



“Meet Waukecha Wilkerson”

She grew up dreaming of climbing the corporate ladder and creating a big beautiful career for herself. But when she entered the job market, and became a mom, she realized her path to success would not be so straightforward. Reporter Giovana Romano Sanchez tells the story of her journey into higher education, and how she found the village she would need to succeed from then on.

[Project Self-Sufficiency](#) is a non-profit, community-based organization that helps low-income single parents graduate from college or vocational training with the skills they need to achieve economic independence

Pamela Kirkland:

Welcome to 1 in 5, which takes its name from the one in five college students in the United States who are also parents. In this documentary series, we meet student parents from across the country who are balancing school, work, and full lives, while creating a better future for themselves and their families. I’m Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and audio producer, and narrator of 1 in 5.

In this episode, we’re spending time with Waukecha Wilkerson. When she was younger, Waukecha had big plans to climb the corporate ladder to a successful career. But when she entered the job market, she realized her path to success would not be so straightforward, and that she would have to tap into her strengths and create a village around her to help her get there.

Through her journey, Waukecha found Project Self-Sufficiency, a community-based organization that played an instrumental role in helping her make her dreams and plans a reality.

Waukecha is now a Parent Advisor with Ascend, a national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations at the Aspen Institute, focusing on economic mobility for all student-parent families. They believe in a two-generation approach in services and policy.

Reporter Giovana Romano Sanchez has Waukecha’s story.

Giovana Romano Sanchez:

It’s a quiet morning in Waukecha Wilkerson’s home. When I visited her, she was living in a three-bedroom apartment with a small kitchen that opened to the living

room. Her two sons are up, and her daughter is still in bed. Waukecha is making sure they have all they need to start school.

Waukecha Wilkerson:

Then I have to go check my email, make sure that I have the right kid in the right class, at the right time. I can't believe I can't find this link. I have second grade, but where's kindergarten?

Romano Sanchez:

Especially the youngest, Edison

Wilkerson: Edison, it's time for school.

Edison: I don't wanna go to school.

Romano Sanchez:

He's five.

Wilkerson: Edison? Sometimes my oldest will have to help me to convince the younger ones to do things. This is real life.

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha is a single mother living in Southern California. Since the stay-at-home order started in March 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, her life became much more difficult.

Wilkerson: This is a good morning because usually the TV's on, I'm fighting with them over devices. Everybody's hungry at the same time.

Romano Sanchez:

She has an autoimmune disease and is high risk for COVID, so they're all strictly socially isolating. And the children are attending school remotely.

Wilkerson: Back to school. Here's our login. Ok found it.

[sounds of Zoom meeting logging in and teacher's voice in the background]

Romano Sanchez:

That's the teacher's voice, from the Zoom call in the background.

Wilkerson: Now we go convince Edison to come. Edison?

Romano Sanchez:

After making Edison a bowl of cereal, Waukecha checks to see if her 14-year-old, Za'Kai, is on his Zoom class.

Wilkerson: Like I said, he's so self sufficient.

Romano Sanchez:

Za’Kai is in his room, covered in blankets, looking at the screen. Now that her two sons are logged in, Waukecha has some time to check her work emails. She walks through the living room, but when she gets to her phone...

Wilkerson: Good morning, say good morning.

Romano Sanchez:

Her daughter Zamia, who is seven, wakes up.

Wilkerson: It’s not time for school yet, but I’ll make you some cereal. You have an hour.

Romano Sanchez:

It’s about 8:30 and the morning already feels like a marathon. Waukecha brings the cereal bowl she made to Zamia to a small pink table in the middle of the living room. And when Zamia starts eating her food...

Zamia accidentally kicks the table, throwing the computer, food, and cables on the floor. Waukecha quietly tidies everything up. Then, she finally sits in front of her computer and gets started on a whole different marathon. Because besides being the sole caretaker to her children, working two jobs and running her own business, Waukecha also has homework of her own. She just graduated from Coastline Community College with two associate degrees, in psychology and social and behavioral science. She’s now studying to get her bachelor’s in psychology at Sacramento State University.

Wilkerson: The most difficult thing is... time. When you're a single parent, you don't have people that will watch the kids for you. And it's hard. It’s still hard now.

