



## “Meet Michaela Martin”

Just as she was enrolling in college, Michaela became a mom. This dual experience opened her eyes to the realities of parenting while in school and led her to become an advocate. Journalist Sarah McClure reports on Michaela’s journey and the legislative project she’s working on that could transform the experience of student parents like her.

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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 Michaela Martin in Covina, California. Michaela became a mom early on in her college career. While learning to navigate campus life with a baby, she became more and more interested in the support student parents received, or didn’t, and why. As an advocate, she’s worked on a legislative project that could be transformational for student parents like her. Michaela 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 Sarah McClure has Michaela’s story.

Sarah McClure: Seven years ago, 23-year-old Michaela Martin was running across campus in Oregon. In her hand, she gripped an ice cooler filled with her breast milk. As a new mom and first-year student at Linn-Benton, a community college south of Portland, Michaela was making big adjustments. Like pumping breast milk in between classes.

She had just 15 minutes to run to one end of campus to use the lactation center, then run back to make her computer science class in time. She didn’t always have time to fully pump. She sometimes arrived late to class. And she never got a bathroom break. But Michaela doesn’t let on to others—her professors included—that she’s not just a new student, she’s a new mom.

Michaela Martin:

It can be so exhausting to have to tell every professor what it is and then never knowing how they're going to react and how... if they're going to treat you different, if they're gonna

be cool about it, or if they're gonna have issues. I don't want to tell anybody like it's fine, I'm fine. It's easier than feeling that judgment and feeling all of that.

McClure: Michaela may have been new to college, but she quickly recognized something was missing on campus.

Martin: I really wish we had, you know, if you could tell your advisor, like: "Hey, I'm a parent," and then they can be like, "Here's the resources, here's expectations, here's what you're allowed, like where all of this falls into place." Even just that, just knowing what your boundaries are, is incredibly helpful.

McClure: Student parents, like Michaela, are a considerable share of the higher-ed population. More than [one in five college students](#) have dependent children. Today, student parents are on [most if not all college and university campuses](#) around the country. A good portion are [enrolled in community colleges](#). Like Michaela, [most are women](#), and [many are single](#), according to the [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) and [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#), an [educational and policy studies organization](#).

Despite their [large numbers](#), student parents are overlooked. Data collection is sparse. Colleges like University of Oregon and Portland State University and college systems like The State University of New York and—with the exception of Fullerton—The California State University don't collect data on student parents. Student parents are sometimes called an ["invisible population"](#) on college campuses.

Lack of data [makes it difficult for colleges to identify](#) what on-campus supports, services or resources student parents like Michaela need.

McClure: Embarrassed and exhausted, Michaela tried to conceal her breast pumping as best she could. Until one day, her computer science professor, who is a woman, noticed a pump and inquired.

Martin: The professor was like, "Whoa, like, are you, are you doing okay? Like, are you having enough time? Like, that sounds really hectic." So, when she found out, she was like, "Oh my gosh, like, no, no, no, no. Use the office. If you ever need to be late, like if you need to pump more, I'm not going to mark you tardy.

McClure: It was a small gesture, but enough to help Michaela balance motherhood and class time. But not all professors were as accommodating of Michaela and her son, Ezra. She faced many barriers and confrontations at college. While in a Communications class, Michaela remembers her professor used a "lock-door" policy, which Michaela says meant if you were late — even by a minute — you were locked out of class and marked absent. Three absences, you were dropped from class.

Martin: I had one or two absences. I always left for her class so early to make sure that I was there, like 30 minutes in case anything happened, you know, like if the car wouldn't work, I'd have time to figure it out, like I left so early!

One day we were walking out the door and Ezra had a diaper blowout, and so there was poop everywhere. There was poop in my hair, there was poop on me, on both of our clothes, like obviously I had to stop and then like wash this all down, and like that whole process takes forever. This was literally as we were walking out the door, too. I picked him up, had the diaper bag on my shoulder. He puts his poo hands in my hair.

McClure: Michaela gets to class, but...

Martin: I'm not exaggerating. I was two minutes late.

McClure: She knocked and knocked but the professor doesn't let her in. Finally, the door opened.

