

# YOUR S.T.U.F.F.

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## Quote of the week

"More and more fathers are realizing how much better their relationship with their child is if they're deeply involved in caring for that child from the start. They know that if only mom takes care of the baby, dad misses out. Whether you're with your baby's mother or not, you and baby will be ahead if you're involved in baby care. . . . Your baby wins by having two loving parents."

— Jeane Warren Lindsay in "Teen Dads: Rights, Responsibilities and Joys" (Morning Glory Press, 2001).



Hub teen strives to take on challenges of fatherhood

# Family man

By CARA NISSMAN

As his former classmates graduated last week, Juan Martinez celebrated a different milestone. He bought his 2-month-old daughter, Bianca, her first stroller.

Martinez, 18, is one of 5,000 Massachusetts teens becoming dads this year, said Suzin Bartley, executive director of The Children's Trust Fund. To learn about the challenges of being a teen dad, Your S.T.U.F.F. followed Martinez and his 17-year-old girlfriend, Zoila Miranda, on their quest for a baby carriage. Trust us, it wasn't easy.

When most teens want to go shopping, they grab their wallet and keys and split. Not so for Martinez.

Diapers? Check. Blankets? Check. Responsibility? Um, check, please.

Martinez, doesn't have a driver's

license, so after he slipped Bianca into a baby carrier, we took the bus from Chelsea to Revere, then walked for a half hour to an Ames store.

Before leaving, Martinez warned against jaywalking for the safety of the baby. Two years ago, he wouldn't have cared.

"I've learned responsibility," he said. "It (becoming a teen dad) was bound to happen, with (Miranda) or with somebody else. I was very sexually active. Now, I've changed. I made my mistakes a long time ago."

Martinez became sexually active at 12. He used to hang with gang members and tag his name around his neighborhood. He rarely used contraception.

Miranda didn't worry about using condoms. When she became pregnant, she and Martinez decid-

ed against abortion. "Lots of people say I ruined my life," he said. "But I'm not going to let my kid suffer a day for something I did."

Martinez dropped out of school last September.

Now he volunteers for ROCA Inc., a Chelsea teen center, and teaches kids break-dancing. He works as a waiter 50 hours a week at a retirement home and attends GED classes four days a week.

"I don't want to rely on other people," he said. "I can sit around and wait for a (welfare) check, but I want to work for my money."

While walking, we passed houses with swimming pools and roses. To Martinez, they looked luxurious compared with the apartment he shares with Miranda and four of her relatives.

"Look at that," he said, about a home with a nicely manicured lawn. "That's like Beverly Hills."

At Ames, Martinez bought a stroller and assembled it outside the store, but it soon broke down. After adjusting the wheels and brakes, he managed to fix it. Watching Martinez cradling his baby's head in his palm and patiently handling the stubborn stroller, you can tell he doesn't give up easily.

On the bus ride home, Martinez ran into an old friend, Nelson Nieves, 18, who proudly opened his wallet to show off his son Jordan's

picture. Martinez smiled knowingly. Martinez can't imagine his life in 10 years.

"It's hard to say where I see myself in the long term," he said. "I want to stay in one place, not moving from house to house like I used to do." In the past two years, he has lived in Malden, Cambridge, Dorchester and now Chelsea. "I would love to live (in Revere). It's quiet over here."

Martinez doesn't plan to wait tables forever. He dreams of owning a break-dance club.

