



“Meet Lorena Barton”

Lorena Barton became a single parent unexpectedly, when her son was just months old. Facing a crossroads, she decided to go back to school in pursuit of a new career in nursing. Reporter Natalie Rivera illuminates Lorena’s journey — how with the support of on-campus resources and childcare, along with a community of student parent peers, she’s now moving toward her degree with confidence in a brighter future for herself and her child.

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 Lorena Barton. Lorena found herself at a crossroads when she was faced with a divorce months after her son’s birth. Not only did she suddenly become a single mother but she also found herself jobless. Following her childhood love of science, she decided to go back to school for a nursing degree. Thanks to on-campus resources and a supportive community of student parents, Lorena’s been transforming her life and that of her son for the better.

Reporter Natalie Rivera has Lorena’s story.

Natalie Rivera:

Lorena Barton was anxious, and understandably so. She had just arrived at [Los Angeles Valley College](#) with her one-year-old son, David, and was about to walk on the campus as an undergraduate.

Lorena Barton:

I had driven by for years — it was on my way to one of my favorite restaurants — but I had never attended any classes there.

Rivera:

Lorena’s life had been turned upside down the year before, and now, going back to school, she was starting over on her terms. Still, she was terrified.

Barton:

I was very nervous, not knowing would I be accepted? Am I too old? Can I manage this with my son?

Rivera:

Lorena is one of those people who were born loving subjects some of us have trouble understanding.

Barton:

I'm a bit of a nerd. I love science. I love studying anatomy. I love studying physiology.

Rivera:

She says she was a great student in high school.

Barton:

Loved going to classes with research projects. And after high school life kind of took me a little bit into a different direction.

Rivera:

Lorena attended a local university after high school. She was working full-time back then and didn't have the time to commit to the classes she actually wanted to take, so instead she got a degree in Liberal Studies.

Barton:

And I went into administration, when I really always loved science, but, um, you know, life happened So I ended up just getting, you know, schooling and just basic, general education. And I didn't really pursue anything that really was my passion.

Rivera:

But while Lorena was comfortable in her job, she still wondered what life would be like if she had taken a different route.

Barton:

I remember sitting in a meeting going, "Is this really what I'm going to give my whole life to?" "Is this really what I want to do?"

Rivera:

Lorena got married and wound up working an administrative job at the same company where her husband worked. Their marriage, however, ended abruptly only months after having their son. Lorena decided she couldn't stay at the same company where her now-ex worked, so she left.

Barton:

I looked for work for about eight months. And because I worked in such a small company that was a very niche company, and just some of the, you know, circumstances

surrounding the divorce, it just made it impossible to get work. I finally got close to getting a job and then they rescinded the offer. I just could not get a job. And then I was sitting there going, okay, I'm a single mother. I am running out of money. I didn't, I had like, very, I didn't have almost anything left.

Rivera:

She and baby David moved in with her father for a while, then her mother. They were both incredibly supportive as Lorena continued to look for a job. That's when Lorena started reevaluating some things: Did she really have to go back to administrative work? Did she really have to do this for the rest of her life?

Barton:

I went really back to my core of, "What do I love? What do I want to do?" And it just kept on coming back to health, kept coming back to science. And when I looked at that, coupled with my serious love for people and serious love for helping people, nursing was just the perfect choice to marry all of my talents and my passions together.

Rivera:

Because going to a four-year college was too expensive, Lorena decided to go to a community college first and then transfer to a university. She decided on Los Angeles Valley College, which is close to both of her parents' homes. Her dad knew someone who worked at one of the school's resource offices, so Lorena decided to head over there. She needed all the help she could get, which is why she was at the campus that day holding her son.

Barton:

I went down to her office and she works in the CalWORKs program.

Rivera:

CalWORKs stands for [California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids](#). It's a public assistance program that offers short term cash aid and services to families with children who need help with basic needs including shelter, food, and medical care.

Barton:

When I went onto the CalWORKs association office on the Valley college campus, I felt like I had an advocate. I would ask questions and they go, "No, this is how it's going to happen." The person I met with actually took a paper and wrote down to me a flow chart telling me first, this is going to happen. And this is going to happen. Then you do this. Then you come to us, we help you. And I felt like I wasn't alone anymore.

Rivera:

Hearing Lorena's story, the woman at the office knew that Lorena had to visit the school's [Family Resource Center](#). So after they talked, she walked Lorena and her son to the center, where the first thing they saw was a group of kids playing outside.

Barton:

So they have this beautiful yard with bubbles, climbing supplies, every kind of stimulus you can imagine a sandbox. And they were having a playgroup where they had probably 20 different kids gathered there with parents. And my son instantly went into the playgroup and he was instantly comfortable. He played while I met with the director of the Family Resource Center, Marni Roosevelt,

Rivera:

Marni Roosevelt founded the Family Resource Center in 2004. Initially, she was focused on the teacher training aspect of the center, but she soon realized it could fill other needs. Ascend at the Aspen Institute came in as partners, to fund a [2-generation approach that would support](#) whole-family success. They wanted to create a community of student parents who could support each other with the day-to-day responsibilities of attending school while also raising a child. Marni was a teacher in child development.