Martin: She's like, "Michaela, you're late, you can't come to class." And I was like, "I understand that that's your policy, but I would like to say that it would be far less disruptive if I could've just gone to my seat quietly. And I would have been on time except for my son had put poop in my hair. And so, my option was come to class on time with poop in my hair or come two minutes late."

McClure: Michaela is ready to lose it. Didn't her professor hear her say "diaper blowout?" She tells her the situation is outrageous.

Martin: I'm not really sure how you'd like to handle this, but I'm going to let you know right now that if you... If I can't go to my seat right now, I'm going to go immediately down to student services.

McClure: It works.

Martin: She let me go to my seat. My whole class afterwards was like, "Michaela, I can't believe you did that." I was like, "I can't believe I did that."

McClure: [Studies show](#) student parents can face obstacles related to childcare, time poverty, and economic insecurity. And this can seriously impact their education. Compared to fellow students, [student parents are less likely to finish college](#). [The Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) estimates that just [37 percent of student parents graduate within six years of enrolling](#), compared with nearly 60 percent of childless students.

Michaela was undeterred by the challenges and embarrassing moments. If anything, they gave her more momentum.

Martin: My first semester I had a 3.75 GPA. I was incredibly motivated to do the best that I could.

McClure: Even finding out she was pregnant around the time she enrolled in college did not sway her from her plan.

Martin: I just kept thinking, like, what am I going to do? Withdraw? I've already completed FAFSA. I'm already enrolled in classes. I also thought, you know, while being pregnant and going to school, that I was even more obligated to continue my education because now it wasn't just for me. It was, "What kind of life am I going to give my child?"

McClure: It wasn't always like that for Michaela. For a long time, college was never on her radar.

Martin: I really struggled all throughout the public education system. I was diagnosed with ADD in like second grade. And especially in the nineties, there were not really accommodations or a ton of recognition for mental health. It was just incredibly difficult for me the entire time. I spent a lot of my public schooling in rooms by myself because they didn't know what else to do with me, because I was a distraction, because I couldn't complete my homework, because I was getting in trouble.

McClure: School administrators questioned her commitment.

Martin: I've had teachers say, "If you can't do this, how are you going to go to college? If you can't complete this assignment, you're never going to be successful." I've had teachers tell me that I won't be successful in life because I can't complete a paper.

McClure: It dried up any desire Michaela had to pursue a formal education.

Martin: When you have that for years, people just saying you're not good at school, you can't do school well, I internalized all of that.

McClure: Things took a real turn one day when her high school counselor told her she wasn't going to graduate on time. She would be a "super senior."

Martin: Essentially, there were complications around the credit system, and I was already struggling again and about halfway through my senior year they said, "We're not going to waive the credit difference."

McClure: But Michaela? She had a different plan.

Martin: I decided that I was going to drop out and get my GED. I walked out of her office and got into my car, then started crying because I realized I had to call my mom and tell her that I just walked out of school. But my mom, my mom was super supportive about me dropping out. I scored high enough on the GED that the governor sent me a letter of accolades saying you got in the top 80-90 percent or something. It was awesome. I got my GED with honors.

McClure: After that, Michaela put school in her rearview mirror. She traveled for the next four years, returning to Oregon to work odd jobs, as a Santa Helper, and at a fish factory.

Martin: One station is literally just shoveling guts from underneath the machines. And one was like, you have to put all the fish on this thing so that they go through and have their heads chopped off. And one is you stand up when they're coming off the boats and pull out anything that's not a fish. Sometimes it'd be like baby sharks or like octopus and things. I also panhandled. It's one of those things that people are like, "What do you mean, you like held signs for money?" And I'm like, "Yeah, totally."

McClure: Her sign read, "I bet you can't hit me with a quarter." But by 2012, now in her early twenties, Michaela started to feel tired of being on the road. There was also another big reason.

Martin: I kind of think I started traveling because I was running away. I've had a fair amount of trauma from before and maybe just wasn't coping very well.

McClure: Michaela says a man stalked her for months when she was 13 years old. Her parents tried, without success, to get a restraining order.

Martin: He would call and leave messages on my parent's voicemail.

McClure: He called every day. And he stalked her at home, at school, at her friends' houses.

Martin: He was saying that I was a whore. I was 13, I haven't kissed a boy yet. He'd say that I'm going to hell. "You're going to hell." Yeah, it was really insane. The whole thing was really insane.

