

# SHORT BIOS OF THE TEEN MOTHERS

## *Growing Up Fast*



## **Author's Note**

This is a work of non-fiction. All its characters are real, as are the places where they live and the details of their personal lives. Quotes from characters and dialogue I have used were taken directly from edited scenes I videotaped, as well as from edited transcripts of interviews I conducted and either videotaped or audiotaped.

All the teen parents seen in the photographs I took for this book are referred to by their real names. They embarked on this project knowing that their true stories would become public and that their identities and the identities of their children would not be hidden.

Their courage and their long-term commitment to sharing their stories over the course of four years made this book possible, and for that I will always be extremely grateful.

Most of the other characters that appear in the chapters are referred to by their real names. Some names have been changed. Every instance where a pseudonym was used is accounted for in the endnotes in the book.

**The pseudonyms that appear in these short bios have been marked with an \*.**

I was interested in presenting the subjective stories of these individuals, who spoke from the heart of their personal experiences and shared their unique perspectives on their lives and the world around them. I accepted what they said without judgment, not necessarily as the only truth, but as their genuine perception of the truth.

For the first and last chapters, I did substantial research and am greatly indebted to the work of experts, scholars, and writers in many fields. Details about the sources of the information and statistics in those chapters can be found in the endnotes.

**J.H.L**  
**New York City**  
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# AMY



School was always difficult for Amy. She struggled through her classes, barely passing her tests. By seventh grade, lacking support or direction when it came to her studies, she began smoking, drinking and partying with her friends. At home, Amy's parents were preoccupied with their own stress; her father a machinist at GE, lost his job in Pittsfield when the factories shut down, and after a year of unemployment and uncertainty, he was recalled to a GE plant in Schenectady and assigned to the night shift. He began commuting back and forth. Amy's mother struggled to rein her daughter in, but to no avail. The two were in constant conflict.

Amy began dating a senior at the local high school. She got pregnant at the age of fourteen and hid her pregnancy for five months. When her mother finally found out, she insisted that Amy put the baby up for adoption. As her pregnancy continued into its final weeks, Amy agonized over her decision to give the baby up. Finally, she decided that there was no way that she could go through with the adoption and made the final decision to keep the baby.

After Amy's daughter, Kaliegh, was born, the baby's father graduated, joined the army and moved out of state, leaving Amy to raise their child on her own. Amy and her mother continued to disagree over how to raise Kaliegh until her mother finally called the Department of Social Services and asked them to intervene for the sake of her grandchild. Faced with the threat of having her daughter removed from her custody and placed in foster care, Amy enrolled in the Teen Parent Program, moved forward with her studies, and began working part-time as a waitress at Friendly's.

When Kaliegh was a year-and-a-half old, Amy met Bernard, who had recently arrived in America from Ivory Coast. Several months into their relationship, Amy got pregnant again. Bernard wanted her to have an abortion but she refused.

Eventually Amy and Kaliegh moved in with Bernard, and Amy gave birth to a son and named him Marcus. She, Bernard, and the kids moved from one housing project to another. With the help of one-on-one tutoring and on-site daycare provided by the Teen Parent Program, Amy completed the coursework necessary to graduate. She returned to Pittsfield High School for her graduation ceremony and received her diploma on time with the rest of her class. Amy then did one thousand hours of training and passed the state boards for her Cosmetology License. She began looking for job openings for hairdressers and ultimately got a job at a salon in Great Barrington. She has held this job for several years and is well liked by her co-workers and by her regular clients.

Bernard went to Ivory Coast to visit his family, and when he returned, he and Amy split up. Amy had applied for Section 8 Housing and she got an apartment in the same housing project, just across the yard from where she had lived with Bernard. As Amy settled in with the two kids, Bernard reduced the amount of time he spent with them. While continuing with his long-term job working at a center for mentally and physically disabled children, Bernard took classes at Mildred Elly Business School and got a job designing websites for a local company.

