
Building a Brighter Future

Andrews University's Single-Parent Program

By Desiree Ham-Ying

Susan Martin dropped out of academy to get married. During her years as wife and mother she did not need to pursue another career, so she never completed her high school diploma. Ten years and four children later her marriage fell apart. Immediately she became the sole parent and provider in her family. She worried about the long-term effect this would have on her children. She had hoped to provide them with the educational opportunities she had missed by dropping out of school.

Facts About Single Parents

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American families (8.7 million families). Today, one of every four families with children under the age of 18 is a single-parent family, up from one of every 10 in 1970.

According to U.S. Bureau of Census records for 1985-1986, 2.6 percent of the households in the country are headed by a male single parent, 19.3 percent by

a female single parent. In most cases the woman assumes this role through divorce, separation, the death of a spouse, or an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Like Susan, many of these women lack a formal education or marketable skills. As a result, they usually have to work at subsistence-level jobs and cannot earn enough to adequately support their families. Susan had always wanted to become a nurse, but she soon realized that she had to complete her education in order to find a meaningful job.

A New Program at Andrews University

In 1988 Andrews University, through its Community Service Assistantship Program, discovered that a number of

low-income single-parent families lived nearby. The vast majority of these families were headed by mothers like Susan, with little education and small children. These women were anxious to obtain an education and a better life for themselves and their children.

Federal Grant Helps Fund Program

With a \$30,000 federal grant from ACTION (Federal Domestic Agency), the university reached out to more than 450 single women and children in the nearby community of Benton Harbor, Michigan. Andrews students studying nutrition and family life taught these families about nutrition, child development, and family resource management.

As a result, single parents became interested in the university, inquiring whether they could complete their education there. Soon it became apparent that Andrews could provide opportunities for single parents, if it provided the

bridge that these families need to be self-sufficient.

Overcoming Enormous Difficulties

Single parents, particularly females, face enormous difficulties in trying to break the cycle of poverty. In addition to the financial stresses of supporting a family and funding a college education, they must balance the demands of college work with the need for adequate child care. Many also need skilled counseling, tutoring, and living accommodations to assist them in making their goal a reality. For many, a four-year degree seems beyond reach.

Andrews Addresses the Needs of Single Parents

Nationwide attention has focused on the growing single parent population who desire a college degree. However, only about 80 colleges in the United States provide special support services for this vulnerable segment of the nation's student population.

Many single parents are relatively independent and emotionally and financially stable. However, others need varying amounts of assistance. To address this need Andrews University developed a comprehensive support program. The Single Parent Program's developers realized that as the sole support of their families, single parents need to obtain a good job and achieve economic independence. However, over the long-term, job training and job placement are effective only when certain other basic needs are satisfied.

To meet the needs of single parents, Andrews University's program offers a full range of services and seminars in parenting education, time and resource management, job-seeking skills, emotional support, basic skills instruction, career development, remedial assistance, and child-care services.

Building Self-Esteem

Single parents also need to build their self-esteem. The program received a \$7,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Education for a special curriculum to achieve this important goal for single parents and their adolescent children.

During the past academic year 43 single parents enrolled at Andrews University. Through the Single Parent Program they received tuition assistance, family counseling, on-campus living accommodations, and child care, as well as social and recreational activities for their families.

Through the cooperation of the Michigan Department of Social Services single parents on public assistance can retain their benefits for living accommodations, food, medical care, and child-

care allowances while completing their education through the Single Parent Program. They also are allowed to participate in a work-study program run by the university's Community Service Assistantship Program. This gives them work experience and some income to assist in the cost of their education.

Helping the Whole Family

The Single Parent Program seeks to help parents achieve their educational goals. Going beyond mere financial support, this help addresses the needs of the entire family. In order to overcome one of the major barriers single parents face when returning to school, the Child Development Center began to operate 12 hours a day. The center offers two preschool development sessions each day and an after-school latchkey program that allows parents time to attend classes and study in the evenings.

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Financial Aid

One of the most significant factors in the program is its financial support. Eligible single parents who are Michigan residents can receive up to \$5,700 in state and federal grants. The Andrews administration has voted to provide an additional \$1,000 of financial aid each year. Out-of-state residents who are ineligible for Michigan grants can receive up to \$3,000 in aid from the university.

The tuition increase for 1990-1991 has created a problem for single parents. Their need for aid has increased, while financial aid has remained steady. The university's Financial Aid Policies Committee is currently proposing to separate the Single Parent Grant from Andrews Aid. The total amount of aid available could then be increased to \$4,000 for nonresident single parents. Since aid is awarded on the basis of individual need, each award would vary. If approved, this financial aid package will be available for the 1991-1992 school year.

Another challenge facing the Single Parent Program is inadequate space at the Child Development Center facility. The center can serve only 20 children at a time. Under the present licensing the center cannot care for children under two and one-half years of age. As the single parent enrollment expands, the university needs to provide care for more children and for infants.

Shaping the Future for Single Parents

The Single Parent Program provides parents with a new beginning, a second chance to achieve their educational goals. Sixty-four parents and 101 dependents are currently enrolled in the program. About 80 percent of the participants are Seventh-day Adventists from throughout North America. However, 12 participants from surrounding communities attend Andrews solely because of the support offered by the Single Parent Program. Most of these students are non-Adventists, who appreciate the caring Christian community at the university.

Susan is now a sophomore nursing student. She has used many of the services offered by the program. She receives the single-parent grant, and her children attend the Child Development Center. Moreover, her family enjoys the social and recreational activities offered by the program.

Susan has found the sense of commonality within the group to be very rewarding. Like other parents, she faces the grim realities of being alone with a family to support. Having other people's support is important to her. The single parents carpool to collect their food stamps and do their grocery shopping. They babysit for one another when their children are ill, and have developed a support network.

Education and training are the only way for low-income single parents to achieve self-sufficiency. The Single-Parent Program provides these parents with an education and the financial incentive to work. The program also builds these families' self-esteem and provides the support services that make education achievable for single parents.

Has the Single Parent Program been successful? In place for only two years, it has already produced positive results. In June 1990, five of its single parents graduated from Andrews University. □

Desiree Ham-Ying is Program Developer and Director of the Single Parent Program at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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