McClure: Then, at 15, while hanging out at a friend's house, she was sexually assaulted by a 16-year-old boy.

Martin: I don't know, it was fine, and we were, like, flirting and things and then... and then he didn't stop. Yeah. It was, um, I guess they say like date rape, which is part of why I didn't report. I'd already heard stories of folks and what that looked like, I knew that that was just going to be more trauma.

McClure: All that trauma, Michaela says, is what kept her running for years. She knew it was time to come home to Oregon when, at 22, while working with a group in Las Vegas, her colleague and partner, whom we're calling \*John, became violent. She tried breaking up a fight between colleagues at a hotel where they were staying, when suddenly John threw her to the ground and started hitting her in the back of the head. Things became a little foggy after that. She remembers coming to and being covered in bruises.

Martin: The next morning I called my mom.

Martin: When I came home after experiencing that, I was tired. I was done. I was... Living that lifestyle is exhausting and traumatic and harsh and unloving.

McClure: And Michaela was dating a new guy. A different colleague she had met while working in Las Vegas, whom we're calling \*Kevin. He moved back with her, but it didn't last.

Martin: I kind of started to grow out of that "bad kid" phase that I was in and started wanting to have more stability and realized that he was not at that place. I thought that we shouldn't be together anymore.

McClure: Michaela was ready for a new life in Oregon. She was reunited with her parents, she had just enrolled at Linn-Benton Community College, she was already envisioning getting a two-year degree. Maybe she'd be a paralegal! She had just broken things off with Kevin, and he was on a train back to California, when...

Martin: One week later I found out I was pregnant. I was 23 when I found out I was pregnant. My mom was like, "What do you want to do?" That was her first question. And I was like, I looked at my mom and I was like, "Mom, I'm having a baby." And she was like, "Am I allowed to be excited? Is it too soon?" [laughs] I was like, "Yes, mom, it's too soon. Please stop." [laughs]

McClure: Michaela says when she found out she was pregnant she started Googling how to get help as an upcoming student parent and applied to resources through her school, a church, and a pregnancy center. Something in her had awakened.

Martin: I was incredibly motivated to do the best that I could, because it provided me some self-worth, especially while pregnant, because kind of the way my life had gone up until that point that I felt like doing school for one was like a positive distractor.

McClure: On July 10, 2013, Michaela gave birth to Ezra in Lebanon, Oregon.

Martin: I was so tired. I was ready to just hold him and fall asleep right there. [laughs] I was like, "Cool, we did it, he's here!"

McClure: In college, she took Introduction to Public Speaking and met Speech Professor Mark Urista. He challenged Michaela's belief about not being able to go to a university because she was a high school dropout. He believed she was capable.

Suddenly, Michaela was excelling. She became president of the Speech & Debate team. She joined Student Government. Professor Urista became her mentor, and eventually

helped her transfer to Oregon State University to earn a bachelor's degree in Speech Communications. She also earned a \$70,000 scholarship from the Ford Foundation.

Martin: I attended Linn Benton Community College and fell in love with school and learning in a way that I never had in public school. And I fell in love with speech communication and learning how to be effective in our communication and how that really makes the world go around.

McClure: Things were better than ever in community college. Michaela was working early mornings at a call center, raising her son, Ezra, and loving her classes, like writing, math and Spanish. She wanted to keep excelling. She looked for support and saw on-campus childcare as a good first step. But when she went to college officials to sign up...

Martin: They told me there was over a two-year waitlist for childcare. And that I was not going to have access to on-campus childcare for the entirety of my degree.

McClure: In the U.S., on-campus childcare can fall short for student parents. Fewer than half of the more than 1,000 community colleges across the country offer on-campus childcare, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

In Oregon, where Michaela attended school, [59 percent of community colleges offer on-campus childcare](#), however, there's no guarantee. At Oregon State University, Michaela grew more curious about student parent support, especially after a heated exchange in class.

Martin: I one time had a conversation with a professor in undergrad when I let her know that I was having some childcare insecurities. I was only letting my professor know about these things to let her know that I was trying. I was nowhere near hitting like an attendance drop off. I wasn't going to fail the class. I was doing good. I was just letting her know. When I told my professor that I was having childcare insecurities, she told me that it didn't matter. I was like, "Well, what do you mean?" And she told me to my face, "Well, you chose to have a child and you chose to come to school." And coming from a professor that was...

