



“Meet Ariel Ventura-Lazo”

Ariel Ventura-Lazo is a first-generation American and the first in his family to attend college. A father of two, he’s faced many challenges along the way. Reporter Michael Castañeda brings us along on Ariel’s journey from nearly dropping out of high school to becoming a passionate advocate for postsecondary education, student parents, and first-generation Americans — sharing his experiences on national platforms.

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’ll meet Ariel Ventura-Lazo, a first generation American from Alexandria, Virginia. He began struggling academically in high school and later ended up dropping out of college to focus on providing for his newborn son. After several years of working an entry level job with no promotion in sight, he decided to give college another shot. This time, with support systems in place, he has found his calling as a student parent advocate.

Reporter Michael Castañeda has Ariel’s story.

Ariel Ventura-Lazo:

Everything just felt different, right. Uh, taking a shower, getting ready. The sound of my car even sounded different that day. For some reason, like, please don't let this car break down on the way over there

Castañeda:

It was a summer day in 2019, and Ariel Ventura-Lazo had somewhere very important to be. He was on his way to Howard University in Washington D.C. to be part of a panel discussion. He was excited, but nervous.

Ventura-Lazo:

I can't even find the parking area where I'm supposed to park, and I just paid for my parking on the street and walked to the, to the building and..

Castañeda:

He takes a slow walk through campus and gradually begins to calm his nerves.

Ventura-Lazo:

I started seeing a couple of people that I've worked with in the past at other organizations at the speaking engagements that I would do.

Castañeda:

That wasn't the first time Ariel had spoken in front of an audience, but he knew that this panel would be different. Seeing those familiar faces gave him some reassurance.

Ventura-Lazo:

Like I deserve to be there, right? I'm not there by accident. So that sense of ownership really kicked in when I started seeing a couple of other people there and they had asked me, they're like, "Oh, wow. I didn't know I would see you here." And I said, "yeah, I'm going to actually be on a panel with Michelle Obama." And they just kind of were, in shock and proud of me at the same time.

Castañeda:

Honestly, Ariel was a little shocked himself. Former First Lady Michelle Obama was hosting [the 2019 Beating The Odds Summit](#). This event was put on by [Reach Higher](#), the initiative she started during her time in the White House. The organization aids students in completing education past high school, whether it be a professional trade, college, or with the military. Ariel had spoken at a previous event of theirs, addressing first generation college-bound students, a group that makes up [over half of undergraduates nationally](#), on the challenges he faced as a student parent. Then he'd been invited to this summit.

When he walked into the building where the panel was taking place, he saw a packed house. There were camera crews from various networks, photographers, and students from all over Pennsylvania, Delaware, D.C., and Virginia. The former First Lady was surrounded by security guards in suits as she entered the venue. Ariel and the other panelists took a quick photo with her. Then they were ushered to the backstage area to wait until they were called on stage.

Ventura-Lazo:

You know, they're backing us up into the back of the stage before going on. And I bumped into somebody, right. I kind of slightly elbow somebody cause I didn't see them. And I turned around and it's Michelle Obama.

Castañeda:

Ariel apologized.

Ventura-Lazo:

And I was just so embarrassed at the same time, too. Like, you know, being in shock that it was actually her, that was down here in five minutes and I'm elbowing, you know, the former first lady of the United States, that's kind of like, I'm about to get tackled by some security or something.

Castañeda:

But instead, Michelle Obama took a moment for a brief conversation.

Ventura-Lazo:

She said “This is your story, you deserve to be here,” to me. “These students need to hear what you have to tell them.” I remember that.

Castañeda:

For Ariel, those words set the tone for the rest of the summit.

Ventura-Lazo:

It was a candid conversation between all of us on stage and just giving and feeding information to these students that they are first-generation students, right? Like they need to hear this information that we know.

Castañeda:

If someone had told Ariel ten years ago that one day he’d be speaking alongside a former First Lady of the United States and giving a room full of students advice on how to succeed in college, he wouldn’t have believed it. Because a decade ago, he was wondering if he’d even be able to graduate high school.

