

## **A welcome home for expectant moms**

**Maternity residence provides nurturing environment for young, pregnant females**

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Her special birthday was celebrated among people who would have been considered strangers only a few short months ago, but Kelly is as happy as she could expect to be since she is now 16, single and pregnant.

Kelly (not her real name) is one of two teenagers currently staying at Shifra Home, a unique residence in Burlington for unmarried young women who have nowhere else to turn for stable accommodations and support while they deal with their pregnancy.

**GREAT EXPECTATIONS** This young mom awaits the arrival of her baby in the safe environment provided by Burlington's Shifra Home. Located on Pomona Avenue, Shifra Home is a Christ-centred charity that is the first and only such maternity residence in Halton.



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Shifra Home is a Christ-centred charity that is the first and only such maternity residence in Halton. There are similar homes outside the region -- St. Martin's Manor in Hamilton and Vita Manor in Mississauga.

Shifra means beautiful in Hebrew and was the name of a midwife in the Bible (Book of Exodus) who protected and nurtured life.

### 'FRIGHTENED AND ALONE'

The home's mandate is to provide a safe haven for pregnant young women with support for the baby and parents. It is designed to assist residents, regardless of religious persuasion, or none, in making informed decisions between parenting and adoption; it also offers programs and support to young fathers.

Hoekstra recalled a relative of hers was in a situation similar to Shifra's residents about 15 years ago.

"I had a niece who was pregnant at 14. She kept her baby and is now a mother of three and a foster parent. She is a solid person and I see what support did for her," which in that case came from her family.

Shifra officials say there are approximately 200 teen pregnancies in Halton every year.

"Many young women and their boyfriends lack the support and resources necessary to have and care for a baby. Many feel frightened and alone and conclude that they have no choice but to terminate the pregnancy. As a result, only about 69 of the 200 pregnancies are carried through to the birth of the baby," said Lisa Hoekstra, director of community relations for Shifra Home.

She feels Shifra is the best-kept secret in Halton.

"I went to seven churches in Burlington and none of them knew about us," said Hoekstra, Shifra's fundraising co-ordinator.

However, a church parish that wished to remain anonymous did donate \$10,000 to the home through the Change 4 Life baby bottle campaign.

Shifra Home operates on an annual budget of \$275,000 but Hoekstra said an ideal figure would be \$345,000. It receives money from the provincial government through the Trillium Foundation; it is in the second year of a three-year grant that currently pays \$165,000.

Shifra's biggest fundraiser is an annual gala, which garnered \$12,000 this past March.

The converted home on Pomona Avenue opened in August 2006. It can accommodate up to six women and their babies and is seeking certification to house up to eight pregnant females aged 12-21. Eight women aged 15-20 have gone through Shifra Home to date.

Shifra offers life skills training and other support services during pregnancy and for a period after the birth of the baby. Standard practice is to have the mother-to-be in the home at least three months prior to giving birth and another three months post-partum.

#### PROGRAM OFFERS SUPPORT TO PARENTS

In addition to Shifra's on-site residential support workers, whom they can talk to at any time for help or advice, the female residents also receive monthly visits from a public health nurse before and after the baby is born. There is also access to the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program offered through Halton Region for up to three years.

It's not just the young mothers who are aided by Shifra Home.

"Some of the programs that we offer include parents, boyfriends or close friends; we are also open to counselling them as a family," said Carrie Hasenack, director of residential services at Shifra.

Getting the biological father/boyfriends involved is important, said Hoekstra.

"What excited me about Shifra Home was the opportunity to help young dads." They must undergo a criminal background check if they want to be involved with their girlfriend through Shifra.

At Shifra, different workshops are available to the pregnant females. They are expected to participate in what is offered, like pre-natal classes. Staff and volunteers are there to guide them but not do everything for them.

"I'm all about the tough love for the girls and learning independence," said Hasenack, who has a university degree in psychology and several crisis management certificates, plus several years of management experience in the social services sector.

"They need to pay room and board and we go by Ontario Works (income assistance levels), which might cover about \$340 per month," far short of the estimated \$2,000 per month it costs to house one young woman and her baby, Hasenack noted.

"If they can't pay, they are expected to do volunteer work or go to school," besides doing their own laundry, cooking and cleanup. "We want them to learn how to budget. We do grocery shopping and meal planning with them," added Hasenack.

She said they are not there to judge the young women, but Hasenack sometimes has a hard time holding her tongue about some parents.

"If you have a (pregnant) 12 year old, maybe you should look at how you are parenting."

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On her second day as a 16 year old, Kelly, who's about 4 1/2 months pregnant and due next April, reflected on how she arrived at Shifra Home, her experiences there and expectations following the minimum three-month residency period after her baby's birth.

"I had no idea; it was a shock to me," she said of finding out in the summer she was pregnant at 15. "It was kind of scary at first, now I'm more excited than anything," said the slender teen, whose stomach is only starting to show signs of a maternal bump.

The Burlington resident had been attending a local high school but was expelled in Grade 9 for poor attendance. She doesn't have much communication with her parents, who are now separated. She said she's kicked around at various places including 'couch surfing' with various relatives and friends.

Kelly was recommended to Shifra Home by a youth counsellor with Bridging the Gap, a subgroup of the Transitions for Youth organization in Halton.

"I love it here. I like the staff. It's a very safe environment to be in."

When she wants to relate to someone who knows intimately what she's feeling, Kelly occasionally talks to Shifra's other teen resident, a 19-year-old Oakville woman who is expecting her baby in late January.

"She's already gone through the stages that I'm going through now. I watch her belly getting kicked and it makes me excited and I want my baby to do that. I'm excited. I want mine to be here now."

Kelly says she feels little flutters in her stomach and believes it's the baby. As far as the queasiness or morning sickness many pregnant women experience, she says she's had none.

"People say it's coming, don't worry," she smiles.

Kelly says the baby's father, who is a few years older than her, has been with her for a couple of years and supportive of her pregnancy from the outset.

"We talk and see each other almost every day. He was shocked when I first told him but really happy from the start."

As far as her baby's future, Kelly says she wants it to be with her.

"I am keeping the baby. I hope to get into housing, my own place, and go to school until I graduate, that's one of my No. 1 things right now."

Currently, when Kelly isn't at Shifra Home she is attending pre-natal and Grades 10/11 classes every day for half a day at the Burlington YMCA. Kelly hopes to continue going there when her baby is born as it also offers infant daycare.

Once the baby is born, if the care providers or administrators at Shifra have a concern about the ability of the young mother to look after her baby they can contact the Halton Children's Aid Society (CAS) for a second opinion.

"All the (pregnant) girls want what's best for the baby," said Hasenack. "Adoption is an option (but) the majority want to parent."

The executive director of the Halton CAS Foundation, the fundraising arm of the organization, said they may or may not get involved with a Shifra Home resident.

"It's not our protocol to automatically go out and make an assessment of a woman under 18 who has a baby," said Tina Blatchford. "Possibly at Shifra that's their protocol. If someone from Shifra called us and made a referral, then we would make an assessment based on the information they give us," and only then perhaps visit the new mother.

For more information about Shifra Home, visit [www.shifrahomes.com](http://www.shifrahomes.com) or call 905-681-9633.

<http://www.burlingtonpost.com/news/article/136666>