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Living with their choices

Teenage sisters sought freedom in pregnancy, but one found confinement

By N.C. Aizenman

When the Marquez sisters set out to get pregnant, Edelmira was 14 and Angela was 15.

Having babies, the girls thought, would force their Salvadoran-born parents to stop trying to keep them and their teenage boyfriends apart.

Edelmira was the first to succeed, giving birth to a baby girl in the eighth grade. She regretted it almost immediately, and warned her sister not to get pregnant.

Angela, whose round, brown eyes and shy smile are so similar to Edelmira's they could almost be twins, stayed quiet.

"I didn't want her to know I was still trying," Angela recalls, sheepishly. "When I used to see my sister play with her baby, I was like, 'She's so cute; I want my own.'"

Shortly before her 17th birthday, Angela got her wish: a baby girl, just like Edelmira's.

Even as the teen pregnancy rate for other racial and ethnic groups has fallen substantially in the past 15 years, it remains stubbornly high among Hispanics. As many as one in four Hispanics born in the United States to immigrant parents gives birth to a child before her 20th birthday, according to a statistical analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Child Trends, a nonpartisan research center. Only Hispanics who come to the United States as immigrants have a higher teen birth rate.

Teen parenthood often adds an extra hurdle for the offspring of Hispanic immigrants. Many are already struggling to get enough education to overcome their mostly Mexican and Central American parents' high level of poverty, limited schooling and lack of legal status.

The impact on the Marquez sisters, who were born in Maryland and live in Silver Spring, has been profound. Angela, 17, who dropped out of Montgomery Blair High School even before she became pregnant, has put off taking classes toward a GED until her baby is older. Edelmira, a 16-year-old sophomore, says she is determined to graduate. But she missed so many days of school last year that she didn't get full credit, and this year she has already been absent 15 days.



Both girls still have had an easier life than their mother, Ana Ayala, who dropped out of school in the fourth grade to help pay the family bills and was 16 when she left El Salvador to make the daunting illegal trek north. Now 39 and a legal permanent resident, Ayala has worked in a hospital cafeteria for a decade.

After years of straining to pick up English phrases from her bosses, Ayala can understand a fair amount. But when it comes to speaking English, her voice grows soft and her tone is tentative.

Her daughters navigate their American surroundings with the casual self-assurance of natives. If Edelmira wants to organize a day trip to the beach, she Googles the destination on one of the school computers. If Angela calls the cellphone company and gets the language prompt, her answer is a resolute "English!" And both sisters chose names for their babies that could have been plucked from the registry of a suburban country club: Edelmira settled on Ashley; Angela named her child Kimberly.

Hidden romances

Yet the girls are also coming of age amid the longest sustained wave of immigration in U.S. history. The constant influx of newcomers has given the brick apartment buildings where the Marquez sisters live the feel of a Central American village, with its own informal economy functioning entirely in Spanish.

Need a prepaid phone card to call San Salvador? A petite woman in the building a few doors down sells them out of her living room. Need a haircut? Head to the sisters' cousin a few flights up. Feel like an afternoon snack? Poke your head out the win-

dow and call over to the elderly man pushing an ice cream cart hung with bells and the sign “Helados y Paletas ‘Tito’.”

Against this backdrop, the U.S.-born Latino kids in Angela and Edelmira’s circle have fashioned a subculture that draws far more inspiration from the South than the North. Even their friends who are fluent in English prefer speaking to each other in Spanish. When Edelmira watches television, she flips on her favorite Mexican soap opera, “Verano de Amor” (Summer of Love). When Angela takes 9-month-old Kimberly out for a stroll, she is careful to conceal her under a blanket to prevent strangers from putting “el ojo,” the Central American version of the evil eye curse, on her.

And when the neighborhood boys first started vying for the sisters’ attention, it was the foreign-born ones who had come here in their early teens who seemed most appealing.

U.S.-born guys “are so -- I don’t know, if they’re not in a gang, they still don’t take life seriously,” Angela says. “They don’t like to work. . . . They just leave you pregnant, and that’s it.”

Edelmira, then 12 and the bolder of the two, fell for a tall Salvadoran with long, glossy hair. Roberto was 15 and had sneaked across the border months earlier.

Angela, then 14, started seeing his friend Franklin, a soft-spoken, broad-chested 18-year-old Honduran construction worker. He had made his own illegal journey here several years before and had already earned enough to buy a car.

The girls were careful to conceal their romances from their parents, who are divorced.

Their father, Jose Marquez, who arrived from El Salvador at 15 and owns a construction subcontracting business, was particularly strict. The sisters were to come home directly after school and stay there for the rest of the day. Boyfriends were out of the question.

It was weeks before Marquez and Ayala realized that their daughters, then starting the eighth and ninth grades, had started skipping class to hang out with Roberto and Franklin. Edelmira would just erase the school’s phone messages before her mother got home from work.

When their little brother tattled, their parents’ solution was to put the girls on the next plane to El Salvador.

“We thought maybe then they’d forget these boys and come back ready to focus on their studies,” Ayala says.

The girls spent the next five months in a remote mountain town. By the time, they returned to Maryland in late winter, they had missed so much school that their parents agreed to let them wait until the next school year to enroll again. In the meantime, the sisters immediately resumed dating Franklin and Roberto in secret.

When their parents learned what was happening from a neighbor, a livid Marquez, who is 36 and speaks excellent English, drove the girls to the Silver Spring police station. He threatened to have Franklin and Roberto arrested, and the girls fixed with ankle-monitors.