Marni Roosevelt:

And students used to come to me and ask me issues. They would want, sort of, me to give them advice about their own personal family. And I thought it would be better for them if I brought them together so that they could share ideas and build a community of support and they wanted to bring their kids.

Rivera:

At first Marni hired child development student interns to be with the kids, while she talked with the adults.

Roosevelt:

Services grew as I started to learn more. I learned that they couldn't really afford baby clothes, so we started a baby clothes exchange. And then I learned that they wanted tips in parenting, so we did these regular groups so that the students really developed a group of support for each other and learned child development strategies and parenting strategies while they were there.

Rivera:

Lorena met Marni that day she visited the Family Resource Center for the first time and the two had a candid talk about Lorena's situation. Lorena was unemployed and like many single-mothers, was finding it more and more difficult putting food on the table, let alone finding childcare. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the vast majority of single mothers in college have low incomes, [with over 60% at or below the federal poverty level](#).

Marni noticed Lorena's drive and offered her a job right on the spot, a job that recognized the particular needs of student parents.

Barton:

I felt like not only did they give me a job and a place to work, but they also saw me as a mom and knew when my son was sick, normally you get really nervous about that, but Marnie and my bosses, her responses, "Your son is first." And she knows I'm, of course,

going to do all the work and do everything I can to cover my responsibilities. But one thing Marnie says, which I love is, "It's not student parents, it's parent students, because parent comes first."

Rivera:

Lorena's role at the Family Resource Center is to manage playgroups, come up with new activities, and also handle some administrative duties. She basically was hired to help the Family Resource Center do what they do, which is a lot.

Barton:

So this place has playgroups. It has a place where you could come bring your child. It has a counselor there who you can talk to about parenting issues. There's a resource counselor who acts like a social worker and she can connect you with food pantries, close by, counseling, help with divorce, help with legal matters. Just anything that you might be going through. And they also, through amazing donations, they get diapers that they could give to their students, wipes. They have a clothing exchange, which is so amazing.

Rivera:

Not only was Lorena helping bring all of these resources to life, but she was also using them herself. Getting a degree in medicine or science can be notoriously grueling, so it was understandable that she would need some support.

Barton:

There was a little lounge for lactation. If I was needing to pump milk and a fridge that was just full of snacks. So if I just needed to come and get a little snack in between classes really quick, I could come there, take a minute, say hi to other parents, get a cup of coffee and then head off to the next class.

Rivera:

While CalWORKs helped Lorena pay for food, textbooks, and medical supplies, the Family Resource Center helped her with other, equally important things.

Barton:

I didn't have any money for Christmas gifts. But someone from the community came and donated toys. And I was able to take those toys home. I cleaned them up. I got a scrub brush out. I made him look like and do when I wrapped it. And my son had amazing toys that I was able to provide for him. It's things like that, that when you're a student, but you're sitting at home going, "Gosh, do I get my kid clothes or do I fix the sink?" "Do I get toys or do I, you know, pay for supplies I need?" Those are really, really tough choices. And the support that the Family Resource Center gave to just give that little extra help. It just makes you feel like I've got someone in my corner. When you see your kids, smile and thriving that as a parent brings you life, it brings you joy.

Rivera:

Lorena talks about how isolating it can feel when you're a student parent: like you're completely on your own, the only one on this particular journey. The Family Resource Center and Valley College in general quickly helped her dismantle that belief.

Barton:

You think, everyone in here is young and I'm the only one here with all these responsibilities. Then to find out the girl across from me has two children. The girl next to me has an eight year old. This person has four kids. And when I found that support system through the Family Resource Center, I felt like, oh my gosh, I'm not alone. Other people have done this and I can do it.

Rivera:

Knowing this and knowing that she had employment and a support system at the Family Resource Center helped Lorena focus on the reason she registered for school in the first place: creating a better life for her and her son by getting an education.

Barton:

So I would start everyday at six in the morning, get my son ready, make him breakfast, get him to school by 7:15 AM, get to class by 8:00 AM, go to classes till noon, and then work from noon until four, most days. And then some days I would pick up my son and bring him back to the Family Resource Center because they would have late night study sessions. And what was amazing about that was interns would come and play with the kids, but I could sit there with a laptop and watch my son. So he's with me, but yet I'm preparing for my chemistry test, my chemistry midterm.

I think when you're a student parent, you work more efficiently. So even though I only studied for two hours at night, I only studied for three to four hours max on the weekends. I'm I got straight A's, I have a 4.0. And I think there's determination when you know you're providing for yourself, but also for your child.