Today, he’s a 30 year old father of two and is currently finishing his last year of college at George Mason University, where he’s studying Business Management. He says getting here took a lot of advocating for himself, and finding the right people to push him forward.

Ariel says that In elementary school, he was a good student.

Ventura-Lazo:

Honor Roll. Perfect attendance one year. I would always get those bumper stickers up until middle school.

Castañeda:

Growing up, he lived in a 16 story apartment complex in Alexandria, Virginia, right across the river from Washington D.C. Right before he went to middle school, his family moved a few miles south to the suburbs in Fairfax County. He had a difficult time at his new school.

Ventura-Lazo:

I ended up having a school, a school bully, right. He would pick on the few children, you know, I'd be, I'd be one of those kids that he would pick on. And that persisted for the entirety of my time in middle school. He was bigger than me.

Castañeda:

Ariel lived with his mother Adela, step dad, and two younger step brothers. He wasn’t raised by his biological father and though he saw him once every other month, Ariel says he really wasn’t part of his life.

Ventura-Lazo:

There would be brief visits, at his place of employment, which was, I think it was like a small grocery store in old town Alexandria. But, uh, it was just a, “Hey, how are you doing son? How are things, uh, hope you're doing good,” you know, small, small chat here and there. And he'd give me maybe like 50 or 60 bucks.

Castañeda:

He wasn't close to his step father either, who he felt never treated him like his own son. Growing up, both Adela and his stepfather worked multiple jobs, so Ariel was in charge of his brothers for most of the day. He wasn't allowed out of the apartment to play. He felt isolated. So when his family moved to the suburbs and he was older, he had more freedom. But his grades dropped.

Ventura-Lazo:

Maybe ninth grade I did ok. 10th grade, I did very mediocre and then 11th and 12th grade was a drag. I actually failed my 12th grade year. Um, I kind of said, you know, maybe this just wasn't meant to be. Um, I was skipping a lot. Um, I was just kind of putting homework to the side. I wasn't studying. I wasn't motivated at all.

Castañeda:

After he failed the 12th grade in 2008, he had an opportunity to repeat his senior year. He remembers two of his classmates who at that point were in college asking him, “What are you still doing there? You should be in college with the rest of us.” But Ariel's grades didn't improve. His mother, Adela, was worried.

Adela:

I was pushing him to, to graduate. And I remember one time that I went to see his counselor and, the counselor told him, “Ariel you need to go, you can't be here your whole life. I know you love a lot of the school, but I prefer you to, to come back here, for teacher doing teaching student, not to stay here as a student.”

Castañeda:

Adela sensed she needed to do something. So she sat him down.

Ventura-Lazo:

My mom, we had a huge conversation together and it was at, you know, it was at a moment where I needed it because I was on the verge of failing 12th grade again, for the second time. And that's the last place I want to be being a first-generation American, you know, trying to be the first in my family to get a degree.

She kinda just told me her journey of how she migrated over here to the United States of America from El Salvador. And the reason why she did it, it wasn't just something that she wanted to do out of nowhere. It's kinda the fact that she had no option in the eighties when she was there trying to study and go to school.

She was trying to be a nurse at the time, but there were many disputes going on in the government. It was basically a civil war breaking out and it was a very dangerous one. People were dying every day. Uh, they've witnessed many murders and it was, it was a decision that she had to make ultimately, uh, for her own life and for the future of our children.

So it wasn't just out of nowhere, she left because she had to leave and she had nowhere else to go.

Castañeda:

This was the first time Ariel had heard his mom's full story. He says it made him think about all those nights his mom would get home from work as a bus driver, spend a little bit of time with him and his siblings, and then go back out for her second job. Hearing her story made him realize she didn't make that journey just to watch him fail. He needed to turn things around.

Eventually, Ariel passed the classes he needed to pass, and in 2009 he became the first person in his family to graduate from high school.

Adela:

I still can't believe it, that he did his high school graduation. It was very hard. Um, many time, I, I was sad thinking that he not gonna make it. And, um, the day of the graduation I was so glad that he passed the grade and, and then he graduate.

Ventura-Lazo:

No words at all to explain the achievements. Still one of my most memorable moments

Castañeda:

After graduating, he wasn't sure of the direction he wanted to take his life, but he was at least ready to take the next steps.

