

London Magazine

Great Expectations

By Suzanne Boles

It's Tuesday morning, and in the brightly decorated living room of a small red brick house on Clarke Road five women are gathered. Three of the women are expectant mothers, all at different stages of their pregnancy. Carolyn Davies, program coordinator and a nurse practitioner and Heather Clark, community dietician, are facilitating a discussion on nutrition. This is the setting for a program run at Argyle house called Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies.

A community project, the program's inception in September 1995 began with a steering committee put together by partnerships in the community which include medical affiliations and children's organizations. The goal is to reduce the incidence of low birth weight, focusing on mothers-to-be in the Argyle community. "This area was selected because it has a very high incidence of low birth weights for London" -- 11.6%, in comparison to 4%, Davies explains. Low incomes and the fact that there are no physicians east of Clarke Road appear to be contributing factors.

The project has two components -- nutritional and health care, with core programs designed specifically for mothers to be -- Teen Mothers and the General Program for all age groups. Both begin with a one hour cooking class in the kitchen focusing on economical and healthy food preparation. The second half is informal and confidential pre and postnatal information as well as peer support.

"Our logic's model reflects, basically, child health as well as prenatal health so that we support programs that reflect our logic's model," says Davies. Keeping with their mandate, the house hosts a well baby and breast feeding clinics, run by the public health unit. Other programs are slated to begin soon.

Program participant, Vicky Fleming saw a program pamphlet while visiting her doctor's office. Now entering her sixth month of her second pregnancy she says, "I was finding this pregnancy more difficult, physically, and when you're overwhelmed with so many negatives it's really hard to eat well and sleep well." Companionship and support have helped her. "Learning about the nutrition is incredible. This is really good for making sure you're eating properly."

Presently, there are 22 active clients in the core programs. Davies says their goal is for a client base of 65 to 75. "We would eventually like to reach every pregnant woman in the community to give them support if they need it."

The project has been given two temporary sources of funding. Seed money from Health Canada, available for three years, has met the start-up costs and initial programming. Support from an anonymous London foundation filled the gap until Health Canada money was approved on January 15. Davies says she's actively seeking a partnership with the community to take over when funding runs out.

"One little underweight baby in the hospital for months will cost the hospital thousands of dollars. So even just one baby coming out of this program full term instead of low birth weight can mean savings to the community," says Davies. "We know that there's about 175 to 200 births in the Argyle area a year, and if we could touch base with these folks we believe that we'll be able to bring that incidence (of low birth weights) down to the average for London."