



“Let’s start with Point A, where you are now, and draw a plan to get you to Point B, where you want to be.” This is how Nurse Home Visitor Coydette Binns begins her work with new clients in the Targeted Citywide Initiative, a Nurse-Family Partnership unit uniquely created to address the special needs of pregnant women and teens in homeless shelters, foster care, and Rikers correctional facility. Today she is meeting in Brooklyn, NY, with Sharline, a client like none she has met before.



Sharline and her son Ajani

Sharline’s “Point A” is similar to the starting point of other young women in the program – age 19, little family support, abandoned by her baby’s father and referred to the program by the group facility in which she is living after a stint of homelessness. But when Sharline starts talking about what she wants from her pregnancy and what she wants to achieve in life – her “Point B” – Coydette can barely take notes fast enough.

“For starters,” Sharline begins, “I want to go to school and get an education and I want my child to be able to look up to me and follow in the right footsteps. I don’t want the child to want for anything, so I want to be financially stable. Seeing my mother struggle with five kids growing up, I refuse to be in that situation. I don’t want to be like that.”

And she’s not done. “I am a Muslim and am into natural, holistic birthing options. I put my faith in God and I know my body will do what it needs to do. I’ve been doing research on the Internet and I’m interested in water birth and birthing centers.” Coydette continues jotting down notes. “I’m finishing school and doing an internship at

Long Island Hospital because my goal is to be a midwife. First I have to be an RN and the closest thing to nursing is being a home health aide, so I want to look into programs to do that.”

Coydette smiles as she digests all of the information pouring forth from Sharline, who is not only intelligent and driven, but also beautiful – a mix of Puerto Rican and African- American heritage, tall and slim with a little baby bump. Coydette has become used to clients who have conducted research online, but Sharline is the most proactive, determined young woman she has ever met.

As a former labor and delivery nurse in a hospital, Coydette doesn’t know much about home birthing, nor does she have extensive experience with Muslim culture; what she does know is that her job as a nurse home visitor is to support Sharline in all of her choices and aspirations. This means that a lot of mutual learning will occur.

At future meetings, which take place weekly at first and then bi-weekly as Sharline’s due date approaches, Coydette and Sharline talk about nutrition, health and life skills. Coydette learns from Sharline that Muslim dietary guidelines are consistent with healthy pregnancy eating. Sharline learns from Coydette about Associate Degree programs that will best help her quickly enter the workforce.

Throughout the months, Coydette guides Sharline in identifying various holistic birthing options. There are challenges to getting health insurance to pay for delivery in a birthing center, and Sharline breaks down in tears one



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day, worried that she will have to deliver in a hospital against her wishes. Coydette encourages her to be persistent and eventually Sharline finds a midwife, and secures insurance to cover a home birth.

Throughout Sharline's pregnancy, she continues to attend high school in the evenings and work six days a week in her home health aide training program. Coydette is there through it all, often meeting with Sharline on Friday evenings – the only time Sharline is available.

By Sharline's due date, January 1, she has moved out of the group facility, which is standard procedure for pregnant women, and temporarily moved in to a friend's home. On January 2, a snowy Saturday, Coydette arrives for a scheduled meeting, bearing a gift to celebrate the upcoming birth. After talking as usual, Coydette is about to say goodbye when Sharline suddenly jumps to her feet.

"I felt something pop!" she says. Coydette tells her to go to the bathroom and check to see what happened. Sharline, who by this point has learned about every stage of labor, announces that her mucus plug has broken. "Sharline! Oh my gosh! Call your midwife!" exclaims Coydette.

As Sharline's labor pains intensify rapidly, Coydette becomes concerned. She is a trained labor and delivery nurse, but does not have privileges to deliver a baby, nor is that part of the role of an NFP nurse. "Sharline," she says, trying to sound calm even if she doesn't feel it, "If your midwife is not here soon, I will have to call 911!"

Fortunately, Tioma, the midwife, arrives within minutes. She takes charge quickly and calmly. Sharline's sister is called and arrives a few minutes later with family and friends to provide support and comfort to Sharline.

Sharline's pain intensifies and Tioma has her walk the hallway as she runs warm bath water. When Sharline screams in pain, all of her friends and family scream with

her in encouragement. Eventually Tioma says it is time to get in the tub and Sharline slides in, feeling warm and safe in the water. About an hour later, less than four hours after jumping up from the couch, Sharline's son Ajani arrives in the world. He lets out one little cry, then calmly, alertly, looks around at his surroundings.

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Two months after Ajani is born, Sharline graduates from high school with one of the highest GPAs in her class and wins awards for perfect attendance and honor roll. Currently she and her son are living in a shelter for families. However, Sharline is in a college program working towards her nursing degree. For the next two years, Coydette will continue meeting with Sharline to help her develop a plan for permanent housing and provide parenting advice and personal encouragement.

As for Ajani, whose African name means "one who fights for what he believes in," in six months he has grown from 5 pounds, 14 ounces, to a whopping 20 pounds. He appears to be a natural leader. Although Sharline had planned to breast feed longer, he weans himself at four months. When he plays Peek-a-boo, he takes over from the adult he's playing with and runs the show. Placed on his stomach to try crawling, he sets his sights on a spot in the room and wiggles nonstop until he gets there.

Despite being born into challenging life circumstances, Ajani appears to be smart, hardworking and determined to get what he wants. Just like his mother.

This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.