



“Meet Yoslin Amaya Hernandez”

Yoslin Amaya Hernandez has faced a lot of obstacles on her way to becoming a college graduate. She came to the U.S. from El Salvador as a third-grader, had to care for younger siblings at an early age, and became a parent herself for the first time when she was still in high school. Finding the right supports has been key — from her partner, to a dedicated mentor, to finding a great program with wraparound services for student parents. Reporter Ava Ahmadbeigi shows us Yoslin’s evolution from disillusionment to dreams fulfilled.

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 Ava Ahmadbeigi reported.

In this episode we’ll meet Yoslin Amaya Hernandez, a young mother of two boys in Maryland. She’s working towards her Bachelors in Political Science — but in a way, her student-parent journey started long before she had her own kids. As the eldest child of immigrant parents, she faced obstacles on a personal, family and even national level. Yet she’s found a path forward, to a more secure life. And she didn’t do it alone.

Yoslin was eight when she left her birthplace, El Salvador, to come to the U.S.

Before that, she and her younger sister had been living with their grandmother.

Yoslin Amaya Hernandez:

I'm my grandmother's first grandchild. So I'd like to say that I'm the favorite grandchild.

Kirkland:

Their father was out of the picture and their mother was working in the U.S. to support the family. Though Yoslin missed having her mom around, she has good memories of being with her grandmother.

Hernandez:

She's a Catholic, so Sundays were for church and I would always go with her. Not because I enjoyed church, but because she always took me to Pizza Hut. And that's what I always wanted.

Kirkland:

But living with her grandmother wasn't a long-term solution. Eventually, Yoslin's mom came back to El Salvador to pick up her two daughters. She guided them over several borders, all the way to Maryland, where they had family.

Yoslin enrolled in the third grade, and was placed in the ESL, or English as a Second Language, class.

Hernandez:

I was determined that I was going to learn English and I was determined that I was going to excel.

Kirkland:

And she did do well in school. But things at home weren't easy, for anyone. Yoslin's mom had been working hard to send money back to El Salvador for a couple of years before she decided to bring the kids to the U.S. And now that they were all in Maryland,

Hernandez:

The jobs that she came to do, essentially she just came and picked back up on them, like she had never left.

She would start work in a McDonald's kitchen at four in the morning, do housekeeping from 9:30 to 5, and finally in the evening, go to her job as a janitor.

Hernandez:

So she had those three jobs and she would get home usually around 10:30 p.m.

Kirkland:

This meant that Yoslin's mom wasn't able to be around so much for the kids. And it wasn't just Yoslin and her sister. Her mom found a partner here in the U.S., and they eventually had three children together.

This meant that in a good year—when Yoslin's mom was on good terms with her partner—a family of seven would be living on a combined salary of 45-50 thousand dollars a year.

No one else was home to take care of the kids, so as the oldest child, Yoslin took on that responsibility --starting when she was just in elementary school.

Hernandez:

No one knew behind the scenes what was going on, that I was the second mom to my siblings — that I had given up a lot of my life and my childhood to take care of them. I had given up so much, and no one knew behind the scenes that, you know, I was exhausted.

Kirkland:

This responsibility alone is enough to keep a young student from giving 100 percent. But for Yoslin, there was something else that happened around 9th grade that caused her to spiral, and when she talks about it, her tone changes a little--like she's still trying to catch a breath under the weight of it all.

Hernandez:

I would say what really changed was that I was very aware what my status meant for my future.

Kirkland:

Yoslin, her sister and her mom had come to the U.S. without documents. As an eight-year-old, she hadn't understood all the repercussions of that. Like saying goodbye to her beloved grandmother.

Hernandez:

I guess at that time I didn't get it and now, obviously I do. And so it's like, I left and I was like, "Okay, I'm leaving you," but I didn't really get, "Okay, I'm leaving you forever."

Kirkland:

And it was around her first year of high school when Yoslin learned that being undocumented in the U.S. didn't just mean she couldn't travel internationally. It meant that affording college and getting a good job would be exponentially more difficult. She wouldn't be able to apply for financial aid. And since her family was already living in poverty, no financial aid meant no college, and ultimately no way out of minimum-wage jobs. Yoslin was deflated.

Hernandez:

I started just making bad decisions. I take full accountability for the fact that I just decided to make the wrong choices and just, I stopped going to school. I stopped going to class and I was like, "Why am I going to come here?" If at the end of the day after I get this diploma, I'm just going to get stuck working at a McDonald's or being seven dollars and 25 cents. Like, it just didn't make sense for me.

