

Vickie Ghent has been a nurse for 30 years, including 10 years serving as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. Today, she works for the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) in Dallas, Texas, helping low-income, first-time mothers cope with all the challenges of raising a baby. You might think that her work in Texas is a far cry from her experiences in the bush, but Vickie will be the first to tell you: nothing could have prepared her better.

In fact, Vickie feels particularly attuned to all the obstacles faced by low-income families in America today. They don't have the time (or often the land) to grow their own food, so they have to buy it. They have to pay for transportation, because their daily tasks go well beyond the walking-distance boundaries of a small village. They must also pay for electricity, housing, health care and other basic needs. And all of this becomes even more complicated and expensive when they have another mouth to feed.

Antoinette, pregnant at 18, personifies the young women for whom these simple basics are truly obstacles, and she was one of Vickie's earliest clients. When she discovered she was pregnant, Antoinette was scared and had few places to turn for help. Fortunately, she learned about the Nurse-Family Partnership from a visit to her local WIC (Women, Infants and Children) office, where she was introduced to Vickie for the first time. Antoinette's timing could hardly have been more fortuitous: she was nearing the enrollment cut-off point for the local program.

For their first NFP visit, Vickie traveled to West Dallas where Antoinette was living with her mother, her younger brother and her aunt in low-income HUD housing. The home was cluttered and so dark inside



*Antoinette with her boyfriend Carles and her son Carnell.*

that Vickie could barely see her paperwork in front of her. But Antoinette's personality provided a light of its own, and she was full of questions and eager to learn.

Antoinette had just graduated from high school but still didn't have a job. She expressed concern about her mother's constant financial troubles. She suffered from asthma and asked how it might affect her pregnancy. She confessed to being terrified of needles and wanted to know how much labor would hurt. "She really needs help," Vickie thought as she took detailed notes in her client file. Fortunately for Antoinette, the help she needed was exactly what NFP provides.

After a few weeks, Carles, Antoinette's boyfriend and the baby's father, began attending the sessions with Vickie. Skeptical at first, he quickly warmed to "Miss Vickie." He shared the intimate details of his own childhood during NFP's standard "life history" discussion. Carles was the youngest of 20 children his father had sired with various women. His mother was a drug addict who once sold Carles' only pair of jeans for drugs. He told Vickie that he was worried about how to be a father because he didn't have any role models. "I want to be there for my family," he said.

Despite their positive attitudes and diligent attention to all of Vickie's advice, Antoinette and Carles lurched from one crisis to another. Antoinette's mother periodically threw her out of the house. Carles spent more than a few nights sleeping in his car. Antoinette had to give up the temp job she found because of frequent asthma attacks. And when the couple saved enough to buy a car, they drove it off the lot only to have it break down, leading to the first of many costly repairs.



*Vickie Ghent, NFP Nurse*



*Antoinette with her grandmother and her son, Carnell*

**When Antoinette and Carles' son Carnell was born, he was a healthy, bouncing 8-pound baby. Vickie continued to support Antoinette and Carles with bi-weekly meetings where she would educate them on good parenting skills, monitored Carnell's progress and continued to support the couple's day-to-day well being.**

Through it all, Vickie remained a constant, reassuring presence in their lives. Whenever Carles called to say, "Miss Vickie, I don't know what to do," she always had calming advice. She helped the couple find another car, brought them to the Medicaid office to get their health insurance sorted out, and scheduled some of their meetings at McDonald's so Carles could use the free Internet access to look for jobs online. She even used her small discretionary NFP allowance to buy Carles a new pair of jeans. "Remember," she would say as a visit was ending, "you can always call me and I'll call back. Everything is going to be all right."

When Antoinette and Carles' son Carnell was born, he was a healthy 8-pound baby. Antoinette and Carles continued their meetings with Vickie where she would educate them on good parenting skills, monitored Carnell's progress and continued to support the couple's day-to-day well being. While Antoinette was a natural mother, Carles worried that Carnell didn't seem to like him even though Carles adored his new son. He confessed to Vickie that he thought he was doing something wrong and even felt jealous of the closeness Antoinette enjoyed during breastfeeding.

Vickie discussed all of this openly with Carles. "Your feelings are perfectly normal," she reassured him. "Be patient. The more you play with Carnell and interact with him, the more he'll get used to you. And don't worry," she added with a laugh, "He's going to like you one day, and one day after that, he'll like you more than he likes his mother. He won't leave you alone!" Beyond comforting Carles, Vickie taught him some of the basics of fatherhood like how to hold the baby, how to feed him, and how to change a diaper.

Two years and countless diapers later, Carles and Antoinette were ready to graduate from the NFP

program. Vickie was tremendously proud of their progress. Antoinette was working as a receptionist at a nonprofit organization and Carles had a job at Wal-Mart. Antoinette's mom had allowed Carles to move into their home, and the couple was planning a June wedding. Antoinette was enrolling in college to get her bachelor's degree in science and Carles' had set a goal to get his bachelor's when Antoinette was finished. They had begun saving to move into a place of their own. Carnell was in a daycare program that he loved and where his teachers loved him, too. "Perhaps a little too much," Carles told Vickie after the daycare staff sent Carnell home with candy – *again*.

Today, Antoinette and Carles have graduated from Nurse-Family Partnership, but remain in touch with Vickie. In fact, Antoinette recently recommended a friend to Vickie and the NFP program and occasionally "crashes" their appointments so she can catch up with her former nurse. Antoinette loves knowing that Vickie is still in her life – but she also knows that Vickie has given her and Carles the skills to persevere and succeed on their own.

Vickie admits she was worried about her clients at the beginning, but she never doubted they would succeed. One day, just before their graduation from NFP, Carles showed that he knew it too. "You know, Miss Vickie," he told her, "We don't have anything bad to tell you today. We're doing okay! We can actually say we're going to make it. We're really going to make it."

*This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the YWCA of Metropolitan Dallas.*