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## **Teen mom praises project**

**The Learning for Living program at John R. Grubb YMCA has helped dropouts gain their diplomas and gain hope.**

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER*

Three months ago, 17-year-old Heather Makinson thought it would take her years to get her high school diploma.

The single mother from Fort Dodge was less than hopeful she could earn her diploma and get on with her life any time soon.

"I had decided it was going to take way too long to graduate," she said. So two years ago she dropped out of school and has been working as a nurse's aide in a nursing home to support her son, who turns 2 in September. Her second child is due in October.

Makinson was referred this spring by the juvenile court system to the House of Mercy in Des Moines after a brush with the law charged with interfering with official acts, she said in Fort Dodge. The House of Mercy is a residential facility for homeless women, including pregnant and parenting teens.

After arriving here, she found out about the Learning for Living program and enrolled.

The program, which makes its home at the John R. Grubb YMCA at 1611 11th St., allowed Makinson to get her general equivalency diploma in two weeks. She completed all the testing in near-record time, said Jim Hayes, a case worker with the program.

It usually takes people three months to finish the required testing and classes, but some people, depending on their skill level, can finish sooner.

About 5,000 people get their GEDs in Iowa each year, said John Hartwig, Iowa's GED administrator.

It is vitally important, he said, that there are programs like Learning for Living to help dropouts get their diplomas. "It is extremely important and extremely beneficial in getting people off welfare and contributing to society," he said.

Makinson was one of eight people to graduate from the program at the YMCA this spring. Three participants graduated from the program in 1995, which was its first year.

The program also evaluates and counsels other youths who may not enroll in the Grubb site program but instead are sent to get their GEDs at Des Moines Area Community College or who return to high school.

Anyone between the ages of 16 and 21 is eligible to participate as long as they have a desire to work at it. "They have to be motivated," Hayes said.

Makinson was highly motivated. She dropped out of school two years ago in the ninth grade after being suspended several times. She said her son had several bouts with bronchitis, and she would miss school to stay home with him.

"I didn't like school," Makinson said. "They weren't working with me."

She knew she needed a diploma to get into college or a nursing program. She also realized the traditional method of four years of high school would not fit her situation.

Makinson said she has found more flexibility and a needed psychological boost with the Learning for Living program.

"The teachers have been a great help," she said. "They provided a lot of mental support like saying, You can do it."

"You have to want it or else it will never happen," she said. She hopes to start classes in January at Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge with an eye on a nursing degree.

Hayes said the program allows more individualized attention than a traditional classroom does. "We have to look at each kid as an individual with his own needs."

LaShanda Fitzgerald has worked as program director for about a year.

"The biggest part of the program is the counseling component," she said. Participants are given intensive counseling in decision-making,

responsibility and issues of respect, all ingredients in finding and keeping a job, she said.

"This is so that they are more able to handle jobs in the real world," Fitzgerald said. They are given training on computers and taught how to apply and interview for jobs.

### **Young mom gets GED, gains hope**

Learning for Living is funded through a three-year grant from the Eisenhower Foundation, but some officials involved with the program don't see funding being cut after that.

Hayes said grant guidelines require the program help at least 35 youths a year. So far 11 have gotten their GEDs through the YMCA program and dozens of others have gone on to DMACC or back to high school after receiving counseling and some classes.

Of the first graduating class, two of the participants obtained jobs as secretaries and the other is taking college classes at DMACC.

Makinson will leave Aug. 1 to return to her family in Fort Dodge. She goes home with more than she came with her GED and a new sense of hope for the future.

"I think it's a really good program," she said. "We even had a regular graduation ceremony. It was really nice. Our family and friends were there."