



“Meet Angelina Kery”

Angelina Kery was a single mother to two elementary-aged kids when she decided to go back to college. She was working full-time, was recently divorced, and wondered how she was going to juggle it all. Reporter Hannah Kingsley-Ma explores how a supportive coach and a community of other moms helped buoy her to graduation and beyond — to become a mentor to other student parents.

[Jeremiah Program](#) offers one of the nation’s most successful strategies for transforming families from poverty to prosperity two generations at a time. Learn more about their work at

jeremiahprogram.org.

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 going to get to know Angelina Kery. Angelina was a single mom with two kids and a full-time job when she decided to go back to school. With the help of a skilled and compassionate coach, her learning extended far beyond the classroom walls. And cheering her on was a group of other mothers who understood what she was going through — and were there for her when she needed their support.

Reporter Hannah Kingsley-Ma has Angelina’s story.

Hannah Kingsley-Ma:

This story starts like a lot of stories taking place during the pandemic — in a Zoom meeting.

Zoom:

We are going to start with just a little bit of individual reflection and conversation. I want you all to think about for a few minutes what’s — think about the last new friendship or non-romantic relationship you’ve formed.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina Kery is at her kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. She's in a workshop, training to become a mentor to single mothers juggling the intense demands of parenting, work and school. She knows what that's like. This same table is where she wrote her thesis when she was in college. She worked there in the early mornings on the weekends, before her two kids, Sarai and Isaac, were awake.

Zoom:

You guys all have so much experience, and the mentees are going to look to you as people who have gone on a journey they are on and have wisdom to share,

Kingsley-Ma:

All those attending this meeting are women involved with the [Jeremiah Program](#). It's an organization that takes a two-generation approach to lifting families out of poverty. That means providing support to both the single mothers enrolled in the program, and their children. Part of that support means helping moms gain access to a degree program.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina was one of the [1.7 million single mothers](#) enrolled in college in the 2015 academic year. When she went back to school, Isaac and Sarai were in elementary school. The decision wasn't easy — she wondered how she'd be able to manage it all.

Kery:

I was like, okay, you know, I took a leap of faith. Um, I was very nervous, working a full-time job and going to school, and how am I going to have time to do homework, et cetera.

Kingsley-Ma:

She knew how hard that balance can be, because when she was a teenager, she always had after school jobs--at a cash checking place, and at a bagel shop. Sometimes she worked as late as 11 p.m.. — she was often exhausted, and occasionally fell asleep in class.

Kery:

Honestly, I wasn't at the time, I wasn't really thinking about college. Um, you know, I was, I was, uh, raised by a single mom and, and I helped her with bills. And so my mindset was just to work full time. I really didn't have the motivation to go to college.

Kingsley-Ma:

After high school, she got a job as a document clerk at a law firm. She was working there full time, up until she married at 25 and started her family. She still wasn't thinking about college.

But then one day, years later, Angelina was at her local community center, looking to sign her kids up for summer camp. The sister of the woman who ran the center was a coach at the Jeremiah Program, and encouraged her to [apply to be a fellow](#).

Kery:

I took the information and I was like, okay, you know, at the moment I was just like, whatever. I ended up seeing her a couple of times right after, she's like, you should take advantage of this, you should do this.

Kingsley-Ma:

The Jeremiah Program, or JP, is headquartered in Minnesota, but in Boston, where Angelina lives, they partner with [Endicott College Boston](#). Both organizations are trying to make postsecondary education more accessible to working parents.

Angelina was just recently divorced — she was going through a big life change, and she wanted college to be a part of it.

Kery:

When I sat down with my kids and I told them, mommy's planning to go back to school — at the time they were about kindergarten age. And, they were happy. And I said, you know, the same way, the same way you guys are learning, mommy is going to learn and, show you guys that if mommy can do it, you guys can do it

Kingsley-Ma:

Endicott College Boston is uniquely situated for student parents like Angelina. They have their own [Single Parent Program](#) for students, which is there to provide guidance and support for people taking on the challenges of both raising a family and going to school.

And Endicott College Boston allows for flexible scheduling — Angelina, for instance, took classes at night, after her workday at the law firm was over. For students who don't have childcare, they partner with organizations like [Sitters Without Borders](#), which offers free babysitting.

