



“Meet Rashika Lee”

Rashika Lee’s educational path was not linear, but in the end, it brought her to exactly where she needed to be. After several tries at postsecondary attainment while raising her son, she finally found a school that fit her needs — with educational, emotional and community support built into its programming. Reporter Elizabeth Gabriel and host Pamela Kirkland take us along on Rashika’s journey.

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. I’ll also narrate this episode, which Elizabeth Gabriel reported.

Today, we’ll get to know Rashika Lee in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Rashika was a teenage mother who struggled to finish school while taking care of her son. But after a college journey spanning nearly 20 years, she graduated while also taking care of her family. Now, she’s determined to help other student parents get the resources they need to successfully complete their education.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, nestled in the Roosevelt Park area, 45-year-old Rashika Lee is starting her day in her home office. As a medical coding and billing specialist, she spends a lot of time on her computer.

Rashika Lee:

So I am starting my day getting logged in, and I do have quite a few emails to get started today with.

Kirkland:

Sitting behind Rashika at a smaller desk is her five-year-old granddaughter, Layla, whom she’s raising.

Layla:

Right now I know what I’m talking about.

Kirkland:

Even while she's working, Rashika has to be ready for conversations with Layla, which can sometimes get deep, like a recent one about God and how people get their skin color.

Layla:

Did they, like, paint me with a big thing, a big paintbrush then color me in with crayons?

Rashika:

No, your color came from your parents.

Kirkland:

Rashika has had to answer *even more* of Layla's questions since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lee:

School work is a lot. I'm her teacher. I'm the custodian. I'm the lunch lady. I'm mom, you know, so I think juggling those two things has affected me with the pandemic as far as organizing, keeping schedules, and stuff like that.

Kirkland:

Rashika has had custody of Layla since she was a year old, so parenting her granddaughter is nothing new. But she says in some ways, it's more difficult to take care of her now, than when she was a baby. And even harder than taking care of her son, Larry, when he was Layla's age.

Lee:

It's different with a girl. You know, they are, you know, sassy and everything. And my son was very laid back and easygoing, all growing up. He's still like that as an adult. So now I got this little sassy person, always walking around and she dance and she sings and she has a thousand questions. And so I think that's the part that's more challenging is that I have to interact with somebody more. My son just didn't, you know, he did his own thing.

Kirkland:

Rashika had Larry when she was 19. Back then, she was still living near where she grew up, on the southeast side of Grand Rapids.

She had always been told pursuing a degree was the right thing to do to support her family. So, back in 1999, when she was 24, she decided to enroll in a six-month medical assistance program at Ross College.

But she remembers hearing rumors that questioned the college's accreditation, and seeing directors and instructors cycle through the college. She didn't feel comfortable finishing her degree there. She left the school in 2000 and became a stay-at-home mom to Larry.

Five years later, she decided to give school another try, and enrolled at [Davenport University](#). By then, she had a better idea of what she wanted to study. She realized she gravitated more toward front-end office work, like translating medical records into health insurance claims—and decided to study medical coding.

At the time, Rashika’s job allowed her to attend classes in between her shifts while Larry was also in school.

Lee:

When I first started at Davenport, I was a bus driver. So I used to drop my kids off in the morning, get off my bus, go to my classes and get out of school in enough time to go back and do my afternoon run.

Kirkland:

But since bus drivers are considered seasonal and don’t work during school vacations, Rashika didn’t have a consistent paycheck. Plus, keeping up with annual rent increases was becoming harder and harder, and she wanted to save money to buy a house.

She quit her job as a school bus driver and started working at an industrial furniture factory. But she says the demands of that job — being scheduled six to seven days a week with 10-12 hour shifts — didn't leave much time for Larry, or school work.

Rashika was a single mom. She says Larry’s father was active in his life, but didn’t contribute financially in the first few years. Though he would pick Larry up from school and take care of him on weekends, she covered all expenses.

Rashika isn’t alone. Of the 3.8 million students raising children while in college, [roughly 70 percent are mothers](#). And about [62% of these student mothers are single moms](#).

Ultimately, Rashika’s need to work to provide for Larry overpowered her ability to stay in school. She dropped out of Davenport before finishing her degree.