Romano Sanchez:

[According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research](#), students who are parents make up 22% of all undergraduates in the United States: 70% of them are women, mainly women of color. It’s a large group that often goes unseen. They don’t fit the typical image of a college student. The whole experience of college, with classes spread out through the day, and activities that typically demand in-person attendance, that experience was not designed for people with children.

Wilkerson: My experience was different, but I did create a really good college experience. It started off rocky. My first college was not as supportive as the second college I attended.

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha says the school wasn't responsive when she emailed and called, so she had to go to campus a lot, which made things more difficult, as she was working and parenting.

Wilkerson: Coastline College, however, they were so supportive for distance learners. Like I didn't have to go on campus to turn in stuff for administration or financial aid. It was just like, great.

Romano Sanchez:

At the beginning of her college experience, Waukecha thought she would have to do it all by herself.

Wilkerson: But as I, I guess as I matured in college through that experience, I found ways... I need community because being a single mom, it's a lot for me. So, I take support as often as I can. And in college I needed to figure out a way to create that support.

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha is now 37. And she is doing great in college. She loved studying when she was a kid. She grew up in Compton, California. Her grandmother, who Waukecha was really close to, was a schoolteacher, and education was really important for her. But even though Waukecha did well in her classes, she was more interested in starting a career in customer service right after graduating high school. She thought college was a long commitment and a huge financial risk that could get in the way of her goal of being financially independent. And she always saw herself as a career-focused woman.

Wilkerson: I just did a lot of adult things early. So, I moved out of my mom's house at 17 and lived in LA for a year. It was really fun to be like a grownup and out on my own at such a young age. I felt like I was ready. I felt like that was what people did. You know, I didn't want to follow the rules. I didn't want to answer to anyone.

Romano Sanchez:

And at the beginning, everything seemed to work...

Wilkerson: So, I had like an office job at like 19 where I was making a decent amount of money. So, going to school at that time just would have interfered with me living like this really adult life. I felt like I was living the dream.

Romano Sanchez:

But after a few years, Waukecha realized getting promoted was becoming more and more difficult. There were some jobs she just couldn't apply to because they required a degree.

Wilkerson: Well, I just always thought I was smart enough to work my way up the corporate ladder, like I heard that term before and I was like, “Oh, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to just go work somewhere and they're going to like me so much and I'm going to learn so much doing it that they'll just keep promoting me.” Well, that is true. but no one tells you how difficult it can be to navigate, especially with some of the barriers, like being Black, or being a woman, or not having a degree. So, as with maturity, as I grew. Excuse me, one second. Zamia, take the blanket off and put it back on your bed. That's not what we're doing. No.

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha realized only a degree could lead to where she imagined herself professionally.

Wilkerson: Then I would say when I was 21, I was working a full-time job. After that, I would work part-time at Best Buy. And then I was like, “Oh, I can do school too.” So, I had all these ideas and ambitions.

Romano Sanchez:

She enrolled in community college. [With flexible programs, online classes and generally more affordable tuition rates](#), community colleges are an attractive option [for students who work full-time jobs and have families](#). Waukecha knew she needed a degree to have a successful career, but she had no idea what she wanted to study or how to navigate school. She took some courses in communications and hoped that, with time, she would find her path.

Wilkerson: And I remember being at Best Buy one night after work and just feeling so tired and exhausted, like I almost fell asleep in an aisle, and I knew something was wrong. And that weekend, that's when I found out, like, I was pregnant. As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I dropped out. That was the easiest one to let go.

Romano Sanchez:

She was disappointed. But school was just not a priority anymore.

Wilkerson: Even though I was doing well, I was like, “Oh, I have to be pregnant now or whatever.” So...

Romano Sanchez:

Her oldest son, Za’Kai, was born in 2006. Waukecha was busy working in admin roles and being a mom. There was no time for school. During the following six years, she went through some difficult times: heartbreak, toxic relationships, loss. Waukecha had another baby. A daughter named London. In 2012 when she was three months old, London died from sudden infant death syndrome. It was a lot for Waukecha to bear.

A few months later, she became pregnant again with her daughter Zamia. But after going through a loss, she felt she needed some time away from her job, away from Los Angeles.

Wilkerson: And that's how I ended up in Alabama with my dad. He had a trailer, my grandma had land, and they were like, "You can come live here, and you don't have to pay rent." And I was like, "That's what I want to do."