Initially, after he and Amy broke up, Bernard didn't see his son as often, but in recent months, he and Amy have worked out an amicable arrangement. At present, each parent takes Marcus for half the week. They share the responsibility of raising him. Kaliegh, now seven, lives with her mother full time and sees her father a few times a year.

## LIZ



Liz was born in Springfield, and ended up in Pittsfield at the age of fourteen when the Department of Social Services placed her in a juvenile correctional facility there. Throughout her childhood and early teens, Liz lived in a series of foster homes. She became pregnant while living in a foster home in Pittsfield, and at sixteen, she enrolled in the Teen Parent Program.

As an infant and a toddler, Liz stayed home with her biological father, a Puerto Rican immigrant. He spoke Spanish to his daughter and could not read to her because he was illiterate. When she was five, he left the family. Throughout Liz's childhood and adolescence, her mother frequently beat her.

Soon after Liz turned six, her mother had another baby. Often her mother would leave her daughters in the care of her boyfriend when she was at work. During her mother's extended absences, this man began physically abusing Liz and her infant sister. The abuse increased in severity as time went on and escalated into an incident of sexual abuse, which Liz kept secret.

After a year had gone by, one of her mother's friends who had seen Liz on the night she was sexually abused told Liz's mother about the incident. Charges were filed. Liz, now age seven, testified in court, and her mother's boyfriend was sent to jail for two years. He was released when she was ten. Over the next few years, Liz ran away from home thirty times, habitually seeking shelter with men in their twenties and thirties who lived in her neighborhood.

When Liz was fourteen, she was sent to court in shackles and handcuffs after her mother accused her of assault and battery and pressed charges against her, following an incident during which Liz had struck back during a violent altercation. Because this was her first offense, instead of being sent to juvenile lock-up, Liz was placed in the first of a series of foster homes. Hungry for companionship, respect, and a sense of belonging, Liz joined a local gang and occasionally, engaged in violent behavior.

When she was fifteen, she began dating an older gang member who was married. While involved in this relationship, Liz met a nineteen-year-old named Peter, who treated her with a level of kindness and decency unfamiliar to her. Liz believes she got pregnant the first time they had sex after watching a movie at her foster home.

Liz enrolled in the Teen Parent Program but found it hard to keep up with her schoolwork. She got her GED and then got two jobs: During the day she worked at KFC and at night she worked at McDonalds. For Liz, the problem with being employed at McDonalds and KFC, aside from having no benefits or healthcare, was that she had to work nights and there were no childcare facilities open late. Peter took care of their son during the day and his mother or his eleven-year-old sister looked after the baby on nights when he and Liz were both working. As an assistant manager, Peter earned \$500 per week while Liz, a member of the regular crew staff, earned between \$165 and \$180 per week, despite working hours that nearly doubled Peter's.

In hindsight, Liz wished that she had waited and had her baby at a time when she was financially and emotionally more stable. Her dreams for the future revolved around money, love, and security. Someday she hoped to be able to buy a house and get married. Compared to her childhood, Liz felt her life with Peter was a huge improvement. She was grateful to finally have a family, some love, and some stability.

# COLLEEN



Colleen's father had a problem with alcohol. Her mother struggled with depression and anorexia. After hearing kids at her Jr. High talking about their sexual escapades, Colleen lost her virginity to a boy she knew from school, eager to experience what she thought other girls her age were doing.

One day on her way home from Driver's Ed, Colleen met Ryan\* a troubled youth with a serious drug problem. They exchanged phone numbers and began dating. When Ryan's mother kicked him out of the house, Colleen convinced her parents to take him

in. Colleen's mother gradually realized that Ryan was stealing from them and demanded that he move out immediately.

Despite her parents' protests, Colleen continued seeing Ryan. He was often physically and verbally abusive towards Colleen but she kept this part of their relationship secret. One afternoon when she was sixteen, Colleen told her mother that she wanted to die. Alarmed, her mother rushed her to the hospital. During her stay in the psychiatric unit, the doctor confirmed Colleen's hidden fear: She was pregnant with Ryan's baby.

