



“Meet Lynnette Coney”

Lynnette Coney had always dreamed of working in healthcare, but her educational journey was full of starts and stops. With multiple family caretaking responsibilities on her plate, support with childcare, parenting, and financial planning was critical. Reporter Lisa Bartfai details Lynnette’s setbacks and successes on her way to becoming a nurse.

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 getting to know Lynnette Coney.

Lynnette is a single mom with three boys in Sarasota, Florida. She’s always wanted to deliver babies and work with newborns. With the help of a counselor at her son’s school, she got a chance to go back to school herself, and work toward her dream job in the healthcare field.

Reporter Lisa Bartfai has Lynnette’s story.

Lynnette Coney:

Delvin, tie your shoe.

Kids:

Mom can we go to the water?

Coney:

Nope. Cause neither one of y'all can swim and I can't run that fast.

Bartfai:

It's a mild Florida day in mid-December. Lynnette Coney is in the park with her three sons: Delvin, Dei'Layis, and Dakar'Ray.

Coney:

So my oldest is 11, he's in black and white. And then I have the one in the red is my middle one. He's nine. And my baby just turned five on the first.

Bartfai:

Whitaker Gateway Park is on the water, right by Sarasota Bay. Lynnette takes her kids there on special occasions; a birthday party, or a baby shower. She likes it because it's calm. Not like the neighborhood where they're currently living.

Coney:

So far, I've had like two shootings where I stay at and you could see the bullet holes in the windows and the roofs and stuff. And it's just like, I just can't, I don't want my kids there. I don't, my kids shouldn't grow up around something like that. So I'm really trying to work on getting a career, being able to save money and to purchase my own place.

Bartfai:

It hasn't been an easy path, but Lynnette has made some real headway on that career. She's studying to eventually become a registered nurse.

Coney:

As of right now, I'm enrolled at the State College of Florida and I'm trying to get my pre-reqs out of the way for RN right now during the pandemic. And yeah, that's pretty much it, education wise.

Bartfai:

Lynnette has dreamt of working in healthcare for a long time.

Coney:

So, I've always wanted, like I love babies. I love babies, babies, babies. So I've like, I've always wanted to have like 10 kids, but now these days I'm like, uh, no. So, um, I want it to be an obstetricianist, I can deliver babies. That's always been my dream job. That's what I want to do. So I just decided to, you know, work my way up the ladder.

Bartfai:

And at the age of 19 she started really working towards that dream, by enrolling in a CNA, or certified nursing assistant program.

Coney:

I did CNA my first year out of high school.

Bartfai:

She started that program in 2003. But it would be a journey full of starts and stops.

Coney:

I was inexperienced, you know, and I didn't have anybody to tell me, "Hey, you should do this." "Hey, you should do that," or, "This is what you should do." "This is what you should do," or you know, "what are your interests in school?" So I didn't have a mentor, shall I say, anybody to show me, you know, what I needed to do.

Bartfai:

Lynnette was separated from her biological parents when she was about nine, so a lot of her upbringing was in foster care. And although she's kept a relationship with her biological parents throughout her life, they didn't give her much guidance when it came to college and career.

Coney:

So I was like, you know what, let me just go ahead and get my CNA since that's what I really want to do. I'll go and get my CNA. And then I forgot all about taking the test and all that. So, I kind of just skipped over that.

Bartfai:

Lynnette still has never worked as a certified nursing assistant, despite having taken all the classes and eventually getting her certification. Instead, life happened. Lynnette became a mom in 2009 and things just got too hectic. But a few years later, she felt ready to give school another go.

Coney:

And I was working at Arby's at the time and you know, it was just one kid at the moment. And then everything was good. So I finally got into public housing, which I'm not proud of, but it's a small step. So I got into public housing with my first child. I ended up having my second child two years later. So that's when I was like, I need to, you know, get my stuff out of the way.

Bartfai:

She wanted to take the next step towards her dream of working with babies in healthcare. Lynnette was all set to start studying for a Licenced Practical Nurse degree when her little cousins' mom went through some difficult times.

Coney:

Their mom had some issues at the moment. So I had to take care of them for a full year. So it kind of pushed everything that I had going on back.