Lee:

I did used to be the type of person where once I get discouraged, I kind of just let things go. I was in my 20’s, so I can’t really say where my mind was at. School just wasn’t a priority for me right then, even though you think school would have been a priority for me because having a career vs jobs would have carried me further.

Kirkland:

To Rashika, it didn’t seem like anyone at her university really cared since no one tried to stop her from dropping out, or contacted her after she left.

Lee:

At each one of them schools, I started, I walked away and nobody cared. I was just a person who’s seat this now empty. Nobody checked on me. Nobody cared. I've been gone from these schools 15 years, some of them less. Never saw these people again.

Kirkland:

A lot of student parents might feel this way—like their presence, and their needs, are invisible.

[Only 25% of community colleges track the parenting status](#) of their students, according to an Ascend study. So, which students are on campus and which ones leave, and how their parenting status may factor into that decision, is not something schools are generally aware of.

Rashika said she couldn't juggle working full-time while being a parent who was also going to school. But then, in 2009, she thought she might get another chance.

The recession had just hit, causing widespread unemployment. Rashika lost her job at the furniture factory. Still, she was managing, making things work with her unemployment money. And, like many people who were laid off during the recession, she qualified for federal funding to go back to school. So Rashika took advantage of the opportunity, and enrolled at Grand Rapids Community College to study early childhood development.

But just when it seemed things had fallen into place, an emotional turn derailed her plans.

That year, Rashika's grandfather, the man who raised her, had some serious health problems.

Lee:

My grandparents raised me as my parents. My grandfather had diabetes. And my grandfather had a sore under his foot, it just got worse, worse. He ended up in hospital.

Kirkland:

His leg eventually had to be amputated. Although Rashika no longer lived with Granddaddy, as she called him, she made an effort to see him almost daily. She handled the situation as well as she could. She says she was also concerned about how Larry was processing the change, because he and Granddaddy were very close.

The emotional stress of Granddaddy's health issues was so overwhelming, she didn't enroll the following semester. It was a difficult time of transition for her, and she struggled to find a sense of direction in life.

Lee:

I got laid off, I'm at home, trying to go back to school. I got family issues, my personal life is not going so great. Should I leave this relationship, blah, blah, blah. So I just had a lot going on at that time.

Kirkland:

In March of 2010, after breaking up with her boyfriend, Rashika moved out of state with Larry, who was now a teen. She went to live near her best friend in Columbus, Ohio, about four and half hours away from Grand Rapids.

Lee:

It was just a lot, I just up and left. And then my grandfather died in June. So that's kind of like, so I dealt with a lot of like, emotional things and guilt and stuff within like maybe within that six to nine months. Cause my grandfather didn't want me to leave—that was one of the big things.

Kirkland:

Like Layla, Rashika was also raised by her grandmother.

Rashika's birth-mother used drugs throughout her childhood and wasn't always around to take care of her.

Lee:

We stayed with our grandparents, but we still was around all the drugs stuff because this is my grandmother's daughter. She's still coming around and then her other kids ended up getting on drugs. It was weird because if you went to school or me or something, you would think that my life was so rosy because I had the latest of everything. It looked like I was living well, which we were — my grandmother took very good care of us. But we had a lot of challenges in the house with the drugs and you know, their lifestyles. It did affect us still, even though we didn't have to worry about what we were going to eat, what we were going to wear, if we had a roof over our head, but we still lived in that turmoil.

Kirkland:

So Rashika and her siblings had to grow up quickly. And she says the fast track to adulthood has had lasting effects.

Lee:

We still did everything like other kids, but we knew so much more than other kids. So it was like, we still live normally like, oh, skating, movies, outside playing all day. But we might have an argument in the house in between that time about drugs, you know? So it's like, so it was weird because we were, I would say we were overly well-rounded. It did, kind of, help prepare us for things that we might encounter out in the world. We weren't sheltered from a lot of things, no matter how hard my grandmother tried.

Kirkland:

Her emotions became so guarded by what was going on with her childhood home that she closed off emotionally.

Lee:

I think I was emotionally stunted because I had to learn to not care. Because if I allowed everything to get to me, I would have crumpled up and died in that house for all the stuff that we went through. So, I feel like emotionally, I was stunted.