For Angelina, one of the most important support systems she found was a group of other moms who understood what she was going through, and a coach who was there for her when things got hard.

Kery:

I think the encouragement, goes a long way, um, as single moms and especially, you know, we, we, sometimes we feel guilty. Being able to have someone in your community and to tell you, you know what, it's okay, it's okay to mess up sometimes. And, and, but, you know, we're, we're gonna all get, go through this together.

Xiomara Alicea:

She was really reserved at first, religion meant a lot to her. So I made sure that she was able to talk about those things with me. Um, you know, it was a no judgment zone. We don't do that.

Kingsley-Ma:

That's Xiomara Alicea, Angelina's old coach. She remembers when Angelina was shy, more reluctant to share her feelings. Angelina remembers that time too.

Kery:

I was initially, I was that type that, I had a wall and I, it was very hard for me to open up. Um, and even my coach was with, she looked at me, she was like, I couldn't figure you out in the beginning. It was just, you had that wall in front of you.

Kingsley:

But Xiomara worked to build trust with Angelina. She's a single mom too and she knows it can be a lot to balance being a full-time student and a full-time parent. Xiomara said a big part of her job was just listening, and creating a safe space for the other moms to express themselves.

Alicea:

I think the Jeremiah program, for me and the moms that i work with, was really a place — and I always say this — a second home, a home away from home where they can just come in and grab a snack or relax and, and, and not be rushed to have to leave a place to be open and, and to laugh and to cry and to be able to be their genuine selves, without a worry, to be able to get resources.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina's schedule once she was in school was grueling:

Kery:

So right after work, I would definitely get my cup of coffee to keep myself awake for four hours. I would grab my cup of coffee, go to, go to class. And I would normally have class from 6:30 to 9:30 or 10 p.m., and then I would take the public transportation back home. I would usually get home around 10:15-ish, 10:30. By that time my kids are sleeping.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina had family support when it came to childcare. Her mother and brother could babysit her kids after they got out of their afterschool program. But Angelina was exhausted.

Kery:

Sometimes I would read through my notes and try to work on some assignments. But I'm just like, so beat. I could just go get ready for bed and go right to sleep and do the same thing the following morning. I did that for three and a half years.

It was tough. It was very tough. I, what I try to do is, I try to at least give my kids about 20 minutes, each of them and talk to them and, and see how their day is going.

Kingsley-Ma:

There were times when Angelina questioned whether or not it was worth it.

Kery :

I was like, you know, am I, am I doing the right thing? Not that, well, not that I'm doing the right thing. I knew I was doing the right thing. It was just, what is this going to lead to? You know, am I, you know, I'm going to get this degree, is it gonna get me anywhere?

Kingsley-Ma:

And then, when Angelina was still in school, the law firm she had been working for for more than a decade suddenly dissolved. She found herself without a job. It was emotionally overwhelming. She turned to her coach for help.

Kery:

She was one of the first people I called and I was bawling my eyes out and she's like, okay, you know, relax, calm, you know, try to try to take it easy. Um, try to take it easy, you know, we'll, we'll, we'll get on this, you know, let's, let's work on your resume, you know. She just jumped right on it.

Kingsley-Ma:

After Angelina lost her job, Xiomara helped direct her to resources like filing for unemployment, signing up for health insurance through the state. But the intense uncertainty weighed on her. Xiomara was there to support her through it

Kery:

She said, we'll get through this, you know, and, and don't feel bad, And this happens to a lot of people. I mean, you can, you can be the, you know, it's, it has nothing to do with you. Um, cause I would, I would think like, did I do something wrong? Or, you know, I just, I just, I get discouraged. I go to a bunch of interviews and I don't get called right after. Like, they get so impressed with my resume and, you know, they make it seem like they're interested. And then I just don't get a call.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina said there were nights where she didn't know what to do. She would lock herself in her room and cry.

Kery:

And of course I have to step out and take care of my kids, make sure they are fed and stuff like that. But at nights I would just would go to my bedroom and, and cry. And then you know, the coach would be like, when I had my meetings with her, she says, you know, let's, let's look for jobs. You know, you can do this. And then she would do, she would help me, um, do like a practice interview. And, um, and I just kept pushing through.