“We knew the courts wouldn’t actually do that. We were just saying all that to make an impression on them,” Ayala says.

But the girls took their parents at their word. That night, the sisters fled to Franklin’s apartment. It was in the days that followed that they made the decision to have babies. Just as they had hoped, their parents have grudgingly accepted Roberto and Franklin since the babies were born.

“A parent always forgives their child,” Ayala says with a sigh. “I’ve told my daughters they’ll always have my support.”

She recently agreed to let Franklin move into one of the two bedrooms of her small apartment with Angela and their baby. He pays \$450 for the privilege, but it’s still a sacrifice for Ayala: She shares the other bedroom with Edelmira and 1 1/2 -year-old Ashley, while the girls’ younger brother, Jose, and a friend of Franklin’s sleep on couches in the living room.

Similarly, even after a long day at the cafeteria, Ayala often drives Edelmira and Ashley to a correctional facility 40 minutes away so they can see Roberto, who is serving an 18-month sentence for first-degree burglary. He was arrested in February after he and two friends scuffled with the owner of a house they were trying to burglarize.

Straddling two worlds

Although Angela speaks of getting a job in a store or fast-food restaurant one day, her daily routine would be familiar to many newly arrived, Central American housewives: Wake up at 4 a.m. to cook Franklin breakfast and pack his lunch before he heads to his bricklaying job. Catch a few hours’ sleep before it’s time to feed baby Kimberly and Edelmira’s daughter, Ashley, whom Angela babysits while her sister is in school. Change diapers, gossip with visiting friends and wash baby bottles for the next couple of hours until late afternoon, when Franklin walks through the door. Shuffle back to the stove to pat out tortillas for Franklin’s dinner.

Edelmira never found schoolwork as excruciating as her sister did. But her attendance has long been sporadic. “It’s not that I don’t want to go. I like school,” she says. “It’s just we wake up too early. Sometimes I wake up, take a shower and, once it’s time to leave, I’m like ‘Nah, I’m just going to sleep.’”

When Edelmira does go to school, it’s like a brief excursion to an exotic planet. At Montgomery Blair, the banks of gleaming Dell computers give many classrooms the look of Mission Control. Students who are into drama get to perform in “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and “The Mikado.” Students in the science-oriented magnet program learn how to measure the molecular mass and pressure of various gases before the end of freshman year.

Yet as Edelmira wades through the packed halls, she is only dimly aware of these undercurrents. She doesn't belong to any after-school clubs. In her science class, she is just beginning to learn that matter can exist as a gas.

At home, she doesn't have a computer. She almost never opens a book. When she says she's doing well in a class, she means she's not failing it. She doesn't worry about how she'll do on the PSATs or SATs. She has no idea what the tests are for.

Her worries are an immigrant's preoccupations: Will Roberto get deported after he completes his sentence?

Her dreams are an immigrant's fantasies: Maybe some day she and Roberto could save enough to move to El Salvador. They could open a tienda. Or maybe, she says, thinking bigger, she could get a job at San Salvador's airport, stamping passports like those women in sleek uniforms she noticed on her last visit.

Once in a while, hints of other options reach the sisters' world, like the afternoon one of their longtime pals brought over her 17-year-old friend Jocelyn, who is also a teen mom.

The sisters didn't know Jocelyn well and peppered her with questions.

"How old were you when you had your son?" Angela asked.

"Fifteen."

The girls nodded understandingly. Four of their close friends have babies. Three more are pregnant.

"What's his name?" Edelmira asked.

"Diego."

Then Jocelyn mentioned that she has an older sister who would be graduating from St. Mary's College, a four-year liberal arts school.

The sisters raised their eyebrows in surprise.

"Wow," Angela said.

There was an awkward pause. No one could seem to think of a follow-up.

Finally, Angela broke the silence.

"I love the name Diego," she said.

"Yeah, no one in my family has it," Jocelyn said.

"Just like Ashley!" Edelmira exclaimed, perking up now that the conversation was back on familiar ground. "Nobody in my family has that name!"

Staying in school

If the adults in their lives also rarely speak of college and only vaguely explain the benefits of high school, they have at least constantly stressed the importance of graduating.

When Edelmira started Silver Spring International Middle School already several months pregnant, one of the counselors made a point of alerting the teachers and making sure they worked with her to help her make up any lessons she might miss due to doctor's appointments. Similarly, Eastern Middle School, to which Edelmira switched halfway through the year, arranged for a private tutor to teach her at home for a month after she gave birth.

Edelmira credits the extra help with motivating her to stay in school. But, in many ways, doing so has only heightened her initial misgivings over having her daughter at such a young age.

If she didn't have to care for Ashley, Edelmira says, she could get some of that after-school tutoring her teachers always talk about. Or, she adds, a faraway look coming over her, she could join that dance troupe she's seen rehearsing near the cafeteria.

"You lose so many privileges when you have a baby," she says. "You can't go out. Everywhere you go, you have to take her."

Angela doesn't share her sister's regrets. She smiles with genuine pleasure as she describes the fun she has with Kimberly.

"When you have your own baby, you could do anything with her," she says. "You can change her outfits any time." And yet . . .

The sky was beginning to darken as the sisters walked with their babies to the small playground behind the apartment complex.

Angela parked Kimberly's stroller next to a four-way seesaw and perched on one of the seats. Edelmira sat on another, hugging Ashley to her chest.

Suddenly, their cousin Josue bounded onto one of the remaining seats, sending everyone bobbing up and down in a gale of giggles and squeals.

"Wow," Angela said as she caught her breath. "I miss this."