Romano Sanchez:

Zamia was born there, but life in Alabama was too slow for Waukecha, so she began to plan her next move. Through a friend, she learned a customer service company in Costa Mesa, back in California, was hiring.

Wilkerson: I flew out for a weekend. I did the interview on like a Friday. I flew back to Alabama. They offered me the job and we drove back in two weeks. That's how fast I move.

Romano Sanchez:

Things were getting back on track. Waukecha was happy in her new job, working to climb the ladder again when, a few months later...

Wilkerson:

I found out I was pregnant with Edison, so I stayed at that job. It was great. They were thinking about promoting me, but I had to take maternity. During maternity, I got an even better job offer from the water district. So, I left that job and went to a lead position at the water district, and then I got this apartment at the same time.

Romano Sanchez:

Things seemed to be aligning pretty well. She was feeling confident and excited for the future...

Wilkerson: That's when I decided, "Hey, I can go to school!"

Romano Sanchez:

Like Waukecha, [almost half of all college students](#) who are parents in the U.S. work full-time jobs, compared to 21% of dependent students without kids. One of the biggest challenges for these students is balancing school, work, and childcare.

Wilkerson: And I told their dad and said, "If you stay home, like you've been doing," he was already, you know, the home person because I made the most money. And I said, "I can enroll in school and I can make even more money. Like with a degree." I was looking at all these other jobs, and I was like... They all kept asking for a degree.

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha's vision for her family's future made sense. In California, a study by [The Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) shows that single moms who have an associate degree earn almost \$300,000 more over their lifetime than they would have without a college degree. Now that Waukecha was more settled, going back to school seemed like a logical next step.

Wilkerson: And I'm like, "I can probably do it. You know, if you, because I make a lot of money now and you're home with the kids, and we don't have to pay for daycare."

Romano Sanchez:

At first, her partner agreed to be a stay-at-home dad, and Waukecha enrolled in an accelerated program at Los Angeles Harbor College. She was still figuring out what she wanted to study, so again, she tried different courses. This time, in business and accounting.

Wilkerson: And I hated it, like I hated it with a passion. I got A's, but it was just so difficult for me.

Romano Sanchez:

Besides all the difficulties, students who are parents are academic achievers. [One-third of them get a GPA of 3.5 or higher](#), compared with 31% of independent students who aren't parents and 26% of dependent students. So, even though Waukecha didn't like the courses, the fact that she did so well kept her going.

Wilkerson: And I was so excited, because I never finished a semester of school and I got straight A's and I was like, "I really can do this." And that's when he kind of broke out and he was like, "You didn't thank me for helping you do it." And I was just like, "You don't thank me for paying the light bill."

Romano Sanchez:

And that was the beginning of the end of their relationship.

Wilkerson: Which was perfectly fine, because it was abusive, it was domestic violence all the time, it was terrible.

Romano Sanchez:

But this was more than a breakup.

Wilkerson: Then I also still had those wounds where I believed, like I had to drop out of school. I couldn't do it anymore. How I'm going to do three kids by myself? Cause he was like, "I'm not helping with daycare."

Romano Sanchez:

Waukecha would have to reorganize her life if she wanted to continue in school, but she really wanted to make it work, so she tapped into her savings to put the children in daycare.

Wilkerson: So, I was okay. I was running a little fast, but I was okay.

Romano Sanchez:

And then she lost her job at the water district

Wilkerson: And that's when I panicked.

Romano Sanchez:

The morning I spent with Waukecha and her family, the thing that most struck me about her was how good she is at managing difficult situations. Like early in the day when Zamia kicked the table and threw everything on the floor, Waukecha calmly picked up the mess.

Later that morning, around 11:00, Waukecha was in a work meeting on Zoom when a fight started between her younger children, Edison and Zamia. Then Edison started to jump on his sister's back. Zamia called out for her mom. After a moment, Waukecha interrupted her meeting.

Wilkerson: Please stop, Edison. I'm sorry. Please stop. Please stop jumping on her back. Please stop. I'm asking you nicely. Please stop climbing on her back.

Romano Sanchez:

That happened again a few more times. She had to stop to talk to Edison, but she didn't postpone the meeting. She didn't ignore her children. She just managed it all.

Wilkerson: Okay, this is life. This is my life. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry he was out here doing that. I'm sorry.

Romano Sanchez:

After making sure Zamia was okay, Waukecha sat on the couch to continue our interview. I asked her what she thinks are the strengths of student parents.

