

An Interview with Sherrill Mosee, author of *PROFESSOR, MAY I BRING MY BABY TO CLASS?*

1. Is there still a stigma today about being a young, unwed mother?

I believe it depends on the age of the young mother. There is definitely still a stigma on teen mothers. Because a teen mother hasn't yet had the opportunity to "live" as an adult—experience life as an adult, although she is certainly thrown into adulthood as a parent—she's lost credibility as one to become "someone" in life. She hasn't completed her education, and it will be more difficult for her to pursue opportunities beyond high school than someone else her age that doesn't have children. She essentially has given away her childhood. The stigma of failure, inadequacy, poverty, welfare, and crime is often associated with that of a teen mother.

I believe society has become more accepting of young women with children who have finished high school and college and have decided to become single parents. The notion of being able to afford, provide, and care for a child is what's important regardless of the number of parents present. But I do believe it is beneficial for a child to have both a mother and father present.

2. Being a teenage mother is obviously not an ideal situation. However, do these young women have options for continuing their education, obtaining a college degree, and finding a satisfying job?

Yes, there are options. Not many, resulting in frustrated teens who give up easily. There are more programs/schools that offer great services to help teen mothers stay in high school and graduate than there are transitional programs that help teen mothers stay in school, graduate, and pursue higher education. The disconnect in service is providing innovative programs to help teen mothers stay on track to graduate high school and provide college access services identifying programs supporting student-parents in college. *Professor, May I Bring My Baby to Class?* provides information specifically to address the needs of young women with children who want to pursue higher education.

3. How important is the family's support for these young mothers?

Family support is very important to helping us achieve our goals. Having family support relieves stress and pressure and makes us feel empowered because we have people in our corner cheering us on. But everyone does not have family support. That doesn't mean that we give up. First, we have to be our own cheerleader. Look in the mirror and tell yourself that you can do it—go to college and care for your baby. On those days when you feel like giving up, turn and look at the face of your child. He or she is your biggest fan and supporter. You will meet others along your educational journey that you can count on for support. There is a common theme throughout the book. Many young

women say that their children motivate them to get up in the morning and do what they need to do—go to class, work, come home, prepare dinner, spend time with them, and then study. In the book I discuss the Power of You, which simply says that you have to believe in yourself. It doesn't matter how many people are supporting you, if you don't believe that you can go to school, work, and care for your baby, then you won't succeed.

4. Is it anti-productive and hypocritical for a person like Bristol Palin, who has an extensive network of support and resources, to publicly state that her future has been ruined because of her baby?

Absolutely! It's sad as well. I feel bad that she feels that way. Because we know who she is, the statement flies in the face of thousands of young girls who may already be struggling with depression, insecurities, and ridicule while trying to answer the question, "What do I do now?" A teen who asks this question is looking for hope. With the right people in her life she can become hopeful and begin to work toward her dream—the one she had before becoming pregnant. The statement Bristol Palin makes kills that hope. A young girl may look at Bristol and say, "Wow, she's famous, she has family to support her, and she got pregnant and ruined her life. I guess there's no hope for me" and conclude that her life is also ruined. There are wonderful stories throughout the book that discuss how teen mothers became determined and focused and did not give up on their dreams. They finished high school or earned a G.E.D., went to college, and graduated.

5. What are colleges around the country doing to provide young mothers with an environment conducive to continuing their studies?

There are approximately 1,700 colleges and universities offering on-campus child care, representing only about 6% of the total number of postsecondary institutions in the country. A handful of these institutions have established programs on campus that specifically provide support services for student-parents—offering on-campus housing for single mothers and their children, child care grants, stipends for books, meal plans for children, and parent support groups. We already know that today women outnumber men on most college campuses or they at least represent close to 50% of the population. At community colleges, 60% are women and 17% of them are single parents.

Obviously, there is much more colleges can and should do to help their students succeed, given the increase in the number of women attending or returning to college with children.

6. Is it really possible to be a successful student, a good mother, and an income provider all at once?

It is absolutely possible to be a successful student and good mother at the same time. However, unless you are from a well-off family that supports you financially, having a good income to adequately provide for your family while in school is not usually the case. Generally, young women are pursuing higher education to get a better paying job in

their career of choice, so that they can better take care of their family and not depend on others for financial support.

In my book, you will find that the successful student-mothers featured are patient, organized, disciplined, focused, and multitaskers. Becoming a successful student-mother is certainly a learned behavior, and everyone has her own method of making things work.

7. What inspired you to help young mothers continue their college education?

I would say a combination of events that happened in my life inspired me to help young mothers. I look back over my life now—it was seeing my mom struggle as a single parent caring for three of her children, never having enough food in the house, living from paycheck to paycheck, and struggling to pay the bills, not having adequate healthcare.

It was when my stepdaughter became pregnant in college during her first year. The love and support she had to help her care for her baby so she could stay in school made me look back at how my mother didn't have that support and wasn't able to go to college when she wanted to. My mother did however attend a two-year college when she and we (her children) were a little older, but fell to the pressures of needing income to care for us, so she didn't finish. When I see a teen mother with her child/children, I always look in the face of the children. I wonder if the mother is going to school, if she dropped out, if she had dreams of becoming a nurse, or lawyer, or teacher. I wonder about the lives of the children. I think about the impact her education or lack thereof has on her children. Are they seeing a healthcare provider regularly, are they eating properly, are they attending a quality early childhood educational program, will they be prepared for kindergarten, will they become teen parents themselves or lead a life of crime? I'm not saying this will happen to all young mothers who don't pursue higher education, but according to research it's likely that the children of teen mothers will be impacted by some of these issues.

Higher education makes a difference in what we earn, where we live, and how we're able to care for our family. It impacts our quality of life and our children's—affecting a least two generations. It can take us out of poverty. Those who earn a college degree will earn \$1 million more over their lifetime than a high school graduate. I'd say that's worth seeking higher education.