medicare, she said. If a single mother becomes pregnant again, she loses the benefits.

The emotional adjustments of raising a child alone are in many ways more costly than economic problems. "Part of my defensiveness about the level of organization I live in is the way people judge single mothers," she said. "There is usually an assumption that there is some maladjustment."

"But most mothers don't choose the situation as I did. I had to have a lot of self worth. I feel like I don't encounter self-consciousness since I'm not as defensive anymore."

"I'm real supportive of single fathers," she reported. The public hears less about them than single mothers, but she said they are given more credit because they have no wife to raise their children. "A woman is

supposed to do everything as well as everyone else. Society's expectations of us and our families have to be tolerant."

Monica remarked that she has had no relationship with men since Rebecca's birth. "A person must make a decision to have a good time. Sometimes you must choose between spending time with your child or with others."

Most single parents end up associating with other people who have children, Monica said. Although she sees nothing wrong with parents, she believes the field could be opened wider. "Unless you make an effort to be outgoing, you'll probably be ignored," she said.

Since Rebecca's birth, Monica has been involved with several organizations for single parents. One of these, MOMMA, is a national organization which included a Lincoln chapter for several years. The group functioned as "a solidarity gesture for women to share the same problems." All of the women in MOMMA were low income, Monica said, and met in a church. MOMMA died in Lincoln because there were not enough people to keep it going.

The extinction of this organization symbolizes the nation's ignorance of the number of single parents in this country, she said. "It's important to emphasize how many homes are single-parent homes and that the divorce rate is covering less of the single households."

What about the children living in these arrangements? Although a lot of people are still unaware of the special needs and the growing number of these children, Monica is optimistic that the situation is improving. "I had a worse time saying my mother was divorced than she (Rebecca) will of saying her father lives in Chicago," she said. "Being small (a result of her premature birth) will be much worse than the stigma from being the child of a single

parent."

Rebecca has not yet started school but Monica said there will be enough students from single-parent homes in her class that the "kids will not be hassling each other. She's not up against much."

Child care is another important consideration for single parents. When Monica started classes at UNL, she worried because Rebecca was only 18-months old and few places accept children that young.

Monica was able to place Rebecca in the University Child Care Center, which she believes offers excellent care. "If Rebecca hadn't been accepted by UCC, I would have felt I had a problem."

But she voiced that daycare needs to be much better than it is. Churches and other buildings empty throughout the week could be utilized, she said.

The circle is vicious, though. "Single parents have the least time to do the organizing," she explained. "We don't have time to set up things we need and we feel penalized because we don't have those facilities."

In spite of claims that single parents can't handle a dual mother-father role, Monica doesn't feel she's "missing anything because Rebecca doesn't have a daddy. All parents come to grips with the fact that you can't be a perfect parent. You lose stereotypes because you have to do everything."

Men in Rebecca's life include daycare personnel, Monica's male teacher's and male friends. Her regular sitter also is a teenage male.

The mother notes that there are a lot of things she and her daughter have not yet experienced. "What I do will be based partly on her needs. But I won't do something I don't like just for the sake of being financially secure, I feel no limitations because of being a single parent."

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choice. "Sex just isn't that important to me now. I've had many opportunities to have intercourse, but I think it is not worth the trouble."

Although he has "made out" with several girls, he has never encouraged any other activities because there are a lot of responsibilities involved with intercourse.

He said his sexual attitudes have not changed since he came to college.

"I respect women. Most guys in our house do not. I don't see a woman as someone whose only purpose is to have sex with."

He has remained a virgin also because he has not met any girls who interest him.

"For some reason, the girls that come over to our house are mostly the type you couldn't take home to mother," he said. "Maybe I'm just too picky, but if I'm going to have intercourse I want to be sure it is with someone I care about."

Frank said he has never felt much pressure from his fraternity brothers to actively seek sex, although added that he said several of his friends in the house "are out to get him laid" this year.

"I really don't think it's any of their business if I stay a virgin," he said. "I don't think it is going to be a permanent thing. I'm sure it will happen, and when it does it does."

Most of the men interviewed said they felt birth control was a mutual responsibility, however, they disagreed on the methods of contraception.

Barry said he does not like to use any type of contraceptive. Craig said he has used condoms, but does not like them be-

cause they are uncomfortable and ineffective. Alan always uses a condom when he has intercourse.

"Most guys are pretty laissez-faire when it comes to birth control, but I feel that it is important to use a condom and that the man should take the responsibility for it. Besides, most girls just don't have a condom on hand with them," Alan explained.

The men's attitudes towards living together also differed.

Alan said he feels that he would not want to live with someone. He said he would get tired of always being with the same person, and, unlike the others, he could not have sex with someone he did not love.

"It just wouldn't excite me," he explained.

Barry also said he does not like the idea of living with someone. Living with someone can make things bad for one's parents or employer if they found out. He said most of society just does not accept the idea of sleeping together and not being married.

Carl, however, plans to live with someone after college and is looking forward to it.

"Sexual attitudes have changed," he said. "People are more open to speak out about sex. It just is not a dirty word anymore. It's not taboo anymore to discuss sex openly and honestly."

Editor's note: This story is not intended to characterize all fraternity men. It is intended only to illustrate how a person's environment—family, religion and peer groups—can influence his sexual attitude and behavior. Our reporter spoke to fraternity men because they are one of the largest homogeneous groups of men on campus.

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"There's a time and place (for sex). I think in our house we follow that rule," the standards chairman said. In this day and age, it (premarital sex) is almost accepted."

But pledges are not the only ones who feel uncertain about how their sexual behavior will affect their image in the house.

One junior sorority member said although she feels comfortable discussing sex with her friends in the house, she sometimes worries about negative reactions to her behavior from a few people.

A lot of our sexual conservatism is the result of a midwest, middle-class upbringing which says I'm only going to sleep with him because I'm going to marry him. "If they don't marry him, and don't marry right out of college, I think they will be surprised how much their attitude will change in five years," she said.

But some members think the tacit code of ethics is hypocritical.

"It's okay for girls who have boyfriends and who are going to get married. But then if they (the standards committee)

hear anyone else is doing it they act like it's a big sin-sin, when they're doing it anyway too," said one senior member.

Sexually active women are not alone in a sense of peer disapproval. One girl said although she disapproves of premarital sex she is afraid to say anything to her sorority sisters.

In other areas of the survey, all those that indicated they are sexually active said they use birth control. The most popular method is the birth control pill. Two women said they use a diaphragm.

However, all 30 women indicated that preventing pregnancy should be both the man's and woman's responsibility.

When asked if they approve or disapprove of homosexuality, 60 percent said they disapprove, 13 percent said they approve and 26 percent said they are undecided.

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