As Catholics, Colleen and her parents did not believe in abortion, so they turned to God and attributed the pregnancy to His Divine Plan. After being released from the psychiatric ward, Colleen transferred to the Teen Parent Program. While pregnant, Colleen and Ryan had a fight and he kicked her in the stomach repeatedly. He was arrested and sent to jail.

By the time the baby was born, Colleen's father was sober. Her mother had gained some weight, and Colleen was no longer depressed and suicidal. Colleen resumed her studies at the Teen Parent Program. Every day after school she worked from four o'clock until nine o'clock, stuffing bags for the Burger King drive-thru. A few days a week Colleen took Jonathan to see his father during visiting hours at the local jail.

The day Ryan got out of jail he and Colleen got engaged. Colleen took the baby and moved in with him. Ryan started doing drugs again and violently abused Colleen. Finally, fearing for her life, she moved back in with her parents, graduated from the Teen Parent Program, and got a job at Wal-Mart. Shortly thereafter, Jonathan was diagnosed with two serious medical disorders: Cerebral Palsy, caused by defects in the brain and spinal column, and Polymicrogyria, a rare brain disorder.

Colleen was assured that Jonathan's doctors' visits, physical therapy, and leg braces would be covered by social security and medical insurance. Determined to help Jonathan reach his full potential, Colleen and her family encouraged him towards the best possible prognosis and eventually he began to walk with the aid of a brace. Colleen enrolled him at a school with children who were not disabled. She hopes that as he gets older he will be able to stay in the mainstream rather than having to go to a special school, but fears that he will be teased by other children because of his handicap.

Colleen fell in love with a woman her own age. The two women have been living together for two years and are raising Jonathan together. Colleen now has a job supervising mentally disabled individuals who have jobs cleaning various facilities in the Pittsfield area, including hotels and institutions. She recently attended night classes at the Mildred Elly Business School, where she learned about computers and office procedures. Devoted to her studies, she earned a certificate.

# SHAYLA



When Shayla was born, her mother was fifteen, and her father was seventeen. They never married. When Shayla was six, her sister was born. Soon after, Shayla's father was sentenced to two years in prison after being convicted on drug-related charges. While incarcerated, he completed a special educational program that helped him qualify for a scholarship at a state college, and he converted to Islam. Eventually, Shayla's father moved away to another town to attend college and medical school. Shayla and her little sister stayed behind with

their mother in Pittsfield.

At sixteen, Shayla and her boyfriend, C.J., conceived a child intentionally. During the pregnancy she worked at the local *Subway* sandwich shop. Suffering complications from kidney stones, she had to be hospitalized repeatedly and as a result, was denied her diploma for failing gym class. Shayla gave birth to a healthy baby boy named Jaiden. After one too many fights, C.J. moved out and rented an apartment with his friends. Shayla got her GED, started Cosmetology School, and got licensed as a hairdresser. As the baby got older, Shayla and C.J. tried living together again and the problems between them intensified. A few days after Christmas, C.J.'s behavior got him in trouble with the law again. This time it was on charges of domestic violence against Shayla. C.J. fled to Arizona to escape the warrant out for his arrest.

Without any help from C.J., Shayla lived in a housing project and supported herself and Jaiden with the one hundred dollars a week she got from working in a hair salon and the money she received from welfare. She placed Jaiden in daycare until she noticed he was coming home with bruises. Soon after, she heard a rumor that a worker at the daycare facility died of a drug overdose. Instead of switching him to a new daycare, Shayla left him in the care of her grandmother, who took a course and got certified as a licensed daycare provider, so that she could look after Jaiden and other children at her house and get paid for it.