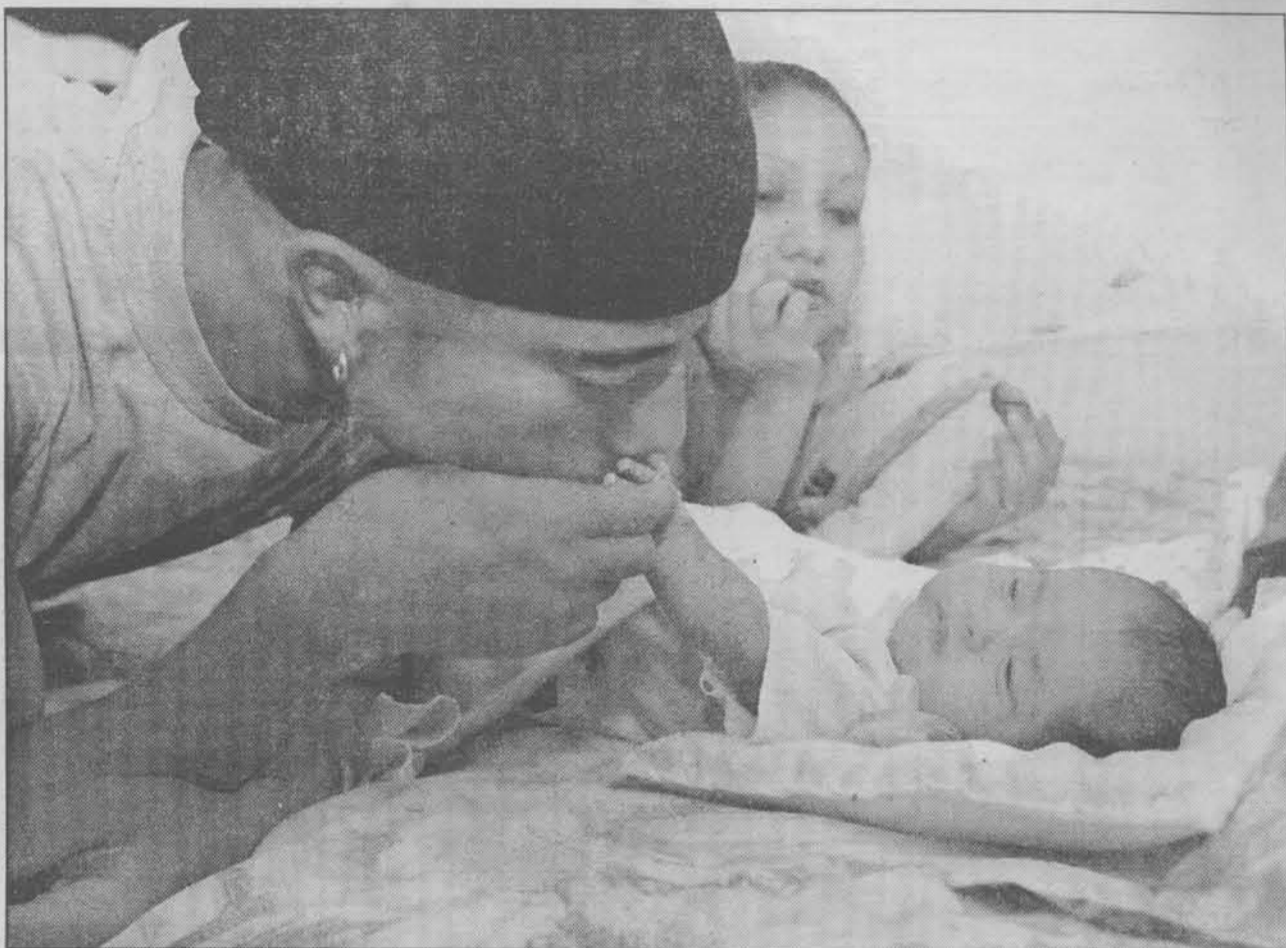
Although he's putting off marriage until he's 23, he doesn't want to lose his bond with Miranda.

"A baby should have two parents," he said. "And I can't break up with (Miranda) and see some other dude taking care of my baby. Nobody can fill my spot."

Martinez and Miranda were both born to teen mothers. Daughters of teens are 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves, according to a 1996 Robin Hood Foundation study. Martinez hopes his daughter will learn from his mistakes and break the cycle.

"I'll tell her how it is and hope that she learns to wait for the right person," he said. "I'll tell her everything. I'll be here for her."

What's up? Tell Cara Nissman at [cnissman@bostonherald.com](mailto:cnissman@bostonherald.com).



STAFF PHOTOS BY NANCY LANE

KIDS WITH KIDS: Above, Juan Martinez, 18, kisses his 2-month-old daughter Bianca, as his girlfriend, Zoila Miranda, 17, looks on. Above left, Martinez and Miranda give Bianca's new stroller a test drive.

## A little older, a little wiser

Jeremy Kearnan has a lot of advice for teen dads celebrating Father's Day this weekend. Kearnan, 23, a home visitor for Healthy Families in Framingham and Milford, speaks from experience as the father of 4-year-old Collin.

He and his girlfriend were seniors in high school when she became pregnant, and they broke up. The toddler lives with his mother, and Kearnan takes him every other weekend.

Kearnan recommends young dads connect with other teen fathers for support. "It's easier being part of a community."

Kearnan cautions young parents pondering marriage not to rush into it.

He also recommends being flexible. Kearnan changed his college plans to be closer to Collin.

To find teen parenting programs in your area, call (888) 775-4KIDS.

— CARA NISSMAN



BOUD PAPA: Martinez, left, and Miranda look at a picture of Jordan, baby boy of Nelson Nieves, center.