In March of 2009 Ariel got a job working at the cash handling company Loomis. A few months later he registered for the fall semester at Northern Virginia Community College.

Ventura-Lazo:

It was a really cool experience, but there wasn't many opportunity for growth in there unless you had a degree or unless you knew somebody that knew somebody, the hours were just, they just weren't working for me. I'd be there in the morning to eight or nine or sometimes 10pm at night.

Castañeda:

Working 60 hours a week was a lot to handle while trying to figure out how to navigate college. So Ariel decided to take a break from school.

Ventura-Lazo:

A couple of months after that, uh, I found out that my girlfriend and I, we were pregnant. And so I kind of felt cornered to stay in the workforce at that point. It was, uh, intimidating to say the least. I was, I was in disarray. I wasn't quite sure how it was supposed to work out because um, my biological dad, uh, he wasn't really a part of my life. I did have a stepdad that stepped in, but that also was kind of a, uh, it wasn't a successful relationship. I wouldn't say it was a failed relationship, but there was definitely room for improvement. Not having a father, and now becoming one. There's like a big gap.

Castañeda:

Ariel was worried about how he was going to support his family financially, but also about what kind of father he was going to be.

Ventura-Lazo:

There was a lot of wisdom and knowledge that I wish I had learned over the years.

Castañeda:

He knew the choices he made going forward wouldn't just affect him and his girlfriend Naraya, but now they would also affect their son.

Ventura-Lazo:

Sometimes people come in your life for a reason. They're there literally just to give you what you need to keep going.

Castañeda:

Enter Jamie. He was one of Ariel's coworkers at Loomis. A young father with two daughters.

Ventura-Lazo:

We were counting money together for about a year. And I had told him that I was pregnant, about to have a kid, but I, I shared with them that I was honestly scared. And through multiple conversations, he had two young daughters at that at his age. I think he was at the time 23 or 24. And I think he was a teen dad as well, but he did let me know that you do figure it out.

Castañeda:

"You do figure it out." Hearing those words from a man he could relate to, made a big impact on Ariel.

Ventura-Lazo:

You do figure it out no matter what, whether you had a parent in your life and now you do figure it out. You know, the love that you have for them is, it's a lot of love. So he did, he did help build my confidence into being a father.

Castañeda:

Still, after Ariel and Naraya had their son Ariel Jr., a lot changed.

Ventura-Lazo:

And so once I had my baby boy, everything just started kind of unraveling the way it needed to. You know, the bills are stacking, um, not making the sufficient amount of money that should be making to provide for my family. And so we decided to take a step back. I decided to take a step back and just submerge myself into school. One more time.

Castañeda:

Ariel re-enrolled at [Northern Virginia Community College](#), also known as NOVA, in 2014. Both he and Naraya had done research on programs that could support their educational goals-- and they both took advantage of the same one.

Ventura-Lazo:

There was a scholarship program called Generation Hope and it was a teen parent scholarship program. And my girlfriend at the time, she took advantage of it the year before I did. I joined the following cohort.

Castañeda:

[Generation Hope](#) is a D.C. based non profit, founded in 2010, that provides scholarships, mentorship, and early childcare services to young parents who are in college. Now that Ariel had quit his job, they needed money to pay for school. Generation Hope provides scholarships of up to \$1,200 per year to students attending a two year institution and also gave Ariel a laptop his first semester back. But even with some of those expenses taken care of, Ariel and Naraya still needed money for food and housing.

Ventura-Lazo:

And my family and I, we were eligible for [SNAP](#), which is food stamps. We were eligible for [TANF](#), which is temporary assistance for needy families. You know, we were eligible for the childcare, it's called C-Car, and they're able to provide us, uh, the childcare while we went to work and juggled school as well.

Castañeda:

Generation Hope provided Ariel and Naraya with a case manager to make sure they were receiving those state assistance programs. They also paired Ariel with a mentor who helped connect him to other supports, and whose financial contributions directly funded Ariel's scholarship. This mentor's guidance would play a big role in Ariel's life.

