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Forget 'The Hills': Audiences embrace the harsh realities of 'Teen Mom'

For the last couple of years, MTV has often been both branded and buoyed by the success of its reality show sensation "The Hills." But the juggernaut, which trails impossibly beautiful and thin twentysomethings around Los Angeles, has recently begun to falter; during the fifth season, when Kristin Cavallari took over for fan favorite Lauren Conrad, ratings fell.



Meanwhile, other of the network's shows featuring arguably less glamorous lifestyles have become surprise hits — there's "Jersey Shore," of course, which followed a bunch of self-proclaimed tanned "guidos" and "guidettes" around Seaside Heights as

they danced the night away at local night clubs. There's also "Teen Mom," a documentary-style show that debuted in December about four teen mothers struggling to cope with their new realities. Only last week, MTV announced it had greenlighted a second season of "Teen Mom," which averaged 2.4 million viewers per episode this season. The show -- whose reunion special airs Tuesday evening -- is a spinoff of "16 and Pregnant," which followed a handful of girls from the point at which they discovered they were pregnant until they gave birth. (A second season of that show begins Feb. 16.)

The concept for "16 and Pregnant" was spawned by the headlines surrounding the pregnancies of Jamie Lynn Spears and Bristol Palin, said Liz Gateley, senior vice president of development for the network.

"I knew in my gut it was gonna be huge," recalled Gateley, who served as an executive producer on "Teen Mom." "I think pregnancy itself is something that young people have been compelled by for years. Back when I was at Lifetime, 'A Baby Story' was very big with younger viewers because it's such a unique aspect of one's life. As a development exec, I thought it was something that would be worthy of sharing with America — particularly when it was in crises with teen pregnancy."

Morgan J. Freeman, the show's executive producer, began working with the girls on the show during "16 and Pregnant" and said MTV sought out so-called normal girls who ended up in an abnormal situation. "The goal was to try to find a typical, middle-class teenager who should have known better," recalled Freeman. "The mandate was 'get the truth. Let's see the real challenges, what pressures it puts on in high schoolers, what the sacrifices are.'"

The girls on "Teen Mom" certainly aren't shown shopping for the latest outfit, traveling on jaunts to Cabo or getting bottle service at trendy nightclubs. They are struggling to complete their GEDs,

make rent and keep the relationships with the fathers of their children intact.

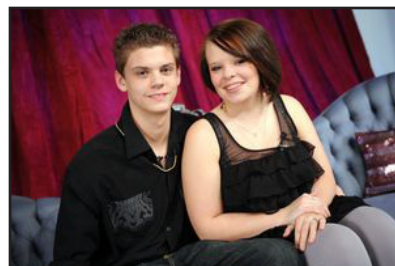
Maci Bookout, a 18-year-old from Chattanooga, Tenn., has a particularly harrowing storyline. She's spent the majority of the season trying to make the relationship with her boyfriend, Ryan Edwards, work — despite his apathy toward both his daughter and his son, Bentley.



"This show really hits people hard. In 'Juno' or 'The Secret Life of An American Teenager,' things are kind of glossed over and they don't really show the hardships," said Book-

out, who recently split up with Edwards. "On 'Teen Mom,' there are girls from different parts of the country with different backgrounds. On every other MTV show, like 'The Hills' and 'The City' and 'The Real World,' it's just for entertainment. Our show is really educational and good for audiences who want to get a different mindset on teen pregnancy."

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has even partnered with the show, formulating discussion guides about issues from each episode and making DVDs of the program available to nonprofit organizations and educators. "I think the audience comes away from the show realizing that pregnancy is not easy or glamorous or fun," said Amy Kramer, the director of the National Campaign. "When you connect with a character on television, like Maci or Juno or someone in the media, it makes you consider those experiences in your own life." But for the girls on the program, the reward of sharing such a personal period of their life is the support they have received in return.



Catelynn Lowell, 17, whose journey after giving her daughter with her boyfriend Tyler Baltierra up for adoption is highlighted on "Teen Mom," said participating in the series has helped her come to terms with her difficult decision.

"The response has been really uplifting and encouraging," said Lowell, who lives in Richmond, Va. "Everyone has been very supportive, and we got really good comments how mature we were and how we could do such an amazing thing for our daughter, thinking about her and not ourselves."