Maybe part of the reason why student parents remain invisible too, is that there's really a different kind of stigma about parenthood. There's this idea that you chose to be a parent, maybe you should've waited until you were done with school?

McClure: It's in these moments, being on campus as a mother, navigating these barriers firsthand, that Michaela starts to get it. She gets fired up about the need for more tailored data about student parents. She gets interested in advocacy and how to get colleges to collect data on parental status.

Today, national efforts are underway to recognize student parents on campus. In 2019, then Senator Kamala Harris and Senator Elizabeth Warren cosponsored a bill, [introduced by Senator Cory Booker](#), that would help community colleges and minority-serving institutions create free childcare options for student parents. Since 2004, [on-campus childcare has been declining at colleges and universities](#), with the sharpest drops at community colleges, according to the [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#), which analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education.

McClure: In 2015, Michaela met her future bill sponsor, Oregon State Senator Sara Gelser.

Martin: I'm a huge fan of Senator Gelser and so I really wanted it to be her. [laughs]

McClure: And Michaela, she doesn't waste *any* time.

Martin: First meeting I had with Senator Gelser, I was in student government with Linn-Benton Community College. When I told her that we didn't have data on student parents, she said, "Well, of course we do. I've seen numbers in meetings." I was like, "Unfortunately, those numbers largely come from national surveys. They aren't representative of our colleges in Oregon. We don't have the data." She's like, "No, we have the data." I like to tell this story that it took a lot for me not to go, "Yes, we do! — No, we don't!" with the senator. [laughs]

I asked Senator Gelser that if she had the information on the data, that I would love to have access to it.

McClure: But there was no data. Michaela was right!

Martin: Senator Gelser was astonished that we do not have data on student parents in the state of Oregon.

McClure: Over the next year, Michaela got more politically involved. She started working on her bill to address the problem.

Martin: I started asking Senator Gelser at town halls, how we could go about getting data collection. I went to a lot of Senator Gelser events and sometimes would just get tickets and wait my turn so that I could ask her again. It got to the point, like she knew my name, she knew why I was there. [laughs]

McClure: Then, in 2018 she landed a private meeting with the senator at her office in Corvallis, Oregon. Her car wasn't working so she climbed in her little brother's lifted jeep and got there early. And she was wearing her "power suit."

Martin: I was wearing a pink flowery dress. Sometimes I embrace my hyper femininity because so often we're told that we're supposed to conform to some kind of masculine professional standard that includes boxy suits and pencil skirts. I just don't feel very comfortable in that. And flowery dresses make me feel good about myself.

McClure: She was ready to get the senator to support her bill. And then ...

Martin: When I walked into the meeting, she told me that she was submitting the bill. I was floored because I had this entire speech prepared on how I was going to convince her, and when I walked in she was like, "Cool. Yeah! How are we going to word it? Let's go." And I wasn't expecting that.

McClure: Michaela's bill, eventually called [SB 794](#), would require Oregon universities and community colleges to collect data on students who identify as parents or guardians.

Martin: I think that without data, how can you look at a population? Especially because other demographics on campus often are visible in ways that student parents are not. The aim of the bill is to collect information on the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. I think in order to assess the struggles and the barriers that student parents face, we have to have hard localized data about how many there are, how many make it to graduation, and what those graduations look like.

McClure: After graduating from Oregon State University in 2018, Michaela threw herself into pushing her bill. She went to the state capitol and worked as a campaign manager for County Clerk Bill Burgess of Marion County, Oregon.

Then, in 2019, Senator Gelser [introduced Michaela's bill](#) in the Oregon State Senate.

Martin: She's so amazing and so supportive.

McClure: Michaela didn't attend the meeting when they introduced the bill because ...

Martin: Bill introduction is not super exciting.

McClure: But she did attend the first public committee hearing, when the bill was presented.

Oregon State Legislator:

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Senate Committee on Education. It is March 11 in hearing room D. Okay, so today we're going to work session on a couple of bills and get them moving.

McClure: At the committee hearing, many came forward to show their support on record.

Trish Garner: My name is Trish Garner. I'm the state public policy chair for the American Association of University Women of Oregon. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 794.

