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My Sister's Secret

By Lisa, Contributor

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We've all heard stories in the news about teen girls who give birth and then abandon their babies in trash cans, public restrooms, or parks. Most of us probably think, "How could anyone do such a thing?" I used to feel that way until my younger sister, Tanya*, gave birth alone and abandoned her baby when she was 16.

Tanya was living at home when she got pregnant. She simply couldn't face the pregnancy, so she went into complete denial. This denial can lead girls to completely deny that they're pregnant. When they finally give birth, they react by "getting rid" of the baby.

In the Dark

Before the birth, my parents and I were concerned about Tanya. Something seemed to be wrong, but we just didn't know what. She'd gained weight and, when she was about six months pregnant, our parents took her to a doctor, since they were concerned she might be pregnant.

The doctor asked my sister for the date of her last period. Tanya gave her a false date, and, based on that information, the doctor decided that Tanya was not pregnant, without examining her.

Three months later, my sister gave birth alone in the back of our family's minivan, placed the baby in a plastic bag, and dropped her in a dumpster at an apartment complex. She drove home and went to school the next day. Her baby was found alive within an hour.

Criminal Charges

After the baby was found and it was reported in the news, an official from my sister's school called my parents, saying there was a rumor that Tanya was the baby's mother. My parents took Tanya to the hospital. An examination proved that she'd given birth, and DNA tests later confirmed that she was the mother. The prosecutor's office charged my sister as an adult with attempted murder, a felony, and she faced possible jail time in an adult prison.

The prosecutor pursued adult charges because our state has an "infant abandonment" or "safe haven" law, which makes it possible for a teen girl to leave her baby in a "safe haven," like a police station or hospital, without having to reveal her identity or face criminal charges. The prosecutor argued that my sister could've done this, but didn't.

Tanya's final sentence was probation and substantial community service. Luckily, she didn't go to jail. My sister's baby, now one and a half years old, was adopted by her father's parents.

Forty-five states have safe haven laws in effect, but many girls still abandon their babies. I decided to talk to my sister, who's now 18, about these laws, since they were designed to help girls like her.

Lisa: Did you know about the safe haven law and could it have helped you?

Tanya: No, there was very little information available about the law, and none that went to any of the schools. I don't think knowing about it would've helped me at all. You need to be able to face the fact that you're pregnant first, and understand that. But if a girl knows she's pregnant and doesn't want to go through a normal adoption process, this is a good way for her to deal with the pregnancy.

Lisa: Did anyone suspect that you were pregnant or try to help you?

Tanya: People definitely made comments about me, but mostly behind my back. A few asked me directly, but they were mostly adults I didn't know very well, like a guidance counselor. I don't think a girl would be willing to talk to someone she's not very familiar with about something so personal.

Lisa: What could help girls who can't cope with a pregnancy?

Tanya: More information about pregnancy options might be helpful. Also, a girl would be more likely to accept what's happening if her parents talked to her in a kind, understanding way. Unless she's able to really understand what's going on, the only thing that's going to help is if a parent or another adult takes her to get a pregnancy test.

Lisa: What would you say to a pregnant friend who's in denial?

Tanya: I wouldn't even try talking to her about it, but go to her parents instead. Hopefully, her parents can take her to a doctor or just talk to her about her options. In my case, even if my friends had asked, it probably wouldn't have changed the outcome. When a girl denies a pregnancy, she isn't just hiding it from her friends, but from herself as well. So, asking her if she's pregnant isn't going to change her actions; it will most likely only make her very upset.

Lisa: What final message do you have for teen guys and girls?

Tanya: Pregnant girls in denial need to be helped before they give birth, and although they're not going to be happy when you talk to their parents, it's definitely the best thing to do for them.

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