After losing her job at the hair salon following a disagreement with a co-worker, Shayla worked a series of jobs ranging from cleaning hotel rooms to telemarketing. She started dating a new guy. Three months into the new relationship, Shayla got pregnant again and decided to carry the baby to term. While Shayla was pregnant, C.J. came back to Pittsfield. He began harassing Shayla and her new boyfriend. There was still a warrant out for his arrest, so Shayla called the police and turned him in. C.J. was sentenced to several months in jail plus a month of rehabilitation. Behind bars, C.J. worked out, ate three regular meals and put on thirty pounds. He started reading The Bible, searching for the purpose of his life. The months flew by. C.J. got sober and matured. Jail was his rite of passage into manhood. When he got out he got a steady job, made his child support payments regularly, and saw his son every weekend without fail, first under supervision, and then on his own.

Shayla's second son was born prematurely. Weighing only three pounds, he spent a month in an incubator. On his first day home, he coughed up blood and stopped breathing in the middle of the night. Shayla rushed him back to the hospital and he was diagnosed with Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). Shayla took six months off from work so that she could be with the baby. Watching TV for hours on end, Shayla longed for a life that was more like what she saw on *Sex & The City*. She wished she could be on MTV's reality show *Made*, where ordinary teenagers were given mentors and the chance to work hard to realize one of their dreams.

## SHERI



Sheri's mother, Pat, was a teen mother. As a toddler, Sheri witnessed wild fights between her parents. Her father abruptly deserted the family while her mom was pregnant with her little sister, Nadine\*. A few years later, Pat married her new boyfriend, Steve\*, who often worked as a truck driver. As the girls were growing up, Pat and her husband were each arrested multiple times for various drug-related incidents, assault and battery, possession of illegal weapons, and disturbing the peace. The girls went in and out of foster homes, but were

always returned to their mother.

When Sheri turned sixteen, she got a job after school working as a housekeeper at Canyon Ranch, a world-class spa in the neighboring town of Lenox. Sheri went through a phase of teenage rebellion, defying her mother's rules and breaking her curfew, mainly because she couldn't stand being at home with all the fighting, drinking and drug activity. Worried that her daughter would run away, Pat allowed Sheri to move in with her boyfriend of three years, Jon. Sheri lived with Jon and his family for six months. Soon after moving back to her mom's, Sheri got pregnant after missing four days of birth control pills. She transferred out of Pittsfield High School into the Teen Parent program.

During her pregnancy, Sheri had to have an emergency appendectomy. While she was recovering, Jon broke up with her. After their daughter Leeah's birth, Sheri and Jon reconciled and she returned to the Teen Parent Program. She and Jon attended their senior prom and graduated on time with their class at Pittsfield High School. Soon after graduation, Sheri moved out of her mother's house, taking her daughter with her to the low-income housing project where Amy, Bernard, and Shayla also lived.

Sheri got a job cleaning rooms at a local B&B and Jon got a job as a cook at a restaurant. Sheri enrolled in a computer course at the local Mildred Elly Business School. In order to make time for her classes, Sheri had to adjust her hours at the B&B until she was replaced by "a girl who was more available." Sheri then found a new job cleaning rooms forty hours a week at a sprawling hotel four times the size of the B&B, forcing her to withdraw from her computer class mid-session.

By the time Leeah was three, Sheri had saved more than a thousand dollars, and soon her welfare counselor told her that she made too much money to continue on welfare. Sheri regarded her independence from the system as a marker of success, a rite of passage. She got a new job taking care of infants at her daughter's daycare. Then, Jon abruptly decided to break off their seven-year relationship because he had found a new girlfriend. Sheri's dreams of someday marrying Jon were shattered. Immobilized by depression, she lost her job at the daycare center, the one job she had loved. She had to get a new job leasing cars to customers at Rent-A-Wreck.

