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Teen pregnancy storyline on soap opera tackles some real-life issues



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REIMER

WOMEN ARE ALWAYS GETTING pregnant on soap operas. They are always having affairs or regrettable one-night stands or having sex while also having amnesia. And getting devastatingly pregnant as a result.

The unintended pregnancy is a soap opera plot staple, but it usually happens to the grown-ups. Phyllis is pregnant as the result of her affair with Nick on *The Young and the*

Restless, but she has a grown son. It was a shock because she didn't think she could get pregnant.

That's the way teenagers think, too. It can't happen to me. And that's what Lulu Spencer was thinking on *General Hospital*, when she lost her virginity to Dillon Quartermaine during an unhappy patch in his too-young marriage.

But it did happen to her. She's just finished high school and she's pregnant. Lulu's mother, Laura Spencer, is in an asylum in a catatonic state, and her rogue ad-

venturer father, Luke Spencer, is off somewhere, but Lulu will have help dealing with this pregnancy.

The folks at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy are working closely with the writers and producers of *General Hospital* to craft the conversations Lulu has with herself and her friends and the adults in her life about this pregnancy.

They will have the kinds of conversations that real people should be having about teen sex and teen pregnancy, but most often (Please see REIMER, 4N)

Issue of teen pregnancy is more than a soap opera story

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do not.

"ABC isn't going to turn this into an after-school special," said Marisa Nightingale, director of media and youth at the National Campaign. "Nobody wants that. The viewers don't want that."

But ABC is dealing with the consequences of teen sex directly. Lulu is a main character in the cast's sub-group of teenagers, not some random secondary character who conveniently leaves town.

"The theme of a teenager getting pregnant is full of real-life

drama," Nightingale said. "It is about feelings, values, the future, relationships, disappointment and heartbreak. There is plenty of fodder."

"This is the perfect way to get this on a teenager's radar screen and that's how prevention starts."

The second week in August — just when Lulu's pregnancy story line took off — ratings for *General Hospital* were up 23 percent among teen girls.

Julie Beriman, the actress who plays Lulu, will talk directly to those girls in a public service announcement to be aired during the show.

live in a world where this has happened to their friends. They resonate to the story, the ambivalence and the fear."

It is not the first time a teenager has gotten pregnant on a soap, and it isn't the first time the National Campaign has had a role.

Jessica Buchanan got pregnant on *One Life to Live* in 1998. She was 15, it was her first time having sex and she didn't use contraception.

Her pregnancy was not resolved with a convenient, but tragic, early miscarriage. She stayed pregnant for almost the full nine months while having all sorts of

real-life conversations with her parents and her boyfriend and her girlfriends about the physical and emotional consequences of what she'd done.

ABC pulled out 12 minutes of clips from the nine-month story arc and produced a kind of educational video, complete with a study guide.

Almost 10,000 copies of the tape are still in circulation in schools and among community groups.

"We had a teacher in Wisconsin call and ask for a replacement because his VHS tape wore out," Nightingale said.

Phelps said ABC will do the

same with Lulu's story. "But hers is a much grittier story than Jessica's. After all, Lulu is a Spencer, and Jessica is a Buchanan."

An unknown number of soap opera characters have gotten pregnant since Amy Ames got pregnant as the result of an affair with her married professor on *The Secret Storm* 40 years ago.

But we know that one in three sexually active girls will get pregnant before the age of 20.

Just like Lulu Spencer, they don't believe it can happen to them.

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