Kristi King: For the record, I'm Kristi King, the student family coordinator in the Family Resource Center at Oregon State University. We don't know who our student parents are. We have to rely on them finding us. They don't have a label that says, "Hey I'm a parent, come and find me."

Jasmine Vega Heath:

My name is Jasmine Vega Heath. We are asking for our voices to be heard. We want to know why we don't see many student parents making it to graduation. We want to know why we are slipping through the cracks and no one sees us. We want to know that we're not alone. Please count on us on Senate Bill 794.

McClure: Finally, Michaela was called.

Oregon State Legislator:

Thank you for a wonderful testimony. Michaela?

McClure: She was wearing a purple dress, a short, sleeveless black jacket. Michaela lit up and smiled as she approached the mic under fluorescent lights.

Martin: I'm Michaela Martin. I recently graduated from Oregon State University and I started working on this bill with Jasmine and Lina and some other folks through the Oregon Student Association. When I first started at LBCC, starting out on an Associates, I found that there was more than a two-year waitlist for childcare, which meant that I would not be receiving on-campus childcare for a two-year degree. And then I started kind of asking questions about like what is this, how many students are there that need this? And there just kind of weren't answers that existed, and just kind of all roads lead to we're going to need more data. And it's kind of astonishing that as a low-income single mother, I can tell



you how likely that my child will graduate from college, how likely it is that he'll do drugs, how likely it is that he'll run away, but I can't tell you how likely it is for I or other student parents to be able to get an education, and so I just kind of like to say that I would like to be another statistic.

Oregon State Legislator:

Thank you so much. I just have to say, Senator Gelser, I love this bill.

McClure:

Senator Sara Gelser took the mic, she looked directly to Michaela.

Senator Gelser: I just really want to thank Michaela, who has been working on this for a couple of years and has been unwavering in her quest to get it here.

McClure: Michaela was beaming as she headed out with other student parents. Two weeks later the committee voted unanimously, 4-0 in favor of Michaela's bill.

It's late afternoon in October 2020, in Covina, California. Michaela is in her living room. She's sitting on her couch and excitedly talking into a laptop that sits on a coffee table in front of her. She's in between Zooms. She scheduled this one three weeks ago.

A bluish-green sticker, prominently placed on the front of her laptop, quotes from the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "Women belong in all the places decisions are being made." Behind her hangs a painting of white daisies that she bought at a flea market. Leaning on the top of her bookshelf is another painting that reads, "Think positively, learn actively, play more, smile always." Its shelves are filled with books on activism, holistic health, geology, and others by Michael Crichton, John Steinbeck, Jane Austen, and the Harry Potter series. At her feet is her white 10-year-old English Labrador, Sunny.

Martin: She's been with us for about seven years, since Ezra was still in the carrier.

McClure: Right now, she's on a Zoom video call with Amy Cox, director of institutional data, and Kyle, a political director from the [Higher Education Coordinating Commission](#), or HECC, a state entity that helps govern all colleges in Oregon. It's a group that will be responsible for implementing Michaela's bill if it becomes law.

Amy Cox: Are you thinking only of the public universities and community colleges, one or the other?

Martin: We're asking for community colleges and public universities and I mean, like in an ideal world, I would have loved to say all colleges and universities, but from my understanding having that kind of language makes it different and potentially more difficult for implementation.

Amy Cox: Will someone share screen so I can see?

Kyle: Oh, you want the bill?

Cox: Yeah.

Martin: I think it's up a little bit under summary. Oh, I see.

Amy Cox [reading bill aloud]:

The data collected, um, basis, whether the student is a parent, a person acting as a parent, or legal guardian. That's good.

Kyle on Zoom:

Okay, if you look at the template 794, really the only thing I think you need to do there is change the word "question" to "questions," just pluralize it. And then everything else by my sort of quick read, looks like it kind of allows Amy to do what she would need to do in conversation with the institutions. It says that we have to consult with the institutions of higher education.

Martin: Perfect. Yes, yes. Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time. Both of you. I really, really appreciate that. And as soon as we have like a draft, of course, I'll send that over to you. Thank you so much.

Kyle: All right. Have a good one.

Martin: You too. Have a good afternoon.

Martin: That was so good. Oh, that was really great. Okay. Okay.