Kirkland:

As she sees it, this emotional turmoil was part of what made sticking with school so hard. It also made processing her grandfather's illness and death much harder.

Which is why her move to Ohio was so transformative.

In a very real and concrete way, she had to face hardships and handle her emotions head-on. She couldn't rely on her grandmother to take care of her all the time.

Lee:

I'm just going to say mom, because I feel weird calling my grandma, grandma, cause I call her mom.

I didn't have her there to pick up the pieces. She is four and a half hours away. She can't just drop everything like she normally would do. So it forced me to kind of start doing things more for myself. And it's weird because I've always been independent, but my mom was a crutch. And when my car broke down in Ohio and I had to go get my first car by myself, this ain't my first vehicle, but my first car by myself, without my mom, without her input, without her assistance or anything, I think that actually started the journey for me because I, I made a big purchase without her.

Kirkland:

During her two years in Ohio, Rashika became more independent.

But Larry, without his familiar friends or his old Montessori school, struggled to adjust to life in Ohio. Ultimately, Rashika moved back to Grand Rapids.

In Michigan, she became a postal worker. And although it was very far from working at the furniture factory, she said the conditions were just as strenuous.

Lee:

Factory work is okay. You make really good money when you work in factories cause they're gonna work you to death. But what that would have been for me at 45, I don't think could have been that woman wearing steel-toes, hurting my hands and feet and working hard in the hot sweaty factory in the summer. And, you know, I don't think I would have been able to do that today.

Kirkland:

At this point, she had a singular goal.

Lee:

Coming back here and working at the post office was the final resort for me in knowing that I'm not doing this until I'm 40, 50, 60. I'm not retiring from a factory setting. I'm not working somewhere where you can change my schedule when you feel like it. That was like my end.

Kirkland:

Having more control over her life meant starting a career, and giving school another try. Larry was almost 20, and able to care of himself. Rashika was on better terms with her grandmother, so she moved in with her to share expenses while she was in school. She left the post office and found a part-time job that fit her schedule better. She and her boyfriend got back together, and he was helping support her financially.

Rashika decided to enroll in the [Western Michigan Center for Arts and Technology](#)—known as WMCAT.

Lee:

WMCAT is not just, it wasn't just school. They have programs and they did things for us to help us. They really wanted us to succeed, so they dealt with our emotions and our backgrounds and taught us how to be, not just what to be.

Kirkland:

She says it was life changing. And calls the students and staff there her family.

Rashika's experience happily contradicts what other student-parents go through. The National Student Parent Survey administered by Generation Hope, says [20 percent of student parents felt unwelcome on their campuses](#).

But WMCAT was the perfect fit for Rashika. It's a nonprofit school, and there's a [tuition-free program](#) that also pays for books. And they had a program in her field of interest—medical coding and billing.

The school college works with local nonprofits and the State of Michigan's Department of Human Services to [connect students and their families with all kinds of support](#). And with 19 out of 20 classmates who were also parents or grandparents, she didn't feel alone. She'd become a grandmother herself in 2015, when Larry's daughter Layla was born.

Beyond the financial support and academic options WMCAT provided, the emotional support Rashika found there was key during this time in her life. The WMCAT faculty led team-building activities that helped students grow on a personal level. For example, groups would often meet, and students would share their experiences with one another.

For Rashika, the emotional journey she started in Ohio prepared her for the emotional breakthrough she would have while in school.

Lee:

We were truly a family. It's a lot of times I cry in our big groups, like a lot of times. You hear someone else's story, so that's the part where I say WMCAT changed me. It opened me up. 'It's okay to cry. It's okay to be, you know, you know, softer.' In my household crying and looking weak was going to get you ran over and being at WMCAT, I think all the emotions I hailed all my life is why I probably cried so much at WMCAT because I couldn't believe that I was able to be that vulnerable with anybody without them taking advantage of it.

Kirkland:

In the middle of her first semester, Rashika decided to fight for custody of her granddaughter, whom she says was in an unstable environment. Layla was one at the time.

Lee:

All the drama started right at the top of the year, while I was in school. I finally got Layla May, 2016 and I graduated June, but I was going to court before that. So I was going back and forth to court and doing school, working a part-time job. So I was doing all that at the same time.

