



They say a picture is worth a thousand words. A family photo of Crystal, her boyfriend Kelvin and their son Torrian is worth so much more. The picture shows a smiling Crystal gazing up proudly at baby Torrian, who is being lifted into the sky by Kelvin, his dad. Torri, as they call him, is looking directly into the camera, smiling brightly, with a blur of trees, grass and sunlight behind him.



*Crystal's son, Torrian*

You might casually glance at the photo and think, "There's a typical, happy young family." But the story behind this photo is far from typical. It begins one year earlier, in the small town of Delhi, Louisiana, when a scared high school junior tells the school nurse that she thinks she is pregnant. That girl is Crystal.

The high school nurse gives Crystal a pregnancy test, which turns out positive. She immediately refers Crystal to her colleague Debbie Dulaney, a registered nurse and a veteran with the State of Louisiana Office of Public Health's Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program. Debbie sets up her first meeting with Crystal and drives to where Crystal is living in cramped quarters with her aunt, uncle and their children. She knocks on the door and is greeted by a teenage girl who emanates warmth.

"I'm Crystal," she says with a wide open smile, adding "and you're prompt!" Immediately, Debbie can see this young woman is unique. In her experience, most pregnant teenagers aren't very concerned with promptness. The two women bond quickly. While telling Debbie her story, Crystal reveals that she discovered her

pregnancy exactly one month after her mother passed away. "I'm an only child by my mom," says Crystal. "When I lost her, it was like I lost a part of myself."

Debbie confides that she lost her mother at a young age, too. "I understand what you're going through," Debbie replies gently. "But it will make you a stronger person. Once you get through the first year without her—through Christmas, your birthday—everything is going to get easier."

Halfway through the meeting, Kelvin arrives. To Crystal's surprise, he recognizes Debbie immediately and greets her fondly. As it happens, Debbie worked with Kelvin's sister during her pregnancy. "This is something more than a coincidence," declares Crystal. "It's the Lord working his magic!"

Each time Crystal and Debbie meet, weekly at first and then bi-weekly as Crystal's due date approaches, their bond grows stronger. Crystal may be just a growing teenager, but she is an enthusiastic client. She is eager to learn about what foods to eat, how best to sleep with her growing belly and how to build an emotional attachment with the baby. Kelvin attends most of the meetings as well. A high school dropout, he is determined to be a good father and provide his son with every opportunity.

In October, Crystal gives birth to Torrian and it is no surprise to Debbie that Crystal and Kelvin take quickly to their roles as parents. Crystal remains in high school while Kelvin takes care of the baby during the day. Thanks to Debbie's guidance, they have learned how to put the baby on a schedule and provide a healthy environment—



Crystal and NFP Nurse Home Visitor Debbie Dulaney

Crystal pulls out a little book she has made for her son. Even though she is walking back and forth to school, attending classes and doing homework for her double major in psychology and journalism, she has made time to create a homemade alphabet book for Torrian. “I’m smart,” says Crystal proudly, “and I want my son to be smart too.”

Crystal allows no smoking in the house and she checks all of Torrian’s toys for hazards like chipping paint. By the following May, Crystal and Kelvin have been in the NFP program for a full year, and they are models of the program’s success.

Despite this accomplishment, life remains challenging for teenage parents with minimal family support and very little income. In the fall, the family faces yet another crossroad when Crystal decides to enroll in college at Louisiana Tech. This requires a move to Ruston, Louisiana, about 70 miles west of Delhi. Not only will the young family have to find the resources to move, they will also have to build a new life in a place where they have no relatives or friends to rely on.

Debbie is still prepared to help, because helping clients set life goals in areas like education and career are part of the NFP model. She assists the couple in planning the move and, when Crystal and Kelvin express concern about making appropriate friends in Ruston, Debbie even gives them some entertaining tips. She brings over a few decks of cards and teaches them how to play group games like Liverpool Rummy. Finally, she reaches out to a colleague in Ruston, Debbie Nash, who will take over as the nurse home visitor after the move. It’s a natural fit; the two nurses are already part of an NFP team that meets weekly for case conferences, so the “new Debbie” is familiar with Crystal’s story.

In their first meeting with Debbie Nash, Crystal and Kelvin are incredibly proud to show off their new two-bedroom apartment. Although it is over two miles from the Louisiana Tech campus and Crystal will have to walk both ways, they are thrilled that Torrian now has his own bedroom. It’s adorable—a little junior bed, a round table with two chairs—all decorated in brilliant red, yellow and blue. On her second visit, Debbie brings her camera and

Torrian poses for her in his new bedroom. He perches on his bed with a huge smile, holding up an index finger to show that he is one.

When Torrian is 21 months old, Debbie administers a language screening and finds that Torrian is well above average. When Debbie expresses her admiration, Crystal pulls out a little book she has made for her son. Even though she is walking back and forth to school, attending classes and doing homework for her double major in psychology and journalism, she has made time to create a homemade alphabet book for Torrian. “I’m smart,” says Crystal proudly, “and I want my son to be smart, too.”

When Torrian reaches his second birthday, marking the completion of the NFP program, Debbie Nash is on leave recovering from shoulder surgery. This means that Debbie Dulaney will be reunited with the couple to complete their last session. Even after months without seeing his original NFP nurse, Torrian runs up to her immediately. The adults reminisce, play with Torrian, laugh and talk, and cry when it’s time to say goodbye.

Debbie Dulaney drives away with a feeling of tremendous joy, knowing that Crystal and Kelvin have taken advantage of every opportunity provided by the Nurse-Family Partnership, beating incredible odds and accomplishing so much. Inside the apartment, Crystal sits on the couch, flipping through the pages of her favorite photo album. She pauses to linger on a beautiful picture of a happy young family. It is her own.

*This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the State of Louisiana Office of Public Health – Region 8.*

Photos by Vanessa Diel Photography.