

*Photographs by John Moses*

Since 1986, I have been working as a doctor and a photographer in the Piedmont of North Carolina. In the clinic where I work as a general pediatrician, I help care for teenagers, not a few of whom become parents at an early age. In working with these teens and their children as patients, I've heard many informative stories and witnessed the telling gestures and phrases and silences that constitute important clues to a patient's condition. But the atmosphere of the clinic, like that of most hospitals and doctors' offices, can limit how much a teenager (or patient of any age) is inclined to reveal. And so, in an effort to better understand teenage pregnancy, I decided to visit teenage parents in their homes and neighborhoods and schools.

One or two afternoons a week, I left behind my familiar professional world. With the help of nursing and social work colleagues, I made contact with twenty-five adolescents in the city of Durham and surrounding rural counties. In a sense I became a doctor making a kind of home visit, though my diagnostic tools were exchanged for the camera. Along the way, the tables were turned. I was out of my element, on others' turf, on others' terms. I soon began to fill in gaps in my education.

When I first went out to photograph, I was filled with a mixture of curiosity and hesitation and confusion. Just what was I looking for? I wasn't

sure. I now realize this state of mind may have worked to my advantage. No longer the confident, all-knowing doctor, I became unwittingly open to new possibilities, new ways of looking at and thinking about the issue of adolescent pregnancy.

I introduced myself as a doctor who wanted to learn directly from others what it was like to be a parent at a young age. I explained that I had read medical articles and newspaper stories about teenage pregnancy but sensed there was more to discover—and I thought that photographs might be a useful way to show what things were like. Those I sought to photograph welcomed me with little hesitation. I was, after all, a rather unexpected and novel guest.

I visited most homes several times, often returning with photographs I had taken previously. At first I was concerned with how the teenagers and their families would respond to certain images (those that were too “serious” or stark), but invariably they regarded my work with intense interest; these photos were apparently quite unlike any that had been taken of them before! In some cases a kind of visual dialogue emerged as the teens showed me their own snapshots and portraits. As it turned out, we were often interested in each other’s photographic point of view. I left behind dozens of prints in the homes I visited; I returned to one home to find two photographs I had taken, now framed and on display.

Each home I visited held some visual appeal. One rural home I was especially drawn to appeared somewhat disheveled from the outside. It was a work in progress, having been assembled largely with scrap materials. It housed four generations. The inside was comfortable and fascinating to behold. One wall of the living room was formed by a mural of Jesus and the children, salvaged from a local church that had been torn down. There was a garden out back. At the end of most visits, the grandmother of the teens I was photographing would appear with a gift of tomatoes or greens.

On the one hand I found what I thought I was looking for: poor, rel-

atively "uneducated," unrestrained, undisciplined, "sexually active" "children having children." The tragedy, the social dysfunction of it all, was there before me to record for others to see.

On the other hand, I found the views and notions I brought along on my visits were often confounded, challenged, even derailed by what I saw and heard and felt. I observed some teenage parents to be more capable and devoted to their children than I had anticipated. I found myself wondering if in some situations the birth of a child was not a kind of stabilizing influence on a family, a kind of adaptive response to a life otherwise chaotic or destructive or worse. And not surprisingly, I had a chance to reflect on my own life: Why was I, a "secure," "responsible," adult "professional" rather wary of parenthood? More than once, I felt I was being visited *upon* by those whose lives I sought to enter into and record.

Though I was primarily concerned with making photographs, my hosts frequently reminded me that I was a doctor. They often had questions and concerns about their children. Could I help? Before long I had tucked a prescription pad in my camera bag. I was eager to help when I could, to offer a bit of advice as thanks for being welcomed.

The teenagers I photographed taught me a lot, even as many of them struggled with serious challenges in their own lives. Having gone out to meet with them in their world, I came away with no neat formulations about teenage pregnancy but rather a richer, more accurate context in which to see them, and I hope, better understand their experience.

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