McClure: Through her education, Michaela's life has become transformed in a big way. In the summer of 2019, she moved to Los Angeles County to attend the University of La Verne College of Law. She's now halfway through law school.

Her son, Ezra, splits his time between their two-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles County and Oregon, where he visits his grandparents. She's also had support from Ascend at The Aspen Institute, a nonprofit that uses conferences, leadership programs, and seminars to promote a free, just, and equitable society. Ascend is a policy program within the Aspen Institute that aims to move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security.

Ascend has given her resources to help with her bill, such as growing her "social capital" and making introductions to community college officials with whom she is working on her bill. Through her higher education advocacy and meeting at a student parent conference, Michaela was introduced to Amy and Kyle at HECC.

In early 2020, Michaela became involved as a parent advisor with Ascend at Aspen. She has participated in grant review processes and speaking engagements.

Martin: When the Aspen Institute contacted me and offered me to be a student parent advisor, I didn't actually know all of the things that came with it. I thought that they just wanted my voice. And to me that was everything, to have somebody that says, "We just want you to be a part of the work that we do and to include you."

McClure: Michaela and Ezra are thriving today, but when they first moved to Los Angeles County, they had to overcome some hurdles, like homelessness.

Martin: When we were staying in the hotels, I really felt like I messed up, that I made some real bad choices. I felt like such a failure. And I know, how can you feel like a failure when you're in law school, and you do policy, and you do things? That's not how you feel when you're staying in a Motel Six with cockroaches with your baby boy.

My parents actually took out a second mortgage in order to be able to pay for those hotels.

McClure: The problem, she says, was that in order to transfer her section 8 housing voucher from Oregon to California, both she and Ezra had to physically be in California to qualify, if and when they found an apartment.

Martin: The plan in coming to LA County was that I would come in the summer and find housing, and Ezra could spend a little bit of time with grandma and grandpa, and then come once I found housing. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way.

McClure: For four months, Michaela and Ezra were homeless, living in Motel 6 and Quality Inn. She spent every night scouring listings. In between that and her law school demands, she finds a way to give Ezra a day-to-day schedule.

Martin: For the bulk of our stay in hotels, there was breakfast. Our routine in the hotels looked like waking up, getting ready for school, grabbing some breakfast, and then he'd go to school. And then he was a part of an afterschool program, so when I picked him up after classes, we would come and kind of, you know, talk a little bit. One of the cool things about the hotels is that they clean your room. So, when we would come home from school, our beds were made, everything was nice. We'd have some dinner.

McClure: On the weekends, Michaela and Ezra would spend time at the beach or by the hotel's pool. While Ezra swam, Michaela sat on a lawn chair, surrounded by her law books.

Martin: He thought it was really great cause I'd give him money for the vending machine. Kids love vending machines.

McClure: But the reality of being homeless hits home after a difficult conversation with another professor.

Martin: I had a meeting with my contracts professor, and he asked if I had a study group, and I said that I didn't. And he's like, "Well, Michaela, it's really important that you participate in these study groups or that you start making those connections. You're a very bright student and I want to see you be successful. Why aren't you in a study group?" And I was like, "Well, my current kind of housing situation and the things I have going on make that really difficult." My professor looked at me and he was like, "Well, you're in law school. What do you mean your housing situation?" I was like, "Professor, my son and I right now live in hotels." And the look he gave me brought me to tears and he was like, "I wouldn't have guessed. I had no idea that you were going through that."

I put my hand in front of my eyes and I was like, "That look right now is exactly why I didn't tell you," because I feel like on the daily I can hold it together but the moment that somebody found out and looked at me like it was bad, it's like It came upon me, like this is really bad. My situation is really bad. And until those moments, I could ignore it. I could just, okay, we'll just, we get through the day, we go swimming.

McClure: Michaela remembered crying in front of her professor that day, She was desperate for help, but there was no support available to her.

Martin: Our school doesn't have resources for housing for student parents. They didn't have anything like that. My school doesn't provide daycare. They don't have student housing. They didn't have emergency funds for these kinds of things.

McClure: The rates of food and housing insecurity and homelessness among [parenting students are high](#). In a 2019 survey with more than 23,000 student parents, [The Hope Center](#), a higher education research group, found that [68 percent of parenting students were housing insecure](#), and [17% were homeless during the previous year](#).

