

For teen moms, success against difficult odds

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For teen moms, success against difficult odds: Russell, 18, was one of 38 teen mothers in the YWCA of Rochester and Monroe County program who celebrated graduation at the Danforth Community Center, 200 West Ave.

Written by **Jim Mandelaro**

Rosetta Russell wore a cap and gown to her high school graduation last Saturday.

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Wednesday, she celebrated with the people who helped her get there.

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"I'm very happy," Russell said. "Teen pregnancy is hard. Having a baby and going to school is hard. Most girls drop out."

Russell became pregnant in her junior year at East High. An in-school suspension resulting from a fight led her to Roslin Horton, a case manager in the YWCA's School-Age Parents program.

YWCA case managers work on campus at seven city schools to help pregnant and parenting teens finish high school.

"Ms. Horton encouraged me to stay in school," Russell said. "She means a lot to me. We call her our second mother."

With Horton's guidance, Russell became active in cheerleading, track and Navy Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC). She also made schoolwork a priority and was named to the East High honor roll.

She has become a peer advocate who speaks to other teens about the repercussions of becoming pregnant while in high school.

"I was talking to a couple of eighth-graders who want to be parents," she said. "I told them all the struggles."

Russell, who lives with her grandmother, plans to attend Monroe Community College and study nursing.

"The YWCA helped me mature into a young mother," she said. "It helped me get through school and focus on schoolwork."

Jean Carroll, president and CEO of the YWCA, says she remains amazed at the perseverance that guides these young women.

"We only do half the job or less," she said. "They do the rest. It's such a challenging time in their life. We're there to guide them through it."

Peggy Fortune, YWCA communications coordinator, says graduation rates have held steady over the years (33 graduated last year) and the Rochester branch is far ahead of the national rate.

"We've had over 70 percent of seniors graduate, as opposed to the national statistic that 70 percent of teen moms drop out of high school," she said.

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