



## “Meet Lesley Del Rio”

When Lesley Del Rio became pregnant at age 18, she faced shame and stigma — even from those who were supposed to be helping, like doctors and social service providers. Since that time, she’s made erasing that shame and stigma part of her life and work. Reporter Laura Isensee shines a light on Lesley’s resilience and strength as she leans on her family and a great coach to balance parenting, school and work even through the lows of the pandemic.

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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 spending time with Lesley Del Rio in Denver, Colorado. She became a mom at 18, and says discouragement and stigma followed many of her attempts to find help and resources. Through her own difficult experiences, she’s reexamined what it means to offer support, in a way that’s inclusive and free of judgement. Now, she finds strength in advising other student parents while she stays focused on her goals.

Reporter Laura Isensee brings us Lesley’s story.

Laura Isensee:

Lesley Del Rio is one of [nearly 4 million student parents](#) in the United States. And like the majority of mothers in college, she’s a single mom.

Lesley Del Rio:

My son is like the driving force, like you know, for my life.

Isensee:

Her son Leonardo, Leo for short, is 10 years old.

The pandemic has made life harder for families across the country, especially student-parents like Lesley who are juggling multiple roles.

Del Rio:

I've always been the primary caretaker of my child. And now I am his wrestling buddy. I am his Nerf gun war person. I'm also his math teacher. I'm also, you know, his therapist trying to help him balance, you know, emotional breakdowns during the day, while also being a full-time student and a full-time employee.

Isensee:

One thing Lesley misses a lot — those small moments in her day where she could shift from one role to the next.

COVID-19 has made those precious moments disappear.

Del Rio:

Now it's all muddled into one. It's I wake up, I go downstairs, I make breakfast, I wash the dishes. I make sure Leo's logged on. I help him with his homework. I'm also trying to be as fully present in my job that 100 percent pays my bills and puts food on the table. And then after that, after I slither away from my desk to make a late dinner snack, then I slither back onto my desk until like nine, 10, 11 P.M. to do schoolwork.

Isensee:

Many universities and their policies treat student-parents like they're invisible, even though extra support can sometimes mean the difference between a degree and dropping out.

Lesley knows these things through her own personal experience. Lesley has shown the world, "Yes, I can," ever since she became pregnant at the age of 18.

At her first prenatal visit, she was embarrassed by the physician.

Del Rio:

I was so nervous and scared because I was facing this alone. I wasn't ready to tell my mom. And I didn't want to burden anybody else with this.

Isensee:

This is Lesley speaking at the [2019 Aspen ThinkXChange](#), a national forum to address complex social problems.

The focus was "advancing family prosperity," especially families who've been historically marginalized. Different people exchanged ideas on how to move families forward, including policy-makers, researchers and parents like Lesley.

She shared her personal story and how sometimes she found that so-called support came with a lot of stigma.

Del Rio:

Too often, the human services industry forgets about the humanity of the families it serves.

Isensee:

One exception was her high school.

Del Rio:

I graduated high school in 2013, at the age of 21 from a load of supports from Florence Crittenton services.

Isensee:

At [Florence Crittenton High School](#) in Denver, teen parents can earn a diploma and access services like [support groups, art therapy and an early childhood education center](#).

But elsewhere, Lesley found harsh judgment when she looked for resources as a single mom.

Like when filing for child support at the department of human services.

Del Rio:

I still felt shame. I still felt shame while being interrogated in that office, getting asked repeatedly, if I was sure of my son's father. And being told that doing off and on relationships was something that they didn't do.

Isensee:

She says when she left that office, the shaming didn't stop. It followed her to other social service providers and her employer at the time. Lesley describes how that feels.

Del Rio:

Think about the last time you had to ask a stranger for help. Maybe you lost your phone and you needed to ask a stranger to borrow theirs to get to your phone or to get a ride home. What if that stranger was like, 'Well, I'm going to need you to empty out your pockets and show me the inside of your purse. I need proof that you don't have a phone!'

Isensee:

Lesley says this has happened to her over and over again.

Del Rio:

Instead of people asking me for a look in my purse, they would callously request intimate details of my work, personal and financial life. This is a very shaming and isolating experience, although I know I'm not alone.

Isensee:

Lesley has tried to create a different experience in her education and her career.

