

# Life Begins at TWENTY-FOUR

For most people, “life” begins at birth. For the child I’m carrying life has already begun. What I, Jerilyn Miller, want more than ever is to give my baby a life that he or she deserves and explain to you how my life is also just beginning—at age 24.

This new beginning is only possible because of the love and support I recently began to experience after enrolling in *Gabriel Network’s* maternity home program.

I was only two years old when my father, Vincent, committed suicide. My mother and I never really talked about my father or have I ever been given the details surrounding his death. Relatives—those few I knew—kept silent. My mother’s significant health problems and her struggle to raise me and my two older sisters, Joan and Beth, offered little time to dwell on such things. In fact, when I asked questions, I was abruptly put in my place and told to be quiet. Even at two, I knew my father, and deep inside I could feel him with me, but, after his death somehow I felt very alone.

My mother did her best to see that we had food and a place to live. She made sure the three of us attended school. But I was bullied throughout grade school which even carried over into my high school years. Shortly after I began high school, Joan moved out of the house. Beth followed soon after leaving me alone with mom—and her worsening health.

My life was a puzzle to me, one I could not piece together to see a clear picture of who I was and where I was headed. I had little time to dwell on it. A cloud seemed to cover me—a state of mind that also seemed impossible to come out from beneath. I found myself at

most times feeling sad, at other times despondent. But somehow I was always able to rally myself to be an encouragement to mom and to see myself through another day.

As her health grew even more life-threatening, mom required constant care. Calling on my sisters was pointless since they were both as bitter about how they were raised as me. They wanted no part of mom and were not at all interested in the problems I was having dealing with her health issues. Then a junior in high school, I couldn’t keep up with my studies and was not emotionally capable of dealing with the bullying, so I dropped out of school. I often thought, *“If my ‘friends’ only knew what I went home to everyday while they were out hanging with other friends at the mall, they wouldn’t taunt me like this.”* And, I could never figure out what I did to deserve such treatment. And I felt the pain from their rejection—a rejection I kept hidden after losing one important person in my life after another. But life went on.

I managed to complete my GED and I even graduated from cosmetology school because those options allowed me to work around caring for mom. *“At least I have a skill,”* I thought, *“that I can rely on to help me earn an income to support myself and to help mom with her medical bills.”*

And then the day came, as I feared it would. I was 16 when mom died, faced with living alone in our tiny one bedroom apartment. The little financial assistance mom was receiving



that kept a roof over our heads ended and I soon found myself not only alone—but homeless—evicted from our apartment with only my purple, flowered, knapsack stuffed with what little clothing I owned and a few other things I held onto since my childhood.

Boys had come and gone over the years and I wrongly trusted all of them hoping the next would treat me better than the last. Bobby was different and a few years older than me. I was spending every night at his apartment and we had taken our relationship to the next level.

Finding out I was pregnant, Bobby forced me out and as quickly as he appeared, he was gone—just like all the others. Homeless for a second time in just a few short months, I was now very alone—and very afraid.

I had considered abortion, but deep inside I felt “*a life*”—a life I did not want to end. It was almost as though God sent me a friend. Someone who wouldn’t reject me. Couldn’t reject me. I thought about how different I could make life for the child that was growing inside me. At that point, I didn’t really know what that should look like—besides the “*Barbie-like*” fantasy life I dreamed and hoped for as a little girl.

Reaching out to Joan and Beth once again, Joan had heard of *Gabriel Network* and suggested I call to learn more about what programs they might offer to help women like me.

Since that time—just a few short months ago—I have experienced acceptance, love, patience, and the security of having a pillow beneath my head when I fall asleep at night.

At *Gabriel Network*, I am challenged daily to accomplish small goals—baby steps if you will—toward motherhood. I have people to talk to, counselors who are without judgment, who are willing to listen and who are guiding me through the learning process. And, most importantly, I am being encouraged to read

*The Bible*, to learn more about Jesus Christ and to realize that even without my earthly father, God is my Father and He was and is by my side every step of the way.

With each baby step, with each goal met, and with the love and care of the *Gabriel Network* staff, I am climbing out of the depression that has held me hostage for so many years. I’ve made friends with other women in the program who may not have had the exact same experiences growing up as me, but had their own traumas contributing to finding themselves at this same point in life. I’ve come to recognize that I’m not so different after all. That there are many others like me who have survived tumultuous childhoods and lived to tell about them.

Since joining the *Gabriel Network* program I have learned that childhood trauma leaves its victims with a surprising number of unanswered questions to the problems of life that are much more significant than those of children who experience a more normal upbringing.

These last few months have been a most difficult transition for me and also the most rewarding of any I’ve ever experienced. I am blessed to be in a program where the staff and volunteers pray with me and exemplify the life of Jesus as they teach me the skills I need to give my child the life I never had.

I arrived pregnant, afraid, and alone. But because of the *Gabriel Network* staff I am building a confidence that reinforces my decision to choose life was the right one for me and my baby. At age 24—with Jesus as my guide—I am beginning a new life of health, happiness and independence.

*Jerilyn*