Bartfai:

That's who Lynnette is. Someone who cares for those around her. Everyone I talk to says the same thing about her, she's always eager to help. And she takes care of family, no matter what.

Coney:

I'm the rock of the family, basically, is what people would say because every time they need something or they're in trouble, I'm the person they come to. And it's really taxing, and it's really, really taxing.

Bartfai:

There were several years when Lynnette's dreams of delivering babies and owning a home were put on hold. She was busy working in fast food and raising her three kids as a single parent.

She was also financially supporting her biological mom at this time. Lynnette had briefly lived with her after moving out of foster care, and always felt a strong connection. Now, not only was she helping out with bills, but also managing her mom's diabetes care.

While all of this stuff was going on in the family, Lynnette never entirely gave up on her career ambitions. And one day, an opportunity to go back to school came from an unexpected place — her sons' school.

Coney:

I was out at [Alta Vista](#), you know, picking my son up and one of the counselors there stopped me and she's like, "I have this program that's like three years long. And it's for single moms, it helps you budget, you know, become stable," stuff like that. And she's like, "Do you want to sign up?" And I said, "Sure, why not?"

Bartfai:

The program was called [Pathways to Prosperity](#). It offered wrap-around services for single moms who wanted to pursue a college degree. The women who got into the program would get help with a variety of things, from budgeting, to providing support at family doctor's visits — the kind of stuff that can take a parent's attention off school.

Lynnette only had 30 days to get her application turned in. It seemed like a stretch. But she was ready. She had recently had her third son, and [gotten a scholarship to pay for his daycare](#). Everything was lined up.

Coney:

I listened to all these other moms talk about \$300 a month. I couldn't even imagine, not even a month a week. I couldn't imagine that— that's a lot. So I was, you know, blessed with the free daycare. So I took advantage of it. I had daycare, kids was in school. I might as well just, you know, focus on me and try to, you know, do better for my kids and get outside of where we at. And all the violence and stuff over in that area that really kind of pushed me, you know, to get into school, go back to school and get a better career. Cause you can't do nothing with just a job. You need a career. You have to have a career in order to survive.

Bartfai:

The counselor who suggested the program was Mary Tucker. She's currently a Parent Education Navigator at [Alta Vista Elementary School](#).

Mary Tucker:

When I came here five years ago, it was to help our parents, um, with post-secondary education.

Bartfai:

Many of the parents at Alta Vista [don't have a strong academic background](#) themselves. That makes it harder for them to help their kids with school work, or get very far in their own careers. The principal at Alta Vista hoped to change that dynamic through opportunities like Pathways to Prosperity, and another program called [Parent University](#).

Tucker:

So it's the idea that the parents can come to all come to school while their children are in school. And my goal is to get the parents into the class and then help support them through that class and help them overcome any barriers that they may have.

Bartfai:

All of this reflects a 2 generation, or 2-GEN approach. The idea is that parents and children are more likely to succeed together. Supporting parents in getting a degree or work-force credential is a core part of the [2GEN concept](#).

Tucker:

It's just wonderful to watch the parents be able to do what they're able to do while their kids are in school and help support that. And the kids love it when their parents come to school and they get to walk in with them or have lunch with them or whatever that may be. So it's been fun to watch — or they go home and study with each other.

Bartfai:

Parent University happens in the summers while the younger learners are in school. Parents participate for an hour a week, choosing from a variety of classes that are offered right there at the elementary school.

It's been a great hit for several years now. And Lynnette participated when her sons were younger too. But, Pathways to Prosperity, the program she had to apply to get into, was specifically for single moms. It wasn't just about having class to go to. It was there to help with all the other life things that can make it hard for moms to achieve academic success — things like childcare, housing, and transportation. The program was a collaboration between Alta Vista, Parenting Matters, Women's Resource Center, and The Community Foundation of Sarasota.

They partnered with the Suncoast Technical College, or STC, so that the moms could take a range of different college level courses. Lynnette still had her eyes set on becoming a Licensed Practical Nurse, or an LPN. And she started at STC in 2016. Her youngest son Dakar'Ray was still an infant.

Coney:

It was full-time classes. So it was from 7:45 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. I believe - 2:15 p.m., 2:30 p.m. - something like that.