Ventura-Lazo:

His name was Billy Ray Davis. A really wonderful, wonderful man. To this very day, every now and then I call him and catch up with him.

Castañeda:

Billy Ray was the Associate Director for Communications, Marketing, and Enrollment Support at NOVA, and he helped Ariel get a work study job in NOVA's Adult Career Pathways program, doing mostly administrative work. The program assists students in improving their employment opportunities. Billy Ray explains.

Billy Ray:

Say you're working as an accountant and you're like, "okay, I really want to move up in the accounting chain. And so I want to become an executive accountant, but I need two or three classes to be able to take this test, to do that." Through adult career pathways program NOVA would get you in, get you those tests, give you the supports that you need to get you to pass that test and hopefully then get on and move your career forward.

Ventura-Lazo:

So the job itself was more of an opportunity to get a better foothold into being able to be successful in college and also an opportunity as well, for me to learn from my colleagues, which I had amazing colleagues, even though it was a low paying job, you know, you can't substitute, uh, money for knowledge and experience and wisdom. And I had amazing and amazing circle around me, at the department that I worked for as a work study. And I was able to grow from that, learn from them.

Castañeda:

Billy Ray and Ariel worked together in the same building, just up the street from NOVA's Alexandria campus.

Ventura-Lazo:

I had earned six scholarships throughout my time there. And, you know, he would drive me to James Madison University to go receive scholarships. It was really good to have our car rides. I would always learn something from him, you know, that I wish I kind of had that growing up, but better, late than never. But, it was such an honor to have, uh, somebody by my side to just be proud of me to just show his support by just being there in his presence and mental support, moral support.

Castañeda:

Billy Ray remembers one of those scholarship dinners in particular.

Billy Ray:

Ariel was a community college student. A lot of the other students that are being recognized were residential students at the four year university. And people were telling a lot of stories about, you know, what their experience was and what they overcame to get there. But I thought it was really poignant to just kind of see, he could see himself in a light with these other students who were all just equally as accomplished as him, and really had kind of persevered through a lot of things to get to where they were.

Castañeda:

Billy Ray also helped with some very concrete needs, like the time Ariel was facing a car repair he couldn't afford. Billy Ray immediately called NOVA, since he worked with the financial department and knew funds were available, and got him an emergency grant of about \$1,000 for car repairs. And, they really connected around issues of family.

Billy Ray:

Conversations about fatherhood were a regular part of our relationship. I established in the very beginning, you know, I said, “One of the most important jobs you're going to have in your life is being a dad.” And so we talked about budgeting, how do you budget your household, how to manage, okay, your idea about a budget versus Naraya’s idea in spending. You know, we talked about conflict resolution. You know, how, when you get really mad and, and what you want to do, and you don't want to do, you don't want to do things that, that scar your relationship, that, to leave permanent marks.

Castañeda:

Billy Ray wasn’t the only one at NOVA that was looking out for Ariel.

Ventura-Lazo:

I had some mentors in there as well, that motivated me to keep going.

Castañeda:

Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon, the Executive Director of Adult Career Pathways, would also become an important figure in his life.

Ventura-Lazo:

She knew a slight bit of my story at the time because of, uh, one of the, one of my counselors for the adult career pathways programs, passed on the information and she came up to me, the director of the program, and she came up to me, and said, “We need you to be in Washington, DC. Uh, in a couple of days at eight o'clock in the morning, do you think you can make it?” And she told me because it was, I was a non-traditional student. I was a father while in school and working and they thought I'd make a great, a great fit for me to be there.

Castañeda:

“There” meant [The Aspen Institute’s Headquarters](#) in Washington DC. Kerin had connections to Ascend at the Aspen Institute, and working alongside Ariel, realized that he’d be a good fit to speak at one of their upcoming forums on children and families. Ariel didn’t quite know what he was getting himself into, but there was no way he was going to turn it down.

Ventura-Lazo:

And I said, sure, I'll go. I'll be there. And I get there and there's maybe 300 people in the crowd and I wasn't expecting that at all. But, you know, nonetheless, I went up there.

Castañeda:

An opportunity like this is exactly why he took the job on campus.

