



“Meet Jesus Benitez”

Jesus Benitez always put his family first. As a single dad, he worked long hours to ensure all of his son’s needs were met. One day, it became clear he couldn’t do it alone. But learning to ask for help, and tapping into the resources around him, turned out to be a harder lesson for Jesus than he anticipated. Reporter Rhana Natour tells us what happened when he decided to go back to school, for his son.

The [CUNY Fatherhood Academy](#) is a free program for unemployed or underemployed young parents, that promotes responsible parenting and economic stability through education, employment, and personal development.

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 meet Jesus Benitez. When his son Mason was born, Jesus was determined to put the needs of his family before his. He thought that meant working long hours as hard as he could to make ends meet. Then one day, he realized he couldn’t do it alone. Asking for help involved seeking out local resources around him, but also, making one very difficult personal decision in order to support Mason in the long run.

Reporter Rhana Natour has Jesus’s story.

Kirkland:

Jesus Benitez didn't go to class very much in high school. In fact, he was such an absentee student even the name of his high school is a bit fuzzy

Jesus Benitez:

I went to Park West High School. Park West? I think so.

Kirkland:

But what Jesus remembers vividly is why he chose to stay away

Benitez:

For instance, like I was walking to school and then I hear everyone, like, 'yo we jumping Mexicans,' and I remember that. They were like fighting. And then one. One of the guys just pulled out a machete. And I was like I was like, okay.

So when you see things like that, like I don't have time for school.

Kirkland:

So when Jesus and his girlfriend Jessica found out they were expecting a child, finishing school took second place to being a father.

Benitez:

My mom always told me to go to school and I always tried to respect that. It's just I, I just never knew how to tell her, like, I really didn't care about school. I just didn't like it. I was more worried about, you know, surviving, I ended up dropping out because my mentality was like, if I'm going to have a son, then I might as well work full time. and because I didn't take school too serious for me, it was just, it was as easy to leave it.

Kirkland:

Soon after dropping out, 17 year old Jesus became a father to a baby boy named Mason. Teen dads like Jesus are sometimes referred to as "the forgotten parent" because much of the attention around teen pregnancy has focused on the moms

News clips:

We're gonna begin this half hour with a story about teen pregnancies on the rise..

Well here's a sobering statistic about teen pregnancy, it's on the rise for the first time in 15 years...

In 15 years the teen birth rate is on the rise. Three quarters of a million American girls...

The number of teen birth rates is on the rise...

Kirkland:

But the impact of teenage fatherhood shouldn't be underestimated. [A 2011 study](#), published in the peer-reviewed journal "Economic Inquiry," found that teen dads are less likely to finish high school than their childless peers. Teen fathers tend to have lower lifetime earnings and [are less likely to attend college](#). And for Jesus there soon came another major change...

Benitez:

His mom was having trouble, adapting to her new life because we ended up breaking up.

Kirkland:

Jesus not only became a teen dad, but a single dad as well

Benitez:

She just didn't want to be as responsible, which was fine. You know, I've always told that I. It doesn't mean you're a bad mom. We got a kid and we're young. You know, we had a conversation of like, if you want to come see him, you know, the door's always open. She always had the keys and...For some reason, I'm not sure. She kind of disappeared for a bit.

Rhana Natour:

So you became a single father in an unexpected way.

Benitez:

Yeah. Yeah. I wanted to take care of my son because I didn't grow up without a father. I grew up without a father. So I didn't want that for him. When I was a kid and we used to bother me all the time, that I didn't have a father or my mom was always working even though it wasn't her fault. And I just didn't want that pain to be for my son.

Kirkland:

To support himself and Mason, Jesus took a catering job

Benitez:

I started to work a lot of hours. And there was like private parties for bar mitzvahs, weddings and things like that. I was like a free agent, so, like I had like maybe

three, at one point six part time jobs. And I'll go home, maybe get home at like 3:30 just lay down with him, him sleep with him. And then, you know, I'll get up at 4:00 or 5:00 and go back to work and I will always make it on time.

And I did that for a very long time. Maybe three, four years. One year I worked seven days a week nonstop.

Kirkland:

Non-stop until one day--while catering a Passover event--Jesus had enough.

Benitez:

And the Passover kind of like kicked my ass because it was just very bad. It was really, really bad. It had too much work to do. We didn't have enough staff. Then I was running from kitchen to kitchen, fixing stuff, from the meat kitchen to the dairy kitchen. And I stop one day and I'm like. It was one of those nights. And I'm like, yeah, this cannot be it. This cannot be it. I'm, I'm killing myself, you know, almost 12, 15 hours a day. And I'm like, yeah, I can't do this. I cannot do this no more.