Bartfai:

The LPN program demands a lot of work in a short time. But the other responsibilities wouldn't stop for Lynnette just because she was now in school.

Coney:

I had a lot of issues that year too with, um, especially my middle one with the school and his issues I had to, I was called every day. I had to go to the school and pick him up every day. So it was kind of hard on me trying to, you know, go get through class and not miss so many days out of class, because in school they only give you a certain amount of days — like it's like six days in like six months, you can miss out of the class before they drop you.

Bartfai:

Lynnette says that there were other parents in her class too, but it didn't change the college's expectations.

Coney:

They was not accommodating at all. They kind of reiterated the fact that, you know, I can only miss so many days of leave-early, so many days of school.

Bartfai:

Lynnette is serious about school. Both her own and her sons'. She wasn't about to neglect her kids' education to finish her own program.

Coney:

A lot of people, or shall I say a lot of universities or colleges or whatever, don't know the struggle of a student-parent, like what we have to do and what they, what we sacrifice, you know, for school, that I don't think they know, you know, the hurdles that we jumped.

Bartfai:

And then there was the money. Although the Pathways to Prosperity program included a stipend. It took a while for the money to come through. In the meantime, Lynnette got nervous. She had quit her job at the Salvation Army, but now she was rethinking that decision.

Coney:

I had started using up my savings and to pay my bills and then I was running out of money. So I decided to go back to work, but I was only going to work four days instead of five. So that kind of messed me up because I was working 3 p.m. to 11 p.m.. So I wasn't able to study. They wanted you to study at least three hours a day and I couldn't get that in. So I wasn't studying for tests. I would try to stay up till like 1 a.m. in the morning and try to go over some stuff, even tried to work at, do it at work. But you know, the clients wouldn't, you know, kept coming up, bothering me. So I wasn't able to get any of the studying done. So that's kind of why I was failing tests.

Bartfai:

After failing her third test. Lynnette was forced to leave the program.

Failing out hit Lynnette hard. Mary Tucker, the Parent Education Navigator, remembers that time.

Tucker:

And one of the things that I admired about Lynnette so much at that time was that it really brought her self confidence down when that happened, but she pulled herself right back up, went in and spoke to the director of STC at the health sciences and said, "I want to come back. I want to do this again." And he said, "Let's do it."

Bartfai:

Lynnette was able to go back to STC, the [SunCoast Technical College](#) a few months later. She started more or less at the point in the semester where she had left off. Things were different this time around. Those wrap-around services that Pathways to Prosperity offered really kicked in and Lynnette had more support.

[The Community Foundation of Sarasota County](#) pitched in with financial assistance.

Coney:

They wanted me to focus on school and not worry about having bills to pay and stuff like that. So they didn't really want me to work, but they did allow me to just to work on the weekends if I wanted to. They really helped me out a lot.

Bartfai:

The living stipend was a huge step. But the help didn't end there.

Tucker:

[Regina Morris from the Women's Resource Center](#) really worked on finances with her to work on budgeting.

Bartfai:

Regina and Lynnette had envelopes for different kinds of expenses. One for groceries, one for gas money, and so on. It was a concrete way to keep track of how much she spent. And they created a calendar together to make it easier to stay on top of bills. With tools like that, Lynnette could spend less time worrying about money and more time focusing on school.

And because parenting is relentless, Mary was also helpful when it came to the kids.

Tucker:

I was the person that was working with Lynnette on parenting. And so, home visits as needed by Lynnette: working with her on the kids, what were any problems that she was having with the kids or concerns that she was having about the kids, were their behavioral

problems, anything that might be going on in the home, and what could I do to help her with that?

Bartfai:

Lynnette got help from a lot of different organizations during her time in the Pathways to Prosperity program.

Today, she wants to give back. She serves on several nonprofit boards in the Sarasota area, giving her perspective and input on what single parents and their kids need to succeed. Always volunteering, always eager to pay forward some of the help she got.

That's how she met [Nicole Light](#), the education officer at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Nicole has known Lynnette for about a year and a half through the work she does supporting other student parents.

Nicole Light:

I would say the biggest barrier that student-parents have to first grapple with is do they have enough time? And then I would say a close second is, a lot of it is self-confidence and feeling like they're not worthy of whatever success the next part of their life can bring if they pursue a post-secondary path. I would say those are probably the two most common hurdles.

