

# A Bump in the Road

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— editor in chief —

After getting pregnant at 17, Petrik shares experience of being a teen mother, how her life changed and how protecting yourself is the most important thing

High school is often described as the best four years of your life. While you are figuring out who you are and what you want to do with the rest of your life, you get to enjoy being with friends and cherishing your last few years as a “kid”.

For Nichole Petrik, her future came earlier than she had originally envisioned.

Just before heading home from her boyfriend's house one evening during her junior year, Petrik took a pregnancy test on a whim. She didn't think she was pregnant and doesn't know exactly why she took the test, but she did.

At first glance, no line appeared in the window. On her way home, Petrik was going to

throw the pregnancy test out the window so her parents wouldn't see that she took one.

“As I was about to throw [the pregnancy test] out the window, the streetlight shined on it and I noticed the line was there. I was like ‘Oh my God, I'm pregnant,’” Petrik said.

Petrik was 17 years old, grew up in a middle class family in West County and was finishing her junior year at Parkway South High School.

“It's something you think won't ever happen to someone like you,” she said.

Petrik and her boyfriend had been dating for around a year and a half when she got pregnant and were about to face the repercussions of not practicing safe sex.

Petrik immediately knew she was going to keep the baby. She knew she had not taken all the precautions to keep herself from getting pregnant and she had ultimately put herself in the situation.

The decision to keep the baby was the easy part. The hard part was telling her family.

Petrik was afraid to destroy the close relationship she had with her parents and how they would handle the news.

“My mom came downstairs the night I found out I was pregnant. I was sitting on my bed and she looked at me and was like ‘you're either pregnant or you have an STD (sexually transmitted disease) because you've told me everything else,’” Petrik said.

Her mom took the news rather calmly, but her dad was a different story.

“Telling my dad was the worst thing. My dad really blew up on me. He wouldn't talk to me and he wouldn't even look at me for like three weeks. It was hard to look at my dad and know that I had really let him down,” Petrik said.

Despite everything, Petrik went back to school her senior year and attended school until she was eight months pregnant. She was determined to finish school and not be a drop out.

Luckily, she had enough credits to graduate early and not have to come back for second semester.

As if high school wasn't difficult enough itself, Petrik had to go through her last semester pregnant and deal with everything that came with it.

“It was really hard getting bigger, dealing with hormones and trying to figure out what you're going to do. I just don't think it's something that girls think about,” she said.

Petrik faced everything from the people who accepted her to the people who no longer wanted anything to do with her.

Before getting pregnant, Petrik's post high school plans included going to an out-of-state four year university and she had already sent in a few applications.

However, everything she had planned was no longer an option nor was even important anymore.

“Instead of going off to college or even a community college, I immediately had to go to work. I had a child that I needed to provide for,” Petrik said.

Just after graduating, Petrik gave birth to son, Joshua Tygart, an LHS

freshman.

Petrik immediately shifted her focus from her college and career plans to what she needs to do for the benefit of her child, even if it meant having to work 40 hours a week.

She lived with her parents until Tygart was two because she was not financially stable on her own.

Petrik made it through those difficult first couple of years with the support of her parents and everyone else around her.

With only having a high school education, finding a good paying job was difficult and when she would receive her paycheck, it all went towards diapers, formula, daycare and more.

Petrik and her boyfriend stayed together until Tygart was about four months old until they realized how strenuous the relationship was.

“Having Joshua made the relationship so much harder because we were babies who have a baby and we didn't know what we were doing so it just made everything a million times more intense,” Petrik said.

Although they ended their relationship, they made it a priority to stay friends and get along for their son. To this day, they have a good relationship and have worked hard to make it that way.

The first few years after Petrik and her boyfriend split were tough because they had to figure things out on their own while trying to keep a good relationship and on top of all that, raise a child.

Petrik feared it would be difficult to find another man that would accept her and her son.

“Even if that person says they're okay with it, do they really mean it? It's one thing to say you're okay with, but once you get in there and realize you have a child you need to take care of 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it's a little different,” she said.

However, it wasn't long before someone came into her life and understood that Petrik was a package deal and was ready to take on the challenge. Petrik and her husband have been married for 12 years now.

“I think that [Josh and my husband] have a good relationship. He's another dad figure who has been there his entire life,” she said.

Petrik's own future was put on hold when she got pregnant and had to put all of her plans on the back burner. But now, Petrik is in school finishing up her psychology degree.

“I had to focus on my children. Not only that, I had another child at 19 and then another child at 21 and had my last child at 24. It's no longer about you, it's about them,” she said.

One of Petrik's main priorities as a parent is to keep an open line of communication and to keep an extremely honest relationship.

She stresses the importance of making it clear that these things, getting pregnant, can and

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“It's something you think won't happen to someone like you.”