Rivera:

That determination paid off when Lorena was accepted to her first choice 4-year school, [Loma Linda University](#). The pandemic was already in full swing when she started prepping her transfer. Valley College and the Family Resource Center had been forced to switch to remote learning and support,

Transferring to another school is already pretty stressful as it is: There's a lot of paperwork that has to be done and a lot of administrative work that's pretty much out of the student's control. Transferring during a pandemic however is a whole other beast.

Barton:

I think the hardest thing is that it's not just that I'm home, it's that everyone in the country is home. So the admissions office is home. Financial aid is home. Everyone you're talking to does not have their normal setup. So when I call someone and they tell me they can't do that because they're not in the office or, I was applying to one school and they got shut

down because their computer system went down and they couldn't do anything for a week.

Rivera:

As difficult as this was, Lorena was able to meet her deadlines, with some help.

Barton:

Valley college normally sends out transcripts in seven to 10 days. It was running almost two months to get transcripts. And finally, I went to CalWORKs and I said, "I don't know what to do." You know, it's not getting there. And they made a call and I was able to get my transcript pushed through.

Rivera:

The Family Resource Center also made sure to step it up, which was a relief for Lorena who is still employed by the Center.

Barton:

At the beginning, I remember thinking we're all gonna lose our jobs because we can't do anything remote. And, it's interesting, I think we're busier now than we were when we were on campus. We've done online, virtual student parent cafes, we've done parenting classes online. We've just launched Creative Corner, where we have activities on Zoom for the kids where they can do crafting, origami. We just did yoga last Thursday. This Thursday is game night.

And they were doing surveys constantly. Like, how are you? What do you need? What do you need help with? And there was funders who came in and gave money to where we could give stipends to students.

Rivera:

Lorena took advantage of these emergency stipends when her laptop gave out on her.

Barton:

My computer that I had for eight years, stopped working almost the moment the pandemic hit.

Rivera:

There was also emotional support.

Speaker 1:

We realized, "Oh my goodness, these parents just need someone to talk to one-on-one." And we started doing wellness checks, where we had a group of students who applied to be a part of a program. And if they were accepted to the program, it included where we would call them so often. And just, "How are you doing, what do you need?" And that was enriching for me to make the calls and also for them where we could connect with each other, hear what they needed, and that could help kind of guide what services we offered.

Rivera:

Lorena officially transferred to Loma Linda University in January, 2021. When I spoke to her, she had only just moved into her own apartment with her son a few months ago. From everything Lorena has accomplished since first stepping into the Family Resource Center, being able to afford an apartment for her and David has got to be on the top of that list.

Barton:

My son loves it. He always says, "I love our new home mama." Every day when I pick him up from school, "I love my new school mama." He's so happy here.

Rivera:

And though she's continuing to get used to her new routine, she's still killing it at school.

Barton:

So, I'm sitting down here to study. I just finished my first big test in nursing school and as I was eating dinner with my son, my classmates were texting like crazy to say grades came in and I got 100% on a very, very, very difficult test. So it kind of makes studying right now just feel a little bit better.

Rivera:

While Lorena is no longer a student at Valley College, she is still employed at the resource center. She can't take advantage of the resources there like she used to, but she stays connected with Marni and the friends she's made there. Having that support system during a pandemic has been incredibly beneficial.

Barton:

In the beginning, we would have these online virtual student parent groups, and we were crying together and sharing our concerns and not knowing what we were going to do. And then a couple months later, you hear strength, "I found something that worked," "Hey, let me share this resource with you." "Let me share you this trick I learned." "We've got this." "We can pull through, look at the grades." I mean, you saw the community coming together and supporting each other and being an inspiration to each other. It's amazing to me,

Rivera:

Lorena says looking at the examples of other student parents around her gives her hope for the future, for everyone.

Barton:

One of my friends has four kids, and she got straight A's with all of her kids being home. Can you believe that? It's just amazing what these people have done and overcome extreme adversity and even managed to get optimism. I have more hope in humanity than ever. I can't wait until it's over, but I think that we're all going to come out of this knowing we can, we can do a lot more than we thought we could.

Kirkland:

Natalie Rivera reported this story.

For more information about Ascend Network Partner, the Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center, you can go to their website at lavcfamilyresourcecenter.org/ where you'll find tons of resources, including more information about their 2-generation approach, and a [toolkit](#) for anyone interested in starting a resource center on their own campus.

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](https://twitter.com/AspenAscend) on Twitter.

Jen Chien edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Elizabeth Nakano with Cedric Wilson. Our theme song is "Ascenders" by Kojin Tashiro, who also contributed to mixing., Sarah McClure, Ryan Katz, Erica Hellerstein, Emily Vaughn and Ava Ahmadbeigi 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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