

Taking it to the streets for UTEC

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LOWELL — Leslie Rivera was 15 years old when she got pregnant. Her dad was in jail, so with no one to drive her it got harder and harder to walk to Lowell High School as the pregnancy progressed.

She had family members in gangs around the city. She had arrests on her record. She dropped out of school.

She had her daughter when she was 16.

But there was something that she kept thinking.

"I didn't want to give my daughter the life that I was given," she said. "That's what drove me."

Not long after dropping out of high school, Rivera went to the city-operated Career Center of Lowell and started work toward a GED.

But she would still get in fights sometimes. Just being pregnant wasn't enough to make the trouble in her life go away.

"It's hard," Rivera said.

But now she is engaged, a homeowner and the streetworker supervisor for the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell, overseeing a group of four employees who each spend 50 to 60

hours a week fighting to reach troubled young people.

Rivera's oldest daughter is 16. She

also has an 8-year-old son and will be married in October. She starts classes at Hesser College in Salem, N.H., soon.

"Being a teen mom doesn't mean that you have to be on welfare and that you're not going to make anything out of your life, Rivera said. "There's still hope."

After getting her GED and working at an internship program in City Hall, Rivera got a job as a paraprofessional for Lowell Public Schools, working in a junior high school when she was 17 — still the age of a high school girl.

She was no longer on welfare. She was able to take care of herself.

"I want to give back that chance I was given," she said, explaining why she stays on call 24/7 for the teens she tries to reach. "I didn't have that support at home, but I found that support in the community. So that's what I want to be. I want to be that support in Lowell."

Being a streetworker takes patience.

Rivera and fellow streetworkers go door to door to meet families. They reach out to youths that social-service agencies refer them to.

They help homeless teens find shel-

ter and help.

They bring members of rival gang sets together, and try to get through to them. They try to get them to talk to each other.

But reaching a troubled teen doesn't happen overnight. Rivera and the other streetworkers have lived lives that give them some credibility on the streets, but they must also earn trust, and that can take years.

One young person she is working with will soon finish high school. They've been working together for three years.

Sometimes a successful week isn't watching a young person turn their life around. It's just getting that young person to call her.

"You have to have a lot of patience," she said. "You're not telling them what to do, you're guiding them. It's their decisions."

And there are plenty of setbacks.

"You might work with someone for a year and they're doing great, but then all the sudden they're back at square one," she said. "You have to keep going and going."

"This is what I want to do," she said. "This is my passion."

To learn more about UTEC, visit www.utec-lowell.org.