For over two years, she's been supporting other student parents as a [Parent Advisor](#) for the [Aspen Postsecondary Success for Parents Initiative](#), or PSP.

In her full-time job, she teaches digital skills and helps people find new careers at the [Mi Casa Resource Center](#). Again, she focuses on empowerment, not judgement.

Lesley, who's now 29, puts this reframing and inclusive approach into practice.

Del Rio:

And I think one way, one simple way to do this is changing the question from how, 'what are you here for?' to, 'how can I support you?'

Isensee:

Before the pandemic closed college campuses across the globe, virtual school was already the norm for Lesley.

Del Rio:

Just this last leg of my educational journey, it has been all online. I attend school at [Southern New Hampshire University](#). It's competency-based education, so I don't have any formal scheduled classes. It's kinda more self-paced work. And I've, I've really enjoyed it. I really have advanced in it.

Isensee:

She's just almost finished her associate's degree in Business Administration in a hybrid university program. That means she takes courses online, around her schedule.

But she also gets in-person support through the university's partner, [Advance EDU](#). It takes a two generation approach to moving families forward - meaning it aims to support both parents and their kids.

So it has a physical campus in Denver with on-site childcare, technology services, career development and a personal coach.

Holly Armstrong:

I'm in this work really just because I believe that every student can be successful in college if they have the right supports.

Isensee:

Holly Armstrong is Lesley's coach with Advance EDU. Lesley's lucky -- not every student parent gets this kind of personalized support.

But [research shows, that when student parents have access to someone based on campus](#) -- like an advisor -- they can better navigate hurdles and meet the needs of their multiple roles.

Holly says it's critical because student parents make up so many of all college students in the United States.

Armstrong:

There's not really a traditional college student anymore. And as there are these growing numbers of alternative, not alternative college options, more flexible, just the pathways for higher education don't all look identical. And I think that's what we need, because college students don't look all identical

Isensee:

Before the pandemic, Holly and Lesley had regular check-ins on campus and in the community.

Armstrong:

So, I think that Lesley and I at this point have probably been to eight or nine of the public libraries in Denver.

Isensee:

Lesley's son, Leo, would almost always be there too. He'd play on the computer or work on his homework.

Armstrong:

Even just providing a place where he could be while she was meeting with her coach and while she was working on school, that was just really helpful.

Isensee:

That's the idea behind Advance EDU's [on-campus childcare offerings](#) as well.

Armstrong:

With the pandemic, we've been closed a lot or it's been optional for students to come on campus, and we've only had a few take advantage of that. But when Lesley has come on campus, when it's been safe during the pandemic, Leo's come with her. He's worked on his schoolwork. He has, you know, put headphones on an iPad and watched a couple shows. I've gotten to see Leo a lot in the past two plus years that I've known Lesley.

Isensee:

Childcare is critical for student-parents, especially single parents who are working towards their degree.

Yet in 2016, a white paper by the [Institute for Women's Policy Research reported](#) that there's limited access to childcare on U.S. college campuses, and it's actually been on the decline since the early 2000s.

Armstrong:

I just could only imagine that if traditional college and college options that are growing would provide flexible ways, lots more parents would take advantage of it and pursue their college degree or finish their college degree, because I think a lot either started unsuccessfully or had to take a pause and never returned. And I think childcare can make an incredible difference for those. I've seen it for Lesley, and getting to know Leo also really helped me build my relationship with Lesley, I think, as a coach.

Isensee:

Among the pandemic's many devastating consequences, COVID closed many daycares and schools, [which millions of working families in the US relied on](#).

Del Rio:

You know, I can go on and on about like childcare. Childcare is really, really big, especially for me as a single mom. There's no sports, there's no— nothing's open.

Isensee:

Lesley tried to be intentional with how she spent time with Leo. Sometimes they looked at old pictures, or turned off screens and played a puzzle instead.

At Advance EDU, Holly and other success coaches have tried to tailor their support to COVID's new challenges.

So when Lesley joins a study hall online instead of meeting up in person, they may send a meal through Grubhub's delivery service.

Armstrong:

..so that she can work on her school and have a free dinner. And a couple of times gotten her and Leo like a family pack of fried chicken and some sides so that she doesn't have to do any cooking so really trying to help as many ways as we can.