Ventura-Lazo:

And they basically asked me about my, share my story and asked me, you know, questions about how I'm doing it. What's working, what's not working for student parents, like you who are essentially, working part-time or full-time jobs going to school, but also having to, you know, read a bedtime book for your children at the end of the night. And they really

wanted to find out more about that. And essentially what happened was I got an invitation in a few months to join them in Aspen, Colorado to share more about it.

Castañeda:

Ariel became a [Parent Advisor](#) with the [Aspen Postsecondary Success for Parents Initiative](#), or PSP. The PSP Initiative raises awareness about student parents and shares recommendations to increase their educational success. It's guided by a comprehensive two-generation approach that supports children and their parents simultaneously.

During this time Ariel's speaking engagements snowballed. He spoke at events for organizations like [The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), [The Lumina Foundation](#), and [The Center For Law and Social Policy](#), in cities across the U.S. from San Francisco, to Orlando.

Ventura-Lazo:

I'm a first generation American. I'm a student parent. I was a teen parent. I come from a low-income household. I fit a lot of the demographics that, many of these organizations are fighting for and are providing, uh, students like myself, a voice and a platform for, and so, I would go just because I really wanted to do it.

I didn't care if it was paid. I didn't care if it was gas out of my pocket, you know, I would take off from work several hours to make this happen because it's something I really wanted other students in my position to benefit from, whatever demographic that may fit in. I really want them to have an easier life years and years down the road when policy is being made, and all of these thoughts and ideas are being considered ultimately to benefit from that.

Castañeda:

Ariel's passion on the subject comes through, not only when he's speaking to a large audience, but also when speaking one-on-one. We were on a video call and through my computer screen I could see a very animated Ariel, all smiles, telling me about his work and life, which these days are very much intertwined.

Ventura-Lazo:

Okay. So it was a two generation approach is basically including parent and child, right? So not just have it parent focused with the children in mind, but also have the children focus with the parent in mind as well. So.

Oh, gosh, I'm sorry.

Castañeda:

No, no, it's fine! Go ahead!

Ventura-Lazo:

My daughter came in.

Hey baby. How you doing? Come here, Nana. Come here baby. So this is exactly the two generation approach is like the fact that, Say “Hi”.

Naliya:

Hi.

Ventura-Lazo:

So, it's the fact that your children can come in at any time. Whether you're on Zoom, uh, whether you're recording a podcast, whether you're doing an online exam, trying to study, and there's a lot that you can control, but there's certain things that you can't control, right?

Castañeda:

By focusing on the outcomes of both parents and children, the goal becomes multigenerational sustained success. And as Ariel's input as a [Parent Advisor](#) has helped develop this approach, he's also been finetuning his own approach at managing school, work, and family life, even as his own family grows.

In 2016, as Ariel was traveling for speaking engagements, taking classes at NOVA, working, and raising his son, he and Naraya became pregnant with their second child, their daughter. This time around Ariel was better prepared.

Ventura-Lazo:

My daughter was born January 29th, which is, uh, the same date that our first exam for that pre-calculus class was as well. It was, it was so crazy.

Castañeda:

Ariel spent all night in a hospital with his wife and new daughter, then barely made it to his exam on time.

Ventura-Lazo:

Literally go to class with my hospital band on, right. And I take the exam, no sleep. I felt like a zombie and the students around me, they just kind of were like, “Hey, what's that? Um, why do you have a hospital band on?” “ I just came from the hospital.” You, they think it's something serious. Like, I don't know, like something that I'm sick and I'm like, no, I just had, I just had a baby.

Castañeda:

Ariel remembers how surprised his classmates were.

Ventura-Lazo:

The whole class was in awe, that there is a number one, a parent. And number two, a young parent. Number three, a father nonetheless. Right. You don't see many young fathers in college.

Castañeda:

According to data from 2018, [more than 1/5 of undergraduate students are parents](#) and [30% of those parents are fathers](#), making up over one million students. Student parents are more likely to be people of color, they tend to be older, and have nearly twice the student loan debt than students who are not parents.