Kirkland:

No one in his family had gone to college but Jesus knew he needed some sort of formal schooling to change his situation, maybe get a GED? He wasn't sure where to start.

When Mason's mom, Jessica--who was now back in their lives--suggested a program that could help. Jesus was skeptical.

Benitez:

She was like, oh, this one at LaGuardia Community College. It's called CUNY Fatherhood Academy. I'm like, man, that looks like, that looks so suspicious. Like, no, I'm good. She's like, no, it's a legit program at LaGuardia. And I'm like, that looks crazy. That looks like a scam. Like that's a fake family in that flier. And she was like, look, just call and see what's up.

Kirkland:

When Jesus finally called, a man named Dave Speal answered the phone.

Benitez:

I remember talking to Dave and he's like 'yeah, yeah, come through.' And then I'm like, why is he so friendly, man? I've never met people who are willing to help me. So everyone was so nice. I was just looking at them like, you guys are so suspicious, I don't trust none of you guys.

Kirkland:

As you may have guessed, the Fatherhood Academy was not a scam, a cult or a ponzi scheme. What it is it's a program that helps young adult fathers prep for college and get their high school equivalency diploma.

The program, launched in 2012, is offered by the City University of New York at Laguardia Community College. It's funded by New York City's Young Men's Initiative.

Dave Speal Speaking on [Fatherhood Academy video](#):

We have a contextualized curriculum, where we have aspects of fatherhood tied into the curriculum, where..

Kirkland:

Dave Speal is a program specialist with the fatherhood academy and still remembers when Jesus first came in.

Speal:

He was pretty quiet. So he never really showed, you know, that he was skeptical about it. I believe almost every student we have has some sort of skepticism too it, because it sounds almost too good to be true. If you really, like, pay attention, like if you're on a subway or a bus or wherever you see the different ads, and the ads are targeted specifically for people who are most likely in low-income situations. If you were to call any of those schools or any of that stuff that's out there, they're for-profit universities. You know, and again, I'm not here to bash anything, but the reality is when one of our students calls one of these places and signs up for them, there's a chance they could end up owing a substantial amount of money, you know? And so they're looking at this stuff and they're like, is this one of those?

Kirkland:

Dave tried to convince Jesus that going back to school with a kid was possible, but to Jesus it all seemed kind of selfish.

Natour:

It seemed that the idea of going to get your education or continuing your education seemed self-indulgent to you. Can you tell me your thought process around that?

Benitez:

I thought it was very selfish. I thought going to school was very selfish. My son would never stop needing milk or, you know, or his food or anything like that. So

for me, it was just like I'm limiting, I'm limiting myself to improve myself. But then I'm sacrificing, I'm not just sacrificing my time in my work, I'm sacrificing my son. Because what happens tomorrow that I don't have money to or there's an emergency and I don't have money to help him out or whatever, I'm like, I'm sacrificing him.

Kirkland:

And providing for a child in New York is not easy.

[According to a 2018 Commerce Department report](#), the cost of goods and services in the New York metro area was 24% higher than the national average.

And for Latinos in the city that high cost of living is a heavier burden to bear. [According to a 2017 report from New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene](#), more than half of Latinos in New York City live in poverty [compared with a third of non-Latinos](#). The odds were not in Jesus's favor.

Jesus was able to avoid the high cost of housing in New York by living with his Mom. And he would only pay for childcare occasionally: \$150 dollars a week to his aunt, well below the market rate for daycare in the city.

But Jesus knew these options would not be around forever. He saw past his circumstances to what was possible.

Benitez:

And I always justify that maybe going to college would mean that, you know, it would be better for all of us at the end, even though it was hard to believe. It was really hard to believe that, especially in times where you're in a mode of survival. If you're starving, it's like, yeah, I don't care about tomorrow. Like, I want to eat today.

Natour:

The way that you're explaining it makes complete sense. But then what we know about parents who go get their education is it turns out better for everyone.

Benitez:

I was wrong. Like, really wrong. But those were the ways for me to kind of. It for me to survive academically. And now when I see my life so differently, it's just like, yeah, it's not selfish. It's not selfish to want to improve yourself as well.

Kirkland:

The decision to go back to school is not only a financial sacrifice but an emotional one as well.

[In a 2006 study on student parents in the U.K.](#), seven out of 12 student-mothers surveyed said they suffered from depression and high stress levels.

Another reason for Jesus's hesitation: Where would he find the time?

Benitez:

They called it time poverty. And they were talking about how student parents have, you know, this time poverty because we don't have the same, actual time availability to study and things like that.