Sheri watched her younger sister Nadine struggling as their mother sank deeper and deeper into drug addiction. Predatory men floated in and out of Pat's house making Nadine extremely uncomfortable. Desperate to get out of her mother's house, Nadine dropped out of high school and entered into a relationship with an extremely violent drug dealer who regularly abused her. At the age of seventeen, Nadine got pregnant with his baby. He assaulted her while she was pregnant and went to jail. Nadine used cocaine while pregnant and her son was born with cocaine in his system. DSS immediately removed the baby from her custody and placed him in foster care. Unlike Nadine, Sheri steered clear of drugs, determined to give her daughter the opportunities, support and stability that she never had during childhood.

# JESSICA



Jessica's mother and father married young. Her mother, Doris, had Jessica at nineteen and was divorced by the time Jessica was two. Jessica visited her dad often, but lived with her mom, who remarried and became a school bus driver. Jessica's stepfather, Bill, was a machinist and Vietnam Veteran, who often drank too much.

Jessica's biological father had survived an incredibly traumatic childhood in a household where child abuse had taken place for many years. Jessica never got to know her paternal grandparents but saw them featured as fugitives on the television program, *America's Most Wanted*. After more than a decade of evading justice, they were captured. Her grandfather was charged with incest and rape and sentenced to a long prison term. Her grandmother was charged with failing to provide care and protection for her children and sentenced to two years.

Jessica's father suffered from depression and was convinced that silence on the subject of his childhood was the best of way of shielding his daughter from this painful family history. He encouraged her to work hard at her studies and wanted her to become a nurse because the work was noble and the pay was good. Eager to live up to her father's high expectations, Jessica was a very good student. She worked hard after school and during the summers at places like Burger King. Her beauty, warmth, intelligence, and sense of humor hid a more troubled, insecure side of her personality. Unbeknownst to her parents, she lost her virginity at fourteen. By tenth grade, she had been in and out of four sexual relationships and found that she was only attracted to black men.

Halfway through junior year, Jessica met Dwayne\*, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout and a drug dealer. The first time Jessica and Dwayne had sex, Jessica said no several times, but then gave in, too tired to argue, and unable to leave because she needed a ride home. They didn't use protection and Jessica got pregnant. In denial, she hid her pregnancy for six months. Finally she broke down and put a note in her mother's skydiving bag telling her the truth about her condition. When Jessica transferred from Taconic High School to The Teen Parent Program, word got around and people in the community came forward and told her that Dwayne had already fathered three other children with other young mothers. On the day their son, Ezakeil, was born Dwayne was in jail. The name "Ezakeil" was Jessica's unique version of the biblical name "Ezekiel."

A few months after Ezakeil's birth, Jessica was arrested at a store while trying to steal a baby's car seat and a baby monitor. When she was released with just a warning, she resolved to take responsibility for her life. She got a job at a nursing home working with patients who suffered from Alzheimer's, graduated from high school, and went on to Berkshire Community College, where she enrolled in the four-year nursing program to get her RN.

Shortly thereafter, Jessica's mother and stepfather separated. Bill was arrested for drunk driving and was sentenced to six months in jail. Jessica and Ezakeil got an apartment in a housing project. Dwayne got out of jail briefly but got in trouble with the law again and was sent back. Ezakeil was diagnosed with severe asthma and relied on a nebulizer several times a day.

One day a friend invited Jessica on a day trip to visit her boyfriend's brother, Wes\* who was incarcerated, and soon Jessica was involved in a romantic relationship with this convicted rapist. Jessica's dad found out about the relationship when he discovered letters Wes had written from jail in Jessica's apartment. After months of screaming matches with her father Jessica was finally persuaded to end this relationship for the sake of her son.

When Ezakeil was four-years-old, his father, Dwayne, now out of jail, was involved in a shooting. He was charged with two counts of armed home invasion, carrying a firearm without a license, and attempting to break and enter with the intent to commit a felony. Jessica entered her last year of nursing school vowing that as soon as she got her RN, she and Ezakeil would get out of Pittsfield. "There's nothing here," she said. "You get stuck."