Kingsley-Ma:

Xiomara describes their relationship like this:

Alicea:

The car breaks down and I'm your coach. And you can hear me. I'm not in the car with you, cause I'm not your friend. And here, it goes to the clear distinction of boundaries. I'm not

your friend, I'm not your girlfriend. I'm not like I'm not in the car with you, but I'm running on the side of you on the car, you're driving. And I'm on the side of you. I'm telling you got this and we're going to get to that finish line. The tire might blow, so I might need to help you pump up and replace that tire. But at the end of the day, I'm going to be at the finish line, cheering you on and saying 'You did it.'

Kingsley-Ma:

Xiomara and the Jeremiah Program also helped Angelina find scholarships to attend school. Student parents — and in particular student single mothers — [are more likely to be saddled with debt as they attend college](#), given the financial demands of raising a family. But the Jeremiah Program also provided her a space to feel affirmed, and seen by other mothers. They helped her feel like she didn't have to have it perfectly together at all times

Kery:

You know, of course, you know, as a single mom, you know, you not only have, not only you see your kids needs, but, you know, you feel lonely and you feel like, you know, you just, even though you do have that support, but there are times that you still feel alone.

Kingsley-Ma:

Xiomara also encouraged her to seek other kinds of help.

Kery:

With her, you know, encouraging me and helping me, but, she also told me that, you know, I should, I should try family therapy. And I was really like, skeptical about it in the beginning. I was just, I just didn't like the idea of talking to a stranger and, you know, someone looking at me being, probably being judgmental. So many things were crossing my mind.

Kingsley-Ma:

Right now is a really hard time for students — and the numbers show it. Campuses across the country are documenting a sharp increase in requests for mental health services.

Through the Jeremiah Program, Angelina learned it was ok to feel her feelings to articulate what it was she needed.

Kery:

I took the empowerment course and the empowerment course was, uh, taught me different, different ways of how to handle a situation, because not it's, my mental health is important and if my mental health is important, so is, I would be able to, I would be able to to, to help my kids, because not only I'm going through the situation, but my kids are as well.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina told me how she learned to carve out a little time for herself, in the midst of work and school and taking care of her kids.

Kery:

I love music, so I listen to music, take an hour to just listen to music. I actually like to sing as well. So I, you know, I just go to my room and sing, I do meditate, pray sometimes. Um, and sometimes I just light up candles and, and, and just lay down, just relax.

Kingsley-Ma:

She graduated in three and half years, with a degree in psychology. She was interested in human behavior, and exploring questions about mental health.

The Jeremiah Program provided her with a tutor, and she used vacation time from her job to finish her thesis. It was an extensive report on the effectiveness of the two generation approach to family services, that is: focusing on both parent and child success. And it specifically examined the Jeremiah Program.

Kery:

Because I was connected to it and I thought it was be, it would be interesting to hear about what other mothers think about the program and how helpful it is.

Kingsley-Ma:

As part of her thesis, she gave recommendations in her report for how to make the program better.

Kery:

There are some moms that have older kids that at the time the program was, was, um, giving resources for smaller children, but other moms have older kids and would be nice to have resources for tweens, teenagers. And I've also made suggestions on having, uh, actually mentorship was one of them, but it was more leaning towards, a career mentor.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina believes her college degree has already helped her support her family financially. She was able to get a new job working in a different law firm.

Kery:

I'm sure that they would look at the degree and my educational background. And that, I think that definitely helped me be able to get a higher paying job.

Kingsley-Ma:

But she also feels like she's helping her family in less tangible ways.

Kery:

I did it thinking more about my kids, so I really didn't have someone around me that, that really, you know, that, that I guess, you know, inspired me or anything like that. I think it was just something that I wanted to do.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina was the first person in her immediate family to get her bachelor's degree. From the family stories she remembers, her own mom — who was born and raised in Puerto Rico — dropped out around middle school. It was a luxury she couldn't afford — she had to work.

Kery:

My family was poor at the time. She came to the U.S., um, when she was about a teenager.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina was her mom's translator growing up. She saw how isolated her mom was as a single parent.

Kery:

My mom didn't have the, the emotional support that I, or my kids have now. She did not have that outside outlet. And it was, it was very challenging seeing my mom go through breakdowns. And the fact that she's always putting herself down and it was, wasn't the greatest experience as a child. I was confused. I didn't know what was going on, and seeing my mom that way took a toll on me.