Isensee:

They've sent pandemic care packages with spiral notebooks, pencils, snacks, gift cards to grocery stores.

Armstrong:

We also sent things like hand sanitizer, just all sorts of things that we thought hopefully not only would our students know that we care about them as people, but they would also hopefully just help them feel more prepared while they were working from home and studying from home.

Del Rio:

I think it is really important, especially for like me, that I live alone with my son, that someone is like, I see your struggles and they are no less than mine, and they are valid.

Isensee:

Lesley says it means a lot to know someone's thinking of her and wants to help.

Del Rio:

And even if it's annoying that, you know, you have to be at your house all day, or, your son is annoying you or whatever my, my challenge is that day, that week, someone is there to just hear it, you know, just hear it and say, 'Okay, how can I support you? Like, do you just

need me to hear you? Or what do you need?' And sometimes it's like, 'Hey, can you check in with me on Monday to see if I did this assignment or to see if I turned that in.'

Isensee:

Holly says she tries to ask Lesley those kinds of questions. She says that Lesley shares her feedback and advocates for others. And that makes the whole program better for student parents.

Armstrong:

I wish that other programs and colleges and universities would do the same and just ask, ask, ask and then and then make changes based on that. We don't have it down perfectly. I don't know that anyone ever can. But I do know that our support for student-parents continues to get better, because Lesley Del Rio and other student parents like her are sharing their honest needs and wants and desires and feedback.

Isensee:

There's something else that Holly and Lesley have talked about this year.

While Lesley was busy with her job, and keeping Leo on track with virtual school and taking her own classes online, she was beginning to buckle under the strain.

Del Rio:

Some things did collapse in my life, my mental health being one of them.

Isensee:

She began to show signs of depression.

It's something that other parents in college have struggled with, even before COVID.

A [2006 study of student parents in the UK](#) found that seven out of 12 student mothers surveyed said they suffered from depression and high stress levels. The pandemic has only added to that kind of stress.

In the last year, Lesley left one job and started a new one. She also tested positive for COVID-19, so Leo had to stay with his dad for a while. She texted Holly how much she missed him.

It all felt overwhelming.

Del Rio:

You know, I wish I would have been one of those people who like, um, ran marathons or, you know, got super fit and learned how to cook really well. Like, I don't think I picked up any new skills, but I feel like I didn't stay stagnant. And that's pretty important to me because at some points in the lowest of my lows of this pandemic, I did feel like I wasn't moving anywhere. I was, sometimes, even felt like I was going backwards.

Isensee:

During those low points, Holly noticed that it was hard for Lesley to follow through on some of her action plans for school.

She started to worry that Lesley would fall behind and lose her status as a full-time student. If that happened, she could end up owing money back on her federal financial aid.

Armstrong:

And so we actually decided the best thing for Lesley was to withdraw from that term and wait until the next term. We made that decision right before she would have to owe any money back.

Isensee:

Lesley was able to put school on pause, heal from COVID and feel better before diving back in.

But it can be tough for student-parents to persist and graduate. A [study from the U-S Government Accountability Office in 2019](#) found that just over half of student parents drop out before they earn their degree, compared to a third of students who are not parents. Without that degree, it can be hard to get a better paying job, and that can make it harder to repay any outstanding student loans.

When Lesley took her break, she kept attending some online study groups with Advance EDU. That helped her have a smooth return this semester for her final stretch to earn her associate's degree in business administration.

Armstrong:

She's already got great rhythm and great strides. And that's something that a lot of students struggle with when that there is that break. So I know I struggled when there would be a summer break, or even that three or four week break between the holidays, you start back after you've been doing nothing related to school, and it is hard to put your foot on the gas again. But Leslie, of her own accord, it was entirely optional, between terms, was the one who told me, 'No, I want to go to study sessions, I want to do what I can so that I have some sort of groove, some sort of rhythm.'

Isensee:

Lesley also got professional support and resources to treat her mental health. And she's taken up dancing, salsa and bachata, which give her a boost.

Del Rio:

The dance lesson is one of those things that haven't closed down. And I cherish them because, you know, it's still keeping true to trying something new. I think it's really helping me, with like my realignment, and just like my mental health state.