Wilkerson: We are very tenacious. We're resourceful. We are persistent. We know how to take no and turn it into yes. I think we have our children watching us for an example, so we have that to live up to. If we tell them to do a thing and you can do it, you know, when they feel discouraged, we have to be that living example. So, those are like the best qualities about being a student parent is that we're learning, you know, how to be the example.

Romano Sanchez:

Those qualities gave her the strength she needed a few years ago, when her partner left and she was alone with three children, in college and unemployed.

She somehow lifted everything up and under her arms and found a way out. She filed for unemployment, focused all her attention on job applications, and found an even better job, as a customer service supervisor for a skin care brand. And this time, she sought out the help she needed to keep school in her life.

Wilkerson: Well, initially it started off as a search for financial support, because I couldn't afford daycare anymore and go to school, because I was working my full-time job, and then on Saturday and Sunday to afford daycare, I was driving an hour to take my kids to my mom on Friday, so that I could do gig work. I would do like Uber, Lyft, Postmates.

Romano Sanchez:

Financial assistance and childcare are two of the main challenges parents face when enrolled in college. [According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) and Ascend at the Aspen Institute, more than half of students who are parents spend at least 30 hours a week taking care of their children. [They hold over two and a half times](#) more student debt than child-free students. And even though [some colleges have affordable childcare centers](#), they have limited space.

During her online search, Waukecha found Project Self-Sufficiency, a non-profit that helps low-income single parents who are in school. She applied for their program to become a scholar, and they invited her for an interview.

Wilkerson: And they sat me in, and they went through all of the supports at that time. They're like, "No, we have a pantry. We'll help you apply for scholarships." They taught me, through their program, how to create the village. Because before that, I still had that mentality that it was just me. They taught me how to maximize on my own social capital.

Romano Sanchez:

Project Self-Sufficiency started in 1985, and it currently helps 60 single parents who are students in Orange County, California. The organization is primarily funded by individual donors and local foundations. Besides educational scholarships and child care assistance, they offer counseling and money for textbooks and auto repair. Finding that kind of support made all the difference for Waukecha to stay enrolled. But there was one other thing that was key.

Wilkerson: It took me being my own self-advocate. I was intentional about finding and creating a support network. And that is one thing that I would say parenting students, that's what it will take. You don't have to figure out how to deconstruct the barriers. You just have to build the network that will help you deconstruct the barriers, one hundred percent.

Romano Sanchez:

In college, Waukecha connected with other students who had children. That opened up a whole new world for her.

Wilkerson: ...because then I had people that could relate to my experience. You know, we'd talk about the struggles with passing statistics. Because I think people that are parents that are students have a very different experience because there's a little bit more pressure on us to complete it. We have so many other life responsibilities happening simultaneously that we're really passionate about the investment and completing it and doing a good job because we were doing it for our families.

Romano Sanchez:

For Waukecha, college worked because she created her village, a strong support network that she can count on to help with childcare and scholarships. That meant she could focus on her own educational journey. Part of it was trying to understand what she wanted to study. Her first experiences with accounting and business were not great, but later on, when she took a psychology class...

Wilkerson: And that came so easy. So, and then I took another psychology class. That's it, it's psychology. Like, this is the moment that people talk about when they say, "Oh, just take your classes and you'll figure it out." I said, "I'm having that moment, it's psychology!"

Romano Sanchez:

She also accessed professional development and mentorship opportunities through Ascend at the Aspen Institute in 2019.

Wilkerson: They've helped open so many professional networks and doors for me in the higher education field. And then my part-time job.

Romano Sanchez:

She was working part time at a mobile learning company called Cell-Ed. Now, she's there full-time, as director of coaching.

Wilkerson: I met that CEO through Imaginable Futures, who's in partnership with Ascend at the Aspen Institute. All of the professional development that Ascend offers, their advocacy work for parenting students, they're always-

Romano Sanchez:

Ascend was launched in 2011 as a policy program at The Aspen Institute. They [partner with other organizations](#) and also fund initiatives that focus on family prosperity, opportunities for women and girls, and academic success for students who are parents. For this last group, they offer career mentorship and help them connect with professionals in their fields. These are social interactions that most undergraduates get when they go to career fairs or do internships and other activities.

Waukecha is also advocating for her peers as a Parent Advisor for Ascend, sharing her experience in higher education.

