

He's not just a man - he's a dad

By WARREN WOLFE, Star Tribune

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As a 16-year-old high school sophomore, Tristen Hurt didn't consider himself a very good father.

"I wanted to be a good dad, but I didn't know much," Hurt, now 23, said as he sat on his living room floor in White Bear Lake. He kept one hand on the shoulder of his son Christen, 7, and an eye on his daughter Trinity, almost 2 and glued to a TV cartoon. "What's a kid know about being a father?"

Hurt is a graduate of a Catholic Charities program called Young Men in Transition. Since 1994 it has helped about 450 very young fathers - - more than 90 percent of whom started in the program -- complete high school, get jobs and establish relationships with their children.

Fatherhood, of course, is never easy. Hurt struggles daily to balance the pressures: working two jobs as a certified nursing assistant, watching over his kids when he's home, ensuring a relative is there when he is not, and trying to make his strained marriage work.

Soft spoken, Hurt doesn't brag about his success as a father or his glory days as a basketball star at Arlington High in St. Paul. He was born in Chicago and raised in St. Paul by his mom.

But smiles light his face as he talks about his strategy to become a surgical technician, or how he is creating play time this summer with his children.

"These kids are really the center of everything now," he said. "They're so smart, so good. My work, my future, everything is really about making sure they have a good future."

'I knew I was pretty dumb'

Hurt was 15 when his girlfriend, Jeanette, became pregnant. When his son was born, he entered the program for young dads.

"Some of my friends were in the program, so it wasn't hard to join. It's embarrassing for some guys, you know, to admit they need some help, or even that they want to be with their kids," he said. "Not me. I knew I was pretty dumb about this stuff."

His knowledge grew as he met with a support group of fellow teen dads, learned how children develop, and took coaching and home visits from his counselor, Colin Moore.

He also began to mentor other young fathers, sharing insights and experiences. He spoke publicly about issues facing young fathers, including talks to teen mothers.

At age 17, he and Jeanette got an apartment so they could better share parenting. They were married two years ago. In 2003, the advocacy group Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting named Hurt Teen of the Year.

"Tristen is a great young man and a very good dad," said Moore, who stays in touch with Hurt. "He's a role model for other young men on how to be a responsible and caring father. He's the kind of dad I like to see in the community."

Helping kids and dads

At its core, the Catholic Charities program in St. Paul is centered on

the notion that children -- and their dads -- have a better chance in life if they're connected.

The program, which is in 10 public and parochial St. Paul schools, offers peer support groups, intensive counseling, home visits, and other services -- this year to about 50 clients.

"We're not trying to establish formal families, although we can help with that," said Nate Rauschendorfer, who manages Catholic Charities programs for young moms and dads.

"Our goal is to help children get healthy co-parenting, whether the parents are a couple or apart," he said.

Young Men in Transition is part of a larger parenting program for men called Dad's Connection. Catholic Charities has worked with teenage moms for 90 years, Rauschendorfer said, "and we finally realized that, gee, there's another player here -- the dads -- and maybe we ought to work them into the equation."

He said the results belie the notion that teen fathers rarely care about their children.

"They do care. And when they're asked, they want to be responsible men -- not all of them, but a lot," he said. "It's not easy, and they often start with a lot of strikes against them -- their age, their own home life, the need to finish school and still be a dad. It takes strength and guts."

Working days and nights

Tristen works four hours every afternoon as a personal care attendant for his father-in-law, Lawrence Johnson, who lost his legs and use of his arms in an accident 25 years ago. Four days a week

he works an eight-hour overnight shift as an aide at an assisted living facility.

"I'm at work or I'm with the kids. I sleep on weekends," he said with a laugh. "But I've been pretty lucky. Yeah, it's hard keeping it all going, but I love the work, I love my kids, and I got people who help me."

But life may get a bit tougher if he becomes a single parent.

"My wife was away and now she's back, but I don't know what will happen," he said. "I know I'll stay with my kids. I always have and I always will. We'll be OK. But even with the program and Colin's help, I still have a lot to learn," he said.

"I'm just 23. It's like I'm growing up with my kids. I'm just a little older than them."

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