Ventura-Lazo:

I'm happy. I get excited when I see another young father in college. I've had run-ins with a couple of other young fathers and it's, it's a very small demographic. So, you know, everybody was in awe to see a young dad that just had another baby come to class at 6:30, 7 o'clock in the morning to take an exam. It's just something that's, you don't really see that too often. That also helps gas my tank and motivate me to keep going to the finish line.

Nana, I signed you up for swim practice. Do you wanna learn how to swim?

Naliya:

Yeah! In like a big pool?

Ventura-Lazo:

Yeah, like a big pool.

Naliya:

In like, like mom has?

Ventura-Lazo:

No. A bigger pool.

Naliya:

I don't like bigger pools.

Ventura-Lazo:

Oh no. You're going to learn how to swim with daddy, together, okay?

Naliya:

Ok.

Ventura-Lazo:

Sound good?

Naliya:

And Pip too?

Ventura-Lazo:

Pip already knows how to swim, but we'll put them in something like soccer.

Castañeda:

Ariel is continuing to grow into his fatherhood. Looking back, he can see the moments in his life, in and outside the classroom, where he needed someone to give him a push, a confidence boost.

Ventura-Lazo:

I was always the shy one in the classroom. I mean, even up until like ninth and 10th grade, uh, was, I didn't have the confidence in myself to trial for the basketball team.

Castañeda:

Now he's ready and eager to be that person for his son, who's now 10 years old.

Ventura-Lazo:

Yeah, so like last year, um, I signed him up for soccer. He was very, he was very shy in school, still.

Castañeda:

Just like Ariel was.

Ventura-Lazo:

He was, uh, timid and I wanted him to kind of break out of that. So I signed him up for soccer, but he wasn't like gung ho about it. So I pushed him, you know, to open up, if he really wants to do this, we can definitely do this. Like, I'll get you signed up and we'll figure out what we need, you know, soccer ball, soccer, cleats, all of that stuff. And you know, he was right there practicing and he got to break out of his shell.

Castañeda:

And Ariel also recognizes the importance of giving his son the head start that he didn't have.

Ventura-Lazo:

I was able to, uh, give my son, who happened to be in one of the daycares that was partnered with our institution and I was able to give them a tour of the campus. Uh, so it was called, uh, Crayons to College, the program. And essentially what we do is we, uh, show younger children how the college works, what, what a college campus looks like in hopes of interjecting the idea of a post-secondary education while they're young. So that was a two gen approach that we had at the college at the time, which was a really invaluable experience that I was able to do for my son.

Castañeda:

And like her big brother, Naliya is eager to take on new challenges. Although she may not be ready for the deep end just yet.

Ventura-Lazo:

You ready to swim in a, in a big pool?

Naliya:

No!

Ventura-Lazo:

In what kind of pool?

Naliya:

A small pool.

Ventura-Lazo:

In a small pool?

Naliya:

Yeah.

Ventura-Lazo:

Okay. Well, daddy's going to be there, too, ok?

Naliya:

Ok. And Pip too?

Ventura-Lazo:

Okay. Yes, your brother too.

Naliya:

Alright? Put your hat on..

Castañeda:

If the right pieces are combined, generational success can create a compounding effect.

Ariel's mother Adela left her home to create opportunities for herself and her children. And now, Ariel is doing the same for his own. And he wants to continue advocating for other students.

Ventura-Lazo:

Especially, uh, students that follow my demographic. They're first-generation students, never been to college, never stepped foot on a college campus. Uh, they didn't know that they were going to make it this far in life.

Castañeda:

The next piece he's working on is finishing his degree in Business Management from George Mason University. He expects to graduate at the end of this year. Adela is looking forward to it.

Adela:

I'm so excited, I can't wait for that day. He said, "Mom, you're going to see me doing that?" So I'm expecting that. I don't want to miss the day.

Kirkland:

Michael Castañeda reported this story.

[Generation Hope](#) uses a two-generation approach by surrounding motivated teen parents and their children with mentors, emotional support, and financial resources that they need to thrive in college and kindergarten. Find them at [generationhope.org](#).

Credits:

Thank you for listening. 1 in 5 is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. and presented by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](#), and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter.

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