Martin: What benefit was there to telling my professors at that time when they don't have resources? While I was staying in the hotels with Ezra, I didn't want my professors to feel sorry for me. It's hard enough being a law student and trying to pull all of this together and to navigate it. Sometimes sympathy hurts.

McClure: It's her first semester at law school and she's struggling. But Michaela's resilience is renewed after Ascend at the Aspen Institute calls.

Martin: When the Ascend program contacted me, my son and I were still living in hotels, and so I was floored that here I am feeling like very alone, and very stressed, and struggling, and to have an organization like the Aspen Institute contact me and be like, "We've heard about your story and we want your voice as a part of our group," was so motivating and inspiring.

McClure: And good things kept happening. That fall, she finds an apartment in Covina.

Martin: The day that the key was put in my hand, I couldn't stop crying. I carried it around just in my hand all day in classes. Like I just, I couldn't, I didn't even put it on my car, my key ring yet. I just, I just carried it around. The classmates that I knew that kind of knew my situation. I was like, "Look, I have the key! I have a key!" I just kind of fished my hand around with it all day, just held onto it, because it was such an insane moment of like, "Okay, like this wasn't a total mistake. We did make it through. Things are going to get better."

McClure: When I visit, Michaela excitedly gives me a tour. We walk past a pile of law books on her living room table and bookshelves, and kid toys, like her collection of Harry Potter wands. It's been a year since she and 7-year-old Ezra moved in.

Martin: My room is really messy. I made this headboard thing, like repurposed it. I took apart a room divider and hung it on my wall. I think it looks okay.

McClure: She shows me Ezra's bedroom. The floor isn't visible. His room is filled with toys, books, skateboards, musical instruments, a stuffed monkey, and an even larger, life-sized teddy bear from Michaela's brother.

Martin: My little brother, of course, as any uncle or little brother, likes to buy the most annoying of gifts for my child as possible, which includes a bear that's almost as tall as me, that can't really go anywhere because where, what do you do with a bear that big?

McClure: She shows me the centerpiece of Ezra's room: his bunk bed.

Martin: This is another yard sale find, it's like real wood and it has a slide and a loft bed and then space for him to play underneath. And I got the whole thing for \$50, which for being real wood is like a steal!

McClure: Michaela loves being in Southern California, but she hasn't decided if she will stay in Los Angeles.

Martin: After I graduate, I think that my main priority is establishing real stability for Ezra, because I feel that through all of this, I have put him through so much and while he's always my top priority, I want all of this to accumulate into stability.

Martin: Hey Ezzie.

Ezra: Oh, found one!

Martin: If another kid said my mom's in law school and it's really hard because I don't get to spend as much time with her as I would like, what would you tell them for advice, what makes it feel better? What would you tell them?

Ezra: I would tell them, just don't worry.

Martin: Why do you think that I'm doing it?

Ezra: To help me. For me.

Martin: I want to make you a better life.

Martin: Ezzie, do you like staying with nonni though, is it OK?

Ezra: Yeah.

Martin: You like being here?

Ezra: Actually, I love it!

Martin: Yeah? What's your favorite part?

Ezra: I get to find rocks.

Martin: Finding rocks? I found another tooth-looking one.

Ezra: Okay, I've found way more than you.

Martin: I love the little planes that fly over. They're like my favorite, I miss them. Oh! I found a big one, look it!

Ezra: I have 12. You have 8. I have-

Martin: Better watch out! I'm catching up, I just found that huge one, look at that.

Ezra: Yeah, but I have 12. [sounds of Ezra laughing with Michaela]

Kirkland: Sarah McClure reported this story. At the time of reporting, Michaela's bill has been redrafted and is scheduled to be formally introduced into the 2021 Legislative Session. At that time, it will receive a new bill number and go through the normal legislative process, including public hearings and work sessions.

Post Secondary Success for Parents Initiative, or the PSP initiative for short, is a partnership between Ascend and Imaginable Futures within the Aspen Institute. Michaela is a Parent Advisor for that initiative, informing their work through her lived experience.

This episode also uses several sounds from Freesound. For a full list, please refer to the show notes.

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Virginia Lora edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Michael Aquino. 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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