Kirkland:

The phrase "time poverty" is an actual term used by researchers to describe the fact that student parents have, on average, [50% less time to study than their childless classmates.](#)

During finals week, all things being equal, a childless student has more flexibility to move their schedule around. If they're able to, they can take a personal day from work, or put a pause on socializing to get more study time in.

But a student parent can't just press pause on taking care of their child.

Despite the hurdles he saw in front of him, Jesus enrolled at La Guardia Community College.

For Jesus, balancing solo parenting, work and school meant making time where there was none. His routine went like this:

Benitez:

Come home, cook for my son, make sure he was good, and make sure he had homework done, and then wait for him to go to sleep and then start doing my homework until like 3:00 in the morning, especially if there were things that I didn't understand, it will go to 4:00 in the morning. Going to sleep for two hours, wake up again, drop him off to school, come back home, get ready, go back to work. It's like a constant thing, you know. You never stop. You never stop.

Kirkland:

And since Jesus missed most of the curriculum in high school, he had a lot of catching up to do in college

Benitez:

When I had my biology test, there was this thing that they did. And I asked one of my classmates, like, 'Yo, did we learn that yesterday? Like, I remember that.' And he's like, 'No, we learned that in high school.'

And I'm like 'Oh, crap, I got to really, really study for this.' And then these were the things where I'm like, like. I had to always work double because there was things that I missed out on in high school that I really didn't know.

Kirkland:

Jesus managed to balance it all but he could feel the burn out setting in. He needed a lifeline.

Benitez:

I had to reach out to the mother of my son and say, like, 'Hey. I need to finish the school thing. I need to really finish, and I need you to help me out. I cannot do this forever by myself, like it's insane.' And at that time, she was already in our lives again. He moved in with her for three years. So it was something that I had to really, really accept.

That decision--to have Mason move in with his mom--was among the hardest he's ever had to make. Now he would only see Mason on the weekends.

Benitez:

For me, letting him go, I think I got like a real bad, like depression where I didn't want to go to school anymore and because I was always burned out. It was just like I dropped everything for, like a year.

Kirkland:

Taking a break from school felt like failure to Jesus, so he avoided his mentor Dave and others at the Fatherhood Academy. He didn't want to face them. Until one day, his younger brother did something unexpected.

Benitez:

One day my brother told me like, 'You know I went to CUNY Fatherhood Academy.' And I'm like, 'What the hell you was doing there?' He's like 'I went to LaGuardia.'

Kirkland:

That's La Guardia Community College, where Jesus was enrolled in school and where the Fatherhood Academy is based.

Benitez:

And he's like, 'Yeah, why do they think you live in Utah?' I'm like 'What? Utah? What the hell is in Utah.' They're like, 'Yeah, they were asking me like, how are you doing in Utah?' I'm like, 'what? I think they did that in order for me to go back to them because I went back and I'm like, Who's in Utah? And they're like 'Oh! Jesus, we need to talk to you!' I'm like, oh (laughs) I'm like, oh, no."

Speal:

Jesus was not in Utah,-but he just had taken some time for himself as he was trying to just figure out his next moves.

Kirkland:

Dave remembers Jesus's disappearance and reappearance well.

Speal:

This is another thing that makes our program a little bit different as well. Sometimes students will get themselves to the next level, and it can be very difficult. Being in college and being a father and trying to work is not easy. But for whatever reason, they hold that dear to themselves because they say they feel like they've done so much for me, I don't want to let them down, but I know I can't do this right now. So I'm just going to either disappear, go ghost, as they call it, or just not, you know, not be present for a little while. And like, we kind of get worried because we're not sure what's happening. And that does happen from time to time. Jesus just kind of pulled that. But we also know to give students their time and their space. And from what we've learned over the years is that they pretty much all come back when the time is right.

Kirkland:

The Fatherhood Academy offered Jesus a job but the deal was he had to go back to college. So he did.

This summer Jesus graduated from the City College of New York with a bachelors in philosophy. He wants to eventually pursue a PhD and teach English abroad.

Mason's Mom-- Jessica Gallardo Solis---says she's sometimes shocked by Jesus's transformation.

Jessica Gallardo Solis:

I mean, he has matured a lot. And he seems like very dedicated, even though he, you know, he finds like an obstacle, he still tries to finish whatever he says, whatever he started.

Kirkland:

Jesus credits Jessica and his mom for helping him succeed as a student parent. Having someone he could trust with Mason, he says, allowed him to stay focused in school.

Jesus also believes programs like CUNY Fatherhood Academy and mentors like Dave Speal and others were also a big part of his success.

Benitez:

I think that having these mentors, I speak with a lot of student parents and I ask them and they're like, 'yeah. I was always alone, so I didn't know what to do.' And I didn't realize how lucky I was that I had Rahim and Dave who were so like, they were always there. And I've never understood, like, why. But I now, I understand that, you know, is they see so much potential in me and they didn't want me to throw it away and to go back to the kitchen, because I was ready to go back.

