



Tony is a sweet little two-year-old who recently became a big brother. His parents, Holly and Alan, are loving, attentive and well-prepared for the future. They know how to advocate for Tony's needs, and where to get answers to parenting questions.

Not long ago, all of this was nothing more than a fantasy.

Before Tony was born, Holly was desperately seeking stability in her life. She had dropped out of school with only a ninth grade education and had moved too many times in recent years to count. At age 23, Holly returned to her hometown of Syracuse, New York because her mother was ill with cancer. Unable to find a suitable apartment with her mom, Holly temporarily moved in with some friends.

Nearly everyone in the house smoked cigarettes, including Holly. Her home life was characterized by frequent arguments and bouts of depression. She tried to find a better job than the one she had in the food service industry, but despite a strong work ethic, her lack of education was consistently a barrier to getting hired.

Then, on top of all this, one day Holly learned that she was pregnant. Her first reaction, as she later recalled: "I can use all the help I can get."

Help soon arrived in the form of Ann Rogers, a Nurse-Family Partnership nurse home visitor. "Annie just showed up out of the blue one day, saying my doctor's office had sent her to talk with me," remembers Holly. As the women chatted about the free, voluntary program, Holly realized that enrolling in Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) could really help. Along with many years of experience as a registered nurse, Ann brought the comfort and reassurance that Holly needed to learn parenting skills and gain confidence in using them.

Holly immediately demonstrated a strong commitment to the program, and showed a great concern for her

unborn baby's physical health and well-being. So did Alan, Holly's boyfriend and the father of the baby, who was determined to remain a part of Holly's life. Ann began working with both parents-to-be on how to create a safe and nurturing environment for their new baby. Holly quit smoking while she was pregnant, and she and Alan moved into a two-bedroom apartment. Both of them made sure to keep the apartment clean and well-suited for a new baby to live and play.

"Holly was always really good at goal-setting, but she would often get caught up in the barriers that existed in her life, and feel stuck," Ann recalls. "As her nurse, I often served as her cheerleader to help her get 'unstuck.' Now, she digs herself out of this mental rut much more quickly."

While Holly had been self-sufficient from an early age, she now had to learn how to take care of someone else. Enter one of NFP's goals: to help connect first-time moms with community resources that can help empower them as new mothers, such as job training and free or low-cost child health insurance. "Before I met Annie, I had never heard about any programs that could help me," says Holly. "I didn't know what to do, or who to talk to—but I do now."

"I think one of the big things that Holly realized is, sometimes you need a little support from one person in order to get a lot of support from others," Ann says.

Holly's parenting skills were also a work in progress. "Holly had babysat before, and she knew about how to



Holly, Tony and Nurse Home Visitor Ann Rogers

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do certain tasks like diapering and feeding a baby, but she learned more about the 'why' for these things through NFP," says Ann. "For example, Holly loves to play with Tony, but now she also understands that playing with her son has meaning for his future mental and physical development."

The young mother soon realized that one of her favorite parts of the Nurse-Family Partnership program was the dependability of the regularly scheduled visits from Ann, and the ability to pick up the phone and call the nurse if an urgent concern arose. In other words, Ann's presence in Holly's life provided stability at a critical time. "I really remember the comfort of having that constant with Annie. If I had any questions, I knew she would come," Holly says.

Ann worked with Holly and Alan to help them understand the natural development of their baby, and assuage the many fears that arise among new parents. For example, when Tony was still not sitting up at seven months, Holly grew concerned. Ann explained to her that children develop at different rates and that Tony was still well within the accepted range.

Sure enough, just over one month later, Tony was sitting up. At age 11 months, he was walking, and by his first birthday he was running. "Now, we can't stop him from moving!" Holly says with a laugh.

For Holly and many moms like her, the Nurse-Family Partnership program was more than just learning the skills of how to be a successful parent. Holly and Ann shared a special bond that was reinforced when Holly's mother lost her two-year battle against cancer, a little more than a year after Tony was born. Around the same time, Ann was also battling cancer, and had to stop working with Holly for about six months while she received treatment.

When Ann returned to work, Holly specifically requested that Ann be reassigned to her and Tony. Holly was still grieving after the loss of her mother, and it was her relationship with Ann that helped her process many of those feelings. "Holly is a very private person, but she trusted me and was willing to open up," Ann says. "Our relationship allowed this to happen."

Now, with the self-assurance that she gained from NFP, Holly has begun creating a brighter future for both herself and her family. Alan and Holly are still together; they have recently had a second child, Angelina, and the parents are already using many of the lessons they learned from Ann when Tony was born. Alan works full-time, and is very involved with caring for the children.

Holly has great passion for cooking and baking, and has hopes of becoming a pastry chef someday—but she also recognizes the shorter-term importance of formal education, and is taking steps toward obtaining her GED. Holly also wants to make sure that as her children grow older, they recognize the value of a good education. "I don't want them to think it is okay to live their lives without going to school," she says.

But perhaps the most important goal that Holly has set is to be there for Tony and Angelina.

"I don't want to ever miss putting them to sleep at night," Holly says. "I don't want to ever miss helping them with whatever they need. I just want to make sure that I am a good role model for them both."

This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the Onondaga County Health Department located in Syracuse, New York.