Kirkland:

As a WMCAT student, Rashika built a support network that helped her and Layla thrive. Rashika's grandmother and sister helped look after Layla when Rashika was at school. And whenever she was feeling down, and began doubting herself, her instructors encouraged her.

Lee:

You cannot do it alone. You cannot. You can't juggle all those things alone. You need somebody to step in sometimes say, 'Hey, I'll take the kids and give you time to do your homework. Hey, do you need me to run and get the groceries or something for you?' Because we don't have enough time in the day, all the time when you're working, your parenting and you're going to school.

Kirkland:

Rashika says WMCAT students also looked out for each other.

Lee:

Like sometimes I just, I need to bounce something off you. And when you, by yourself, you can't bounce them off the kids all the time. And most times they're a part of the stress that you're having. Not that you don't love your kids or they're not important, but you're juggling school with them, school for you, work if you're one of those people that have to work. And you can't put the stress off on the kids, they don't get it. They don't understand it. So those other people being around, like I said, just, being a listening, a soundboard. You need it. You just need it.

Kirkland:

Since her peers were facing similar challenges, she thinks that allowed them to truly trust each other. Rashika says it felt like they genuinely wanted to see each other succeed.

She remembers one time there was a campus survey about what changes students wanted to see. Rashika had an idea.

Lee:

It was one girl, and I won't say her name, she was an alcoholic and came to school drunk a lot. But we all still want to see her succeed, but we felt like she needed extra help. And I felt like we needed somebody else more professional to tap into some of her things.

Kirkland:

Rashika suggested hiring a school counselor that would meet with each student individually, to make sure they were doing ok.

Lee:

My biggest thing was having a social worker or a therapist or something in the building because of all our backgrounds.

Kirkland:

Mental health challenges can prevent student parents from continuing their education and gaining employment. A [2012 study of mental health concerns among college-age students](#) found that 41% reported feeling anxiety, and [36% experienced depression](#).

WMCAT now has a case manager, a resource navigator, and a mental health clinician, all on-site.

In 2016 Rashika graduated with a certificate in medical coding and health information management. She now works for a healthcare provider, helping patients understand billing and insurance, as well as training new hires. She has also become more involved with [Ascend at the Aspen Institute, as a Parent Advisor](#). In this role, she advocates for more inclusive higher-education experiences for student-parents.

Lee:

I always had a mouth. I always had a voice. That's the one thing my mouth was loud in our home. And my mom, my grandma, my mom always used to say, you can use your mouth for something better.

Kirkland:

In advocating for others, Rashika has learned a lot about herself.

Lee:

For me I have a lot of things going on, but I'm not complaining. I mean, I don't want to get spiritual, but I believe God always had a plan for me. And my life didn't start off so great in the beginning, but now I'm starting to see what his plan was for me. I just started 45 a couple of weeks ago, but it took me till I turned 40 to really understand my purpose and what God's plan was for me. And I had to just sit back, shut up and listen, you know and let him tell me, so..

Kirkland:

Rashika's relationship with Larry has had its ups and downs, but she says they're communicating well in order to provide a supportive environment for Layla. As for Rashika's next career move, she hopes to help young women with similar backgrounds by opening a group home for teen moms.

Elizabeth Gabriel reported this story.

WMCAT is a nationally-recognized leader in creative youth development and adult workforce development. With a bias toward action and an unrelenting commitment to equity, they curate a place where teens and adults can elevate their voices and leverage their lived experiences to choose their own unique opportunity pathways. You can learn more at [WMCAT.org](https://wmcats.org).

Credits:

Thank you for listening. 1 in 5 is produced by [Lantigua Williams & Co.](https://lanticuawilliams.com) 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 and Jen Chien edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Elizabeth Nakano with Kojin Tashiro, who also wrote our theme song, “Ascenders.” Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Our theme song is by, who also contributed to mixing. Sarah McClure, Ryan Katz, Erica Hellerstein, Emily Vaughn and Ava Ahmadbeigi fact checked the series. I’m Pamela Kirkland. Follow 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

CITATION:

Gabriel, Elizabeth. “Meet Rashika Lee” 1 in 5 Podcast, Ascend at Aspen Institute, April 27, 2021. Ascend.AspenInstitute.org.