[Promo Video CUNY Fatherhood:](#)

If she wants to be involved in your life somehow she has to be involved in your child's life.

Kirkland:

This is audio of young fathers from a promotional video at CUNY Fatherhood Academy. Jesus isn't on this video, but now, as a mentor coordinator for Fatherhood Academy, these are the kind of conversations he has as he helps young dads, like he once was, return to school.

This sometimes means sitting across from younger versions of himself - a reminder of how far he has come. Like when Mason's mom came to pick Mason up while Jesus was in the middle of a mentorship session.

Benitez:

She came to pick him up and I was like, hey, what's up? And we're talking. She takes him and I'm like, all right, I'll text you whatever. My student was like, who's that? I'm like, Oh, that's Mason's mom. He's like 'what? What?' and I am like, 'Yeah, why? Why is it so hard to believe?' He's like 'because it seems like you guys are friends. That's weird.' I'm in like, 'because we are friends, and that it's not weird. This is not normal in your eyes.' But I'm like, 'it's so good.' And he's like 'I thought I was like his aunt or something.' I'm like, 'no, this is his Mom' (laughs).

[Ascend Event:](#)

We are excited now to turn it over now to Jesus Benitez, our Ascend Parent advisor.

Kirkland:

Jesus is also a parent advisor with “Ascend at The Aspen Institute”, a policy program that’s focused on developing practices and policies that better support student parents.

This year, he was part of their “Postsecondary Success for Parents Initiative”, a cohort of 11 students [who speak publicly about their experiences](#) navigating the world of higher education while raising their families.

Benitez:

When I was a single father I was working a lot, and I realized that...

Kirkland:

The cohort also helps implements a grant program that funds select community-based organizations across the U.S. that are focused on helping student parents succeed.

For Jesus, the best thing about his journey as a student parent was the impact it has had on Mason’s life.

Benitez:

He's 11 years old, so he's very, very smart. He's so logical. He loves games. He loves being outside. Me growing up in the Bronx, like I knew the world existed but didn't know I had the opportunity to go see it. I don't want my son to grow up like that as well, so you know, I exposed him to a lot of different things. It always pushed me to want more and better things for him so he can see a different life

Kirkland:

And though Jesus’s education journey certainly changed his and Mason’s life. It also had a domino effect on the lives of people around him.

Jesus’s mother Elizabeth Hernández:

Elizabeth Hernandez

Now my second son is in college because of him, and my younger one. He wants to be like him, he's like a father to them and they follow him.

Kirkland:

Mason was able to attend a better school because Jesus can afford an apartment in a safer neighborhood, with a good school district. Even Elizabeth, Jesus's Mom, was impacted. She was inspired take up running for the first time.

Hernandez:

I started running the half marathons, because I saw him sleep at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, doing homework and get up. And say, my son is right . The day has 24/7. I had to get up and train, and I start training and training.

[Marathon Announcer:](#)

Good morning runners. Welcome to the 2019 TCS New York City Marathon. The streets of New York City await you. The people of New York City embrace you.”

Kirkland:

At 47 years old, Elizabeth completed the New York City Marathon, considered [among the most difficult of the major marathons](#). And the medal she earned from that race was her most prized possession.

So when Jesus graduated from college--- the first person in Elizabeth's entire extended family to do so--- she knew exactly what Jesus's graduation gift would be.

Hernandez:

I gave it to him, my New York City Marathon Medal. He deserves my medal. So anytime you see the medal or you got a hard time or you got any problems in your life, just see the medal and if your mom can do it, you can do it too.

Kirkland:

Sometimes we all need little reminders of what is possible for our lives and now Jesus has more than a few.

Kirkland:

Jesus is now a Parent Advisor with Ascend at the Aspen Institute. He's part of an advisor group for the Aspen Institute's Post Secondary Success for Parents initiative, or PSP initiative. The initiative raises awareness and shares recommendations for how to better support student parents like Jesus. His lived

experience and insights have become instrumental to their work. Rhana Natour reported this story.

The [City University of New York's Fatherhood Academy](#) is a free program for unemployed or underemployed young parents, that promotes responsible parenting and economic stability through education, employment, and personal development. CUNY Fatherhood Academy is an Ascend Network Partner. Learn more about their work at laguardia.edu/cunyfatherhood

CREDITS:

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.

CITATION:

Natour, Rhana. “Meet Jesus Benitez” *1 in 5 Podcast*, Ascend at Aspen Institute., February 23, 2021. <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/1in5podcast/>

A production of