Wilkerson: I work collaboratively with a team of 11 other parents. And what we do is we work with decision makers in higher ed institutions. We work with community members that are decision makers. We work with policy makers and we help be the voice for our community of parenting students.

Romano Sanchez:

Ascend has helped her, and other student parents, build community with each other.

Wilkerson: So, we'll have dinner together and have like an hour long Zoom meeting. So, I learn from Ascend and their partners and fellows. I learn from my peers, student advisers, my colleagues, because we all work together on this initiative. And then I learn from my local groups and I kind of am like the conduit that exchanges information across all of them.

Romano Sanchez:

After connecting with other parents and creating her community, Waukecha realized her experience can help others, so she started her own business. A life coaching company she named: Won't She Do It?

Even though at first she didn't think it would be right for her, college opened up many doors for Waukecha. And now that she started, she doesn't want to stop. She wants to go to grad school for public administration and social work.

In May, Waukecha graduated from Coastline Community College. Because of COVID, the ceremony was online, which was a little disappointing, because her children...

Wilkerson: They didn't get to see, like, the fruition of why mommy is going, so I didn't get to like wear a cap and gown, and I couldn't have people over and celebrate, my cousin... It was important that they saw it more so than me experienced it. Like I was fine, but them, I wanted them to understand like, everything I'm doing has a purpose. It's not, I'm just not doing this for fun, like, even if it's the big party at the end, like mommy did it for the big party at the end.

Romano Sanchez:

But there have been other moments for Za'Kai, Zamia and Edison to understand the importance of what their mom is doing.

Wilkerson: I remember one dinner I went to and I went up and I had to give like a five minute acceptance speech or something. and I remember getting back to the table and my son, my oldest son, he's like, "Hey, I recorded your speech." And I was like, "You did?" And he was like, "You will want to keep this mom. I recorded it for you." So, that's the best thing. Yes, ma'am? All right. Good job. Did you have homework?

Romano Sanchez:

She's now halfway through completing her bachelor's at Sacramento State. Her daily routine is still hard, with marathon mornings, and sometimes she thinks about quitting.

Wilkerson: I thought about it today, last night. Because I'm just like, it's so much pressure and school is always the easiest, like there's the most resistance to give up school, because I can't give up my kids, you know, they kind of need me. I can't give up work, because I kind of need that. And the school and the big picture in the forest, I need the school, but in the tree portion, the school loses priority over, like, my sanity. So, I think about it when things become really tumultuous in life.

Romano Sanchez:

But, as Waukecha said, students who are parents are persistent. So, when the thought crosses her mind...

Wilkerson:

That's when I zoom out and I think about the forest. And I'm like, no, the forest is that I need this degree and that will make everything a little bit easier for me to breathe. like I'm almost done. We're going to finish. We're not going to let hell or high water stop us from getting this piece of paper.

Wilkerson to child:

Hey, honey, I love you. Good night.

Romano Sanchez:

The experience of being a student parent is helping Waukecha do something that classes alone never could. She's uncovering her gifts, her strength, and her resourcefulness. And doing so is paving the way for her children to have a better life, to have more tools and opportunities, to dream big and be fulfilled.

Wilkerson to child:

I love you.

Romano Sanchez:

What else can a mother wish for?

Child: Mommy, can you tuck me in?

Wilkerson to child:

After you pick up all this stuff that's not supposed to be in your room

Child: That's not mine! I need a drink. I just need some water.

Kirkland: Waukecha Wilkerson just moved with her family to a new apartment in Riverside County. She is halfway through getting her BA, continues to work as Director of

Coaching, and continues to mentor and volunteer. Giovana Romano Sanchez reported this story.

Ascend Parent Advisors, like Waukecha, are one of three advisor groups for the Post Secondary Success for Parents initiative, or PSP initiative, which is supported by Imaginable Futures and the ECMC Foundation.

Thank you for listening. 1 in 5 is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. and presented by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, visit ascend.aspeninstitute.org, and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter.

Virginia Lora edited this episode. Michael Aquino mixed it. Alexis Williams is the Ascend producer on the show. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Our theme song is “Ascenders” by Kojin Tashiro, who also contributed to mixing. Sarah McClure, Ryan Katz, and Erica Hellerstein fact checked the series. I’m Pamela Kirkland. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

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