Kingsley-Ma:

Sometimes Angelina wonders what life would have been like for her mom if she'd had more support back then. But she says no matter what, she's proud of her mom, and grateful for what she taught her about being a parent.

Kery:

Regardless of her language barrier and financial burdens, she was resilient. She, you know, she, she managed to, to raise my brother and myself. Um, and that was one thing that I, when I became a single mom, I always thought of her. I'm like, okay, she can do this, I can do this.

Kingsley-Ma:

Now Angelina finds herself tackling another unexpected challenge — raising her two kids in the midst of a global pandemic. Sarai and Isaac are now fourteen and twelve. Like millions of children across the country, they're attending school online. It's a challenge for the family, as it is for all families, but they're managing. It helps that they're close. Here's Angelina, dropping her kids off at The Boys and Girls Club.

Sarai:

I have a science quiz today, I'm pretty confident on it.

Kery:

Mmm, what's the science quiz about?

Sarai:

It's about organs, cells, genes, and stuff like that.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina still goes into work — the lawyers at her firm are able to rotate when they come in, but the legal assistants and administrative staff are expected to be there everyday.

Kery:

Basketball practice, and then I'll pick up at four?

Kids:

Yeah.

Kery:

Alright.

Sarai:

Bye mommy.

Kery:

Bye honey. Love you guys.

Sarai:

Love you too.

Kery:

Love you guys.

Issac:

Love you.

Kingsley-Ma:

Angelina smiles when she describes her kids. She says her son Isaac loves to draw. He's quiet, with a big heart. Her daughter Sarai loves to sing, just like her mom.

And these days, Angelina is not doing it alone. She remarried after graduating college. She reconnected with an old elementary school classmate and they fell in love. Her husband can work from home and look after Sarai and Isaac while she's at work.

Now on the other end of her educational journey, Angelina's part of the first cohort of former participants who will be providing guidance to new student parents.

Life in the pandemic has been [hard for single mothers](#), who [have disproportionately lost work](#) during the last year. Childcare options have fallen through, and there are [new and incessant demands on their time](#).

I ask her former coach, Xiomara, what she thinks Angelina will be like as a mentor.

Alecea:

I think that what she brings to the table sometimes is less than she gives herself credit for. I think that she is an amazing, strong, uh, powerful woman that would bring, uh, strong attributes. I know we really didn't touch on the spiritual aspect of things because we kind of left that out. We didn't bring people's spirituality into the program, but I think for her, it was important in our individual coaching. And I think that's what's going to bring her to a level higher, is that she's able to be who she naturally is.

Kingsley-Ma:

When she was telling me about her daughter, Angelina mentioned a speech Sarai recently delivered to her class while running for student council.

Kery:

And what is your speech going to be focused on?

Sarai:

My speech is going to be focused on helping out mental health.

Kery:

So what are your ideas about mental health and mental illness?

Sarai:

I want to prove to the students that they are not alone, because with all this stuff going on, I'm pretty sure it's really hard for them, especially for the little kids. So I just want to show them that they are not alone and if there's anything we can do to help them, that I would want to participate in helping them.

Kery:

You mean this time, like the pandemic?

Sarai:

Yeah.

Kery:

It's tough for you guys... it's tough for everybody.

Like, it's, it's one of those things that you, you know, you see your child, but you don't, when you hear them read a speech. And I'm like, Oh my goodness. Like, I, I didn't know my kid had, you know, so much to say, and especially during this pandemic, she, she mentioned that all the students need to stick together.

What's important to her is the mental health of the, of the students and how she would like to, you know, encourage them to keep moving forward and, and, you know, be able to be a leader to them.

It's so funny because it's, it's like, sometimes you don't realize how much of an impact as a parent that, you know, how, how they're little things that you probably don't even think about that influence your child. As a parent it gets me teary sometimes. I'm like, very proud of my kids.

Kingsley-Ma:

But her kids like to remind her that they are very proud of her too.

If there was one thing you would want people listening to this to know about your mom, what would it be?

Sarai:

That she's a really smart and independent woman. And I am proud that she did all this by herself.

Kirkland:

Hannah Kingsley-Ma reported this story.

[Jeremiah Program](#) offers one of the nation's most successful strategies for transforming families from poverty to prosperity, two generations at a time. Learn more about their work at [JeremiahProgram.org](#).

Credits:

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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, 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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