Isensee:

Leo's back in school now, and Lesley follows a new morning routine that keeps her grounded, so she can take care of herself and her son.

Del Rio:

So, you know, although I feel in a very, like a thousand times better than I did last year, I am still working every single day to make sure that I'm taking care of myself in any way that I can.

Isensee:

Lesley doesn't want the world to feel sorry for her for choosing to raise her son Leo without the support of a typical nuclear family.

Del Rio:

People look at single moms and their lives and their, like, experiences and there is like a sense of pity or like a sense of sympathy, you know? Like, yeah, it must be so hard for them, must be really bad, like, they're lonely or, you know, they must struggle a lot. And while that is true, a lot of the time I do struggle, I have struggled and continue to struggle, it's not a very lonely life for me.

Isensee:

One thing that brings her joy — spending time with her extended family.

At holidays, like at last Thanksgiving, they love to pull out their deck of cards and play a game of loteria...

Make that a few rounds.

Del Rio:

You know, when everything seems to be like an earthquake shaking around and like stumbling around, it's good to grasp your foundation and be, like, my family is all still here. We're all healthy, we're all safe. And, you know, that's what matters.

Isensee:

Lesley says her grandmother is the matriarch of their extended family: her mom, two aunts, her uncle, nine cousins and a bunch of great grandchildren, including Lesley's son Leo.

Del Rio:

My grandma comes from Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico, was a single mom, a single grandma. And my grandma had a lot, a big role in raising me. My mom is also a single mom, and I was born in Texas, but lived in Mexico till I was about four or five. And we all then moved here from Mexico, without many things, without, you know, much security or financial or any pretty much, like, you know, just a big dream.

Isensee:

She says before that, when her mom was growing up in Mexico, the family was just scraping by.

Del Rio:

They were so poor that they had to sew their socks for school. They only had one pair of socks, and they, you know, in Mexico they have to wear uniforms and she would have to sew them.

Isensee:

Lesley says she's learned a lot from her grandmother — her wisdom and unconventional ways. She cared for Lesley when her mom worked in a restaurant.

Lesley's found resilience in her family's journey.

Del Rio:

And although, you know, it looks very untraditional and maybe to some, not whole, to us and to our family, it is whole, and it is strong and it is beautiful. And it carries such a huge legacy.

Isensee:

This goes along with the ["two generation" approach](#) to building family well-being. It recognizes that social capital and family networks can help parents and their children access more opportunities and strengthen their lives.

Lesley's already moving forward. She's achieved financial independence. And this past fall, despite everything she had going on during the pandemic, she realized one of her life's dreams -- she bought a townhome. So now she's a homeowner.

Del Rio:

And you know that's always been my goal. My mom, during the recession lost her home and, you know, being a single mom, that was always my goal. I wanted to be, I wanted to be a homeowner to have that security for my son.

Isensee:

Lesley says reaching that milestone gives her the confidence that she can reach other goals.

Del Rio:

Like I wonder what else I can accomplish, you know? I wonder what other dreams can become a reality.

Isensee:

Next up, continuing to focus on her mental health and giving her son the support he needs for school. Later, she'll go back for her bachelor's degree.

She wants to keep building her career. And maybe bridge the worlds of business and nonprofit work.

Lesley says she's proud of how far she and Leo have come, together.

Del Rio:

Sometimes I get really nostalgic about like where I was 10 years ago with my kid. Even just like five years ago where I was, struggling being a single mom, like not really knowing how I was going to keep going. And now it's like a breath of fresh air, you know, there are so many crazy, scary things happening, so much uncertainty and also, like, starting to realize that my hard work is paying off.

Isensee:

Hard work and systems of support to meet her and her son where they're at.

Kirkland:

Laura Isensee reported this story with Theresa Campagna.

AdvanceEDU is a Denver-based hybrid college that combines high-quality online college degrees from accredited and non-profit universities with in-person supports aimed at helping students succeed. You can learn more at [myadvanceEDU.org](https://myadvanceEDU.org).

Florence Crittenton Services is a Denver non-profit that uses a trauma-responsive two-generation program model to help teen families break the cycle of poverty through education, health and wellness, and economic and social asset building. You can find them at [flocritco.org](https://flocritco.org).

Credits:

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To learn more about student-parents and resources for them, visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](https://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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