

## **The Nurturing Network**

offers help to professional women faced with an unwanted pregnancy

**By Jean Libman Block, *Good Housekeeping*, November 1991**

Imagine that you're a 29-year-old college graduate. You work for a major consulting firm on the East Coast and you're in line for a coveted partnership. For five years you've been living in a close, loving relationship with your boyfriend, an architect. You plan to marry eventually, when both your careers are well launched, and you have a tacit understanding that you will marry immediately if you become pregnant.

Unexpectedly, you're pregnant. Even more unexpectedly, your loving architect says, "I'm not ready for this," and takes off. You know from the unfortunate experience of an office colleague that your boss and the firm's most important clients do not take kindly to an unmarried pregnancy. Your coworker was fired.

What are your choices. You can get an abortion. You can ask your boss for a temporary transfer to a back-office slot, but even if he agrees, there goes your longed-for partnership. You can go home to Ohio to face the tight-lipped disapproval and tearful disappointment of your parents.

Or you can call The Nurturing Network at an 800 phone number in Boise, Idaho, and within two weeks chances are that the efficient, knowledgeable staff can arrange a leave of absence from your job, line up a short-term consulting assignment in San Francisco (which will actually enhance your work credits), and set up congenial living arrangements and first-rate medical care for you in California.

A dream? No, a reality made possible by the drive and determination of one woman who has dedicated herself to giving the word "choice" a new resonant meaning.

Her name is Mary Cunningham Agee, a brilliant businesswoman, a graduate of Harvard Business School, who began a new life in the West when she married William Agee, the former CEO of the Bendix Corporation. Now the couple have two children – five and three. "The idea for The Nurturing Network came to me when I miscarried with our first baby in the fifth month of pregnancy," Mrs. Agee explains. "I was so overcome with grief that I began to think about the terrible sense of loss a woman must feel when she has to abort the life of a precious, healthy baby because that is her only possible way out."

Mrs. Agee is not the kind of woman who lets a surge of sympathy pass. She has to do something. First she read almost everything that has ever been written on the pro-life/pro-choice issue. Then she asked 100 business and professional women what they would do if there were a realistic, practical alternative to abortion; 91 said they would choose the alternative.

"I began to see," Mary Agee recalls, "that most women with unwanted pregnancies do not truly experience a choice. The lack of resources and support for the birth alternative tips the scale toward abortion. I can't help wondering how many of the million and a half

women who abort each year do so in simple desperation because they can't find financial, emotional, and practical support if they decide to have their baby."

Mrs. Agee then spent a year talking to college administrators, heads of companies, social agencies, medical experts. The result: The Nurturing Network, a resource for women who have a crisis pregnancy.

**W**orking state by state, through friends, former colleagues, her own extensive "old girl" network as well as her husband's impressive "old boy" network, Mrs. Agee lined up job and educational opportunities, medical support, counseling, living arrangements – first for a handful, now for more than 1,000 women a year across the country. She focuses on college and working women, usually over the age of 20. More than 140 colleges and 350 employers now participate in the program.

One of the Network's first clients was a college senior in Massachusetts majoring in modern languages. The young woman would abort if she had to, but was frantically seeking some other solution. Within three weeks the Network had her transferred to a college in the Midwest, housed with an understanding family, and put in the care of a physician and a counselor. She got her degree, had her baby, and decided to keep the child.

A key question arises. How can a young student, so desperate she doesn't even dare tell her parents about her predicament, manage to go home to her family with a diploma and an infant?

Mary Agee laughs at the question. "People are funny," she says. "A pregnant daughter without a wedding band is a scandal that many families don't want to face. But a baby is suddenly an adored grandchild. All the moral stigma seems to vanish and the girl's parents open their hearts in welcome. I've seen it happen dozens of times."

Mrs. Agee finds that more than half the Network's clients keep their babies. The rest go the adoption route. For some there is a truly happy ending. The college senior from Massachusetts married her child's father the Christmas after her graduation.

Just a week ago a 21-year-old young woman, pregnant for the fourth time, called the Network. Her first pregnancy was aborted, her second produced a son whose father sued for custody and won, the third infant died. The woman had been working in a fast-food restaurant. The network swiftly moved her into the household of a large, close-knit family, found her a job in a vision center, and started her on intensive counseling.

"In this case," says Mrs. Agee, "I think counseling is the most important service we can offer. Why is this woman doing this to herself? She's not a 13-year-old who's never heard of birth control. She has to get to the root of her self-destructive behavior if she's to have any life at all. We hope that by the time her baby is born she will have gained enough insight to make a wise decision about her own and her baby's future."

The economics of the program are surprisingly simple. Mrs. Agee provided the seed money of \$300,000 by selling a vacation home. She regularly passes the hat to foundations and corporations and gets a good response. Loans and public assistance come into play in some cases. Donations are always welcome. She says, "When people realize how inherently practical and compassionate the Network is, they ask, 'How can I help?'"

Employers participate for a variety of reasons. Some, opposed to abortion on principle, are eager to support a viable alternative. Some are happy to find highly qualified and strongly motivated employees for short-term special projects. Others believe they are performing a worthwhile public service. Still others are unable to resist Mary Agee's crusading logic and spirit. In some instances, the temporary employee stays on and becomes a valued permanent staff member.

College administrators cooperate for practical, ideological, and compassionate reasons and find that they are recruiting excellent students at very little expense. Some families provide housing as their contribution to a good cause; others receive modest rent from the Client or Network. Doctors and counselors are paid on a case-by-case basis by insurers, patients, or the Network. Educational, adoption, and career counseling are offered to all participants.

"After I appeared on the CBS morning news show recently, all five of our telephone lines lit up," Mrs. Agee recalls. "Jobs and money poured in and our caseload almost doubled. So many women feel they have too much to lose by continuing and unwanted pregnancy. They can't handle the idea of interrupting present or future plans for nine months, let alone for a lifetime. These are the women who need The Nurturing Network to get them through a painful moment in their lives.

"I ask everyone to put aside the polarizing rhetoric of pro-life and pro-choice and to discover the common ground of mutual understanding and practical solutions. There is so much talk these days about empowering women. What greater power can we give them than the tools to survive a crisis? That's what The Nurturing Network is all about."

The telephone number of The Nurturing Network is 1-800-TNN-4MOM.

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Mary Cunningham Agee, President and Founder

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