— Nichole Petrik

will happen if you have unprotected sex.

“[Having sex] may only last 15 minutes as to where if you get someone pregnant, you're in for a minimum of 18 years commitment whether you like the person or not,” Petrik said.

She said, being a teen parent is a challenge on its own and nothing can completely compare you for what is going to come.

For Petrik, the biggest obstacle was trying to get her life and herself together in order to provide a good life for her son.

She admits she worried about her son being punished in life because of the mistakes she made.

“It scares me to think the same thing would happen to one of my children because I know what that's like and I know the responsibility that comes with it,” she said.

Petrik never thought how other parents would look at her, though. Some parents have said they don't want their child playing with Josh because of her age and they don't respect her as a parent.

“Parents immediately think I'm just some girl who got pregnant in high school and couldn't make smart decisions then, so what makes them think I'm going to make smart ones now. It's unfair but it does happen,” Petrik said.

Petrik is aware of what can come with not so smart decision making and that is why she disagrees with the parents that look down on her. “More than anything, I think I'm harder on my kids than most parents due to the fact that I know what can happen,” she said.

In the end, protection is the most important thing and being aware of what can happen when it isn't used. It can happen to anyone and nobody is the exception.

“It's your responsibility to protect your body and nobody can do that but you. I think you need to know that just because someone says I love you, it isn't always right. You may love them now, but you're not going to love that person in two, three years. You may not even love that person in like a week. I love you right now does not mean I'm going to love you for the rest of your life,” Petrik said.

She added, “You need to know all of your options and repercussions and waiting until it happens is not the time to have the conversations.

Teen Pregnancy:  
Know the Facts

Since its peak in 1991, the teen birth rate has declined by 57 percent

\$9.4 billion  
totaled public spending on teen  
childbearing in 2010

50 percentage of teen mothers  
who receive high school  
diplomas by the age 22

Teen Birth Rate  
27 births per 1,000 girls

2013 274,641  
number of teen births

In Missouri:

43.1

percentage of high school students  
in Missouri that have had sex

Ranked 31st for teen  
birth rate

Ranked 24th for teen  
pregnancy rate

\*all facts from thenationalcampaign.org

Child Development educates students on basics while providing eye-opening experience with Baby Think It Over

elly levy  
— staff reporter —

Among other things, Child Development teaches high schoolers what life with a baby could be like. They discuss conception, pregnancy, childbirth and different styles of parenting.

Though some may see it as a class to free up a challenging schedule, senior Katie Phipps saw it as an eye-opening experience.

“Overall, the class is pretty simple,” Phipps said.

But then, the “Baby Think It Over” assignment hits and things get real.

Phipps said her weekend involved focusing all her energy on the baby from burping and feeding

it, to waking up every 20 minutes to stop it from crying.

She said it's like having a real baby, in more ways than one.

“I learned what it really felt like to take care of a baby as a high schooler,” Phipps said. “It was not fun. Not fun at all.”

When they take home this bundle of electronic-joy, students are required to take it everywhere they go—in the car, to school and even when you hang out with friends.

Though Phipps never drove with it herself, she knew it was an inconvenience to bring it everywhere she went.

“Everyone should take this class. You learn the risks of being sexually active as a teen and it

proves that things can go wrong during sex,” Phipps said.

Phipps wasn't the only one that enjoyed the class, however.

Senior cheer captain, Elle Hillier is known to her friends and teammates as “Momma Elle.”

“I seem to have just this natural maternal instinct,” Hillier said. “It's not that holding the baby felt natural, but it didn't feel wrong either, you know?”

Child Development teacher Lauren Arnet agrees the main concept of the class is parenting.

“We discuss where babies come from, deciding to become a parent, risks involved, the pregnancy process, delivery and basic parenting,” she said.

Students are even required to

walk around with a pregnancy belly to see what it's like to accomplish everyday tasks being pregnant such as walking up stairs, tying your shoes and even hugging.

Each student has their own reason for taking the class, which tends to be filled with about 30 students.

Most join to be able to take the baby home to see what parenthood is like.

Others want to know what it's like to be a parents, or have hopes of being a teacher in the future.

But no matter what the goal of the student is, they are learning the basic necessities of becoming a parent either at a young age, or as a married adult.

**ON THE COVER** seniors Elle Hillier and Sydney Mullen from the Child Development class show off some of the tools used by the teachers to show students the challenges of what it would be like to be a teen mother. Mullen is wearing the pregnancy belly to get a feel of what it is like doing everyday tasks while pregnant. Hillier is holding the “Baby Think It Over” which is a simulation doll that all the students take home once during the semester. The dolls are computer chipped and require extensive round the clock care, just like a real baby. (photo illustration by Hannah Martin)