Bartfai:

Self-confidence is something that she saw Lynnette struggling with too.

Light:

She was one of those moms that she was plagued by a lot of self doubt, a lot of feeling like a failure. She has three boys, and that's a lot for one person for anybody, any parent to try to manage. And as a single parent, there were times when she just felt completely overwhelmed. So thankfully, we did have supports in place and we were able to continually encourage her to, to keep moving forward. And what Lynnette really demonstrated was a lot of her own initiative, her own desire to really want to get to that next place.

Bartfai:

Nicole says she's learned a lot from Lynnette about what life is like for students, balancing kids and school. She thinks that community organizations and society as a whole could be a lot better at understanding and supporting student-parents. And it all starts with listening.

Light:

And I think the first step is awareness. And I think one way that we are doing that, is we have recently convened a parent advisory council and getting the voice of the parents directly. Getting that parent voice, hearing what their challenges, hearing how honest they are about how much they want to change their lives for the better. They want to move forward.

Bartfai:

There was another big source of help for Lynnette. This one, closer to home.

Coney:

My dad was my biggest help because he would drop my little ones off to daycare.

Bartfai:

Lynnette's dad hasn't always been this present in her life.

Coney:

I've always known who my parents was. Even growing up in foster care, even when we would drive down 27th street, I would see, cause my dad has a special walk because of his hip replacement when he was a teenager. So, he kinda, like, has a special walk and I would see him and I was like, "Oh, that's my dad."

Bartfai:

Lynnette's dad had a crack cocaine addiction. But when she found herself in an unstable housing situation with her first baby and no help from her son's father, he came through.

Coney:

I can say my kids really saved my dad cause he was a drug addict. And when I really, really needed him, he went cold turkey with the drugs.

Bartfai:

I call Lynnette on a Saturday morning in March. We connect over a crackly Zoom line. It's already hot in Sarasota, so the fan in Lynnette's room is on full blast and the door to the living room is open. Lynnette's dad is there to watch the kids while we talk. I hear him chatting with the three boys in front of the TV. She sighs and tells me jokingly that sometimes it's like having four kids around.

Coney:

When mommy's not home, you know, we can play, we do whatever, let's forget what mama said.

Bartfai:

But really, she says she's just so proud of him for getting clean and being there for her kids. And she's so proud of her sons for giving her dad a new reason to live.

Coney:

No matter what, if I need him, he's there. If I work overtime, he's there. I give him lip, but it's okay. He's still going to watch them. But you know, I'm proud of him for that. And I appreciate him for that.

Bartfai:

With the support of her dad, Mary at Alta Vista Elementary School, Nicole at the Community Foundation, and Regina at Women's Resource Center, Lynnette graduated from the LPN program in the summer of 2018.

Bartfai:

During the pandemic Lynnette started taking her pre-reqs at the [State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota](#). She needs those credits to get into a registered nurse program. Two classes at once is what Lynnette has time for right now, between work and managing the kids' school during Covid.

Coney:

By the rates that I'm going, it's going to be at least three years if I do it.

Bartfai:

It feels like a long time. But she's learned from previous experience that taking on more isn't sustainable. And she's not losing sight of her goals now. The next step is to move out of public housing and into her own place.

Coney:

You know, pay a mortgage on something that is mine. And that's why I'm like so hell-bent on finishing school, going to school and doing all that.

Bartfai:

Through these years of different programs and schools, Lynnette's learned a lot about what enables her to be a successful student and parent.

Coney:

The most important thing I would just say, stay focused. I mean, losing focus is, it's so easy to do, but if you stay focused, I mean, it all works out in the end.

Bartfai:

Lynnette's got the focus part down on her own. When it comes to the support, she's got her dad. And she knows that she can always lean on Mary, Nicole, and the others she met through Pathways to Prosperity. And now, as a volunteer and advocate herself, she can support other student-parents on their journeys.

Kirkland:

Lisa Bartfai reported this story with Kathryn De La Rosa.

You can find more information about the Community Foundation of Sarasota County at www.cfsarasota.org. And find the Women's Resource Center of Sarasota County at www.mywrc.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.

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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