

DAD MARK

Two years ago Mark was working the night shift at McDonald's in Lubbock, Texas, when a young woman walked up to the counter and asked to use the phone. Her girlfriend's car had broken down and she needed to find a way to get home. Mark introduced himself and offered to give the young woman, named Melony, a ride home.

Melony later remarked, "I couldn't believe he said he would give me a ride home! He was still working." But five minutes later he was ready to go. And as fate would have it they lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same high school.

At the time, Melony was facing a more serious crisis of her own. She was 11-weeks pregnant and in a relationship with an abusive boyfriend.

When Mark started texting and calling Melony, she thought: "He isn't going to want to be with me, because I am pregnant. But he said to me, 'I don't care what people say. I want to be with you. I want to help you and your baby.'"

"I was like... OH MAN, THIS GUY! He was just so sweet and caring. He wanted to love me and be there for my baby. He made me feel love, the love I never felt with my baby's real dad."

But even though the young love story began sweetly, it was not easy. Melony and Mark were just getting to know each other. They had little education, support or money, and they were nearly kids themselves with no idea of how to be good parents.

"Mark wasn't prepared for being a dad," said Shane Pruitt, the couple's Nurse-Family Partnership nurse home visitor. "But his desire was there to be a parent."

When Shane, a registered nurse, met the young couple, she was immediately impressed with how engaged Mark was during the home visits. "He was thirsty for knowledge, asking questions and eager to share Zaryan's progress," Shane said.

Flash-forward to the present, and Mark (age 19) and Melony (age 21) are the proud parents of 18-month old Zaryan, a beautiful little boy. The family lives in Lubbock and has been participating in the voluntary Nurse-Family Partnership program since Melony's pregnancy.

Even though Mark is not the biological father, he knew that being a father to Zaryan was the right decision for him. Not

having grown up with a strong father, Mark believed in the importance of being a dad and chose to be a role model for Zaryan.

Melony said that the stories that Mark told of growing up with a strict stepdad broke her heart. When he just couldn't take it anymore, he left home and moved in with Melony's family to help her have the baby. He was just 17-years old and still in high school.

With Mark's young age, Shane was shocked at how involved he wanted to be in the program. He has been a partner

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Mark, Melony, and Zaryan

in the home visits 95% of the time, Shane noted.

"Our nurse Shane is the nicest person," said Mark. "We didn't have support other than Shane, and she is always there for us."

"Mark is always willing to learn and try new things with Zaryan," Shane said. "He genuinely cares about Zaryan and applies everything I teach."

When Zaryan wasn't where he needed to be with language development, Shane worked with Mark and Melony to teach Zaryan the names of animals by placing out animal crackers.

"Say dog," Shane said.

"Dog," answered Zaryan. And then "woof, woof."

Mark and Melony continued the exercise with Zaryan after Shane left, pulling out more animal crackers and moving on to

show Zaryan the cracker shaped like a cat.

Mark takes the time to name everything he does around Zaryan, Shane said. "You want cup, Zaryan," she'll hear him say.

"He is so patient with Zaryan. He will say something over and over again to help Zaryan learn," Shane remarked.

Mark and Melony have grown through many tough times together. They both dropped out of high school, right around the time of Melony's pregnancy. With Shane's encouragement, they have made a plan to go back to school to pursue their GEDs.

"Shane taught me to realize that I can be somebody. She is the one that pushes me," said Melony.

Mark is working to save enough money to purchase a car, so that they can drive to night classes to earn their GEDs. They often have had trouble affording basic items for Zaryan, like diapers, but he is working hard at his new job to provide for his family.

"I don't know what I would have done on my own," Melony said quietly, choking up. "I try to get a job, but no one hires me... because I didn't finish school. But Mark, he works to get us what we need. Sometimes we struggle, but Mark gets us through it."

Their determination impresses their nurse. "I am very proud of Melony and Mark," said Shane. "They have a great future ahead of them, and they are going to reach their personal goals. They see the need to finish high school, and they will get there. They stand out together."

Lisa Dillard, Shane's supervisor, said that if there was ever a father-of-the-year award, Mark would take the title at their Nurse-Family Partnership program at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center.

He even accompanied Melony and Zaryan to the Nurse-Family Partnership program's scrapbooking night for first-time parents – the only dad ever to attend this event.

"It takes a man to become a father and I am glad to be that man in my son's life," Mark wrote recently.

This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center.



Mark, Melony, and Zaryan