Kirkland:

In her freshman and sophomore years of high school, Yoslin did the bare minimum. She just didn't see the point in trying to do well. But then...

Hernandez:

Okay, so I get DACA in June of 2013, after I had finished my sophomore year.

Kirkland:

DACA—[Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#)— is not a path to a visa, green card or citizenship—all of which would provide legal status in the U.S. But recipients, sometimes

referred to as Dreamers, are eligible for a social security number, work authorization and a driver's license.

Hernandez:

So as soon as I realize, and I get in the mail, my DACA card, and then I get my social security number, I'm just like, "Oh, crap. I have a possibility now, to find a job, to work, even if it's not like, this high paid position, but it doesn't have to be minimum wage anymore."

Kirkland:

Yoslin's mentality started to change. With her new work permit, she got a part-time job at the McDonalds where her mom worked—this way she could start saving up money of her own for college.

But the environment around her didn't change so easily. She was still struggling to balance taking care of her siblings, going to school, and now, working. Plus she had recently gotten out of an abusive relationship. She had a lot on her shoulders, and she needed someone to lean on.

That's when she met Fermin.

Fermin was her coworker at McDonalds and he's also from El Salvador. He finished high school there before coming to the U.S. on a green card. Fermin believed in Yoslin.

Hernandez:

He's the only one, for whatever reason, that I felt comfortable speaking with. I opened up to him and I spoke to him about, like, the situation that I found myself in. And, you know, I would say that that's when things kind of like clicked for us. We ended up just, getting together. And it was really funny because we got together once and that's when I got pregnant.

Kirkland:

Yoslin's mom didn't take the news well. She was disappointed, like now, Yoslin could never have a bright future. And [studies do show that teen mothers](#) are significantly less likely to graduate high school than their peers.

Hernandez:

During that week, there was a lot of rift between my mom and I.

Kirkland:

Years of trying to manage difficult circumstances had built up conflict and resentment between Yoslin and her mom. They had good intentions and even tender moments between them, but at the time, it felt like too much for Yoslin to handle.

Hernandez:

And I think unconsciously, I made the choice that pregnancy was really my only way out of that, like, environment.

Kirkland:

Just one week after finding out she was pregnant, Yoslin left her mother's house. She was 16.

Hernandez:

I was like, "I'm tired of it. I'm over it." And I grabbed my stuff and I left, and I remember her very vividly. She was standing at the stairs, the front of the door, and she was just crying.

Kirkland:

Finding housing as a pregnant teen living in poverty is not easy--in fact, [studies from 2018 suggest](#) that many of the roughly 4 million adolescents and young adults who experience homelessness in the U.S. each year are pregnant or parenting.

Luckily, Yoslin had a place to go—she moved in with Fermin at his parents' house. And she says leaving her family home actually improved her relationship with her mom. Over the next few years, her mom would step up to be a support for Yoslin. And even Yoslin's grandma would become more present in her life—sending love and encouragement all the way from El Salvador.

But soon after the move, Yoslin ended up having a miscarriage. She fell into a deep depression.

People at school started bullying her, and for a few months, she just stopped going to class.

Hernandez:

I didn't show up for four months straight, until they finally called my mom.

Kirkland:

Her mom and Fermin pushed her to go back in April of her Junior year. She finished off the year and went to summer school..

Hernandez:

And then I find out that I'm pregnant once again in September, one day after my 17th birthday, and I was like, "Wow, what am I going to do?"

Kirkland:

It was September of her Senior year, but her motivation for graduating was low. She'd not only have to take all the classes other seniors were taking, but also three other courses that she hadn't passed due to her previous excessive absences. On top of that, community service was a prerequisite for graduation, and she still had 40 hours left to do. She was ready to drop out--it felt like an impossible amount of work.

But a school guidance counselor convinced her to stay--she could do the extra three classes online, and they could figure out the community service hours.

Hernandez:

She always said and she always told me, I know you're smart. I know you're bright. It's just that whatever your past was, is what's led you to this point. And she was like, "But that doesn't define who you are. And I know you have so much potential."

Kirkland:

But in January of her senior year, just a few months shy of graduation and her due date, Yoslin got some bad news. The school had made a calculation mistake. She needed to pass three more classes to get her diploma.

She felt like she was out of options--how could she come back for three more classes next year while nursing a newborn?

Hernandez:

My counselor, who was really amazing, she was like, "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but," she was like, "You can write a letter to the principal appealing those three credits. And he has the power to give you those three credits back."

I write the letter. He asks for a meeting with me. I go to the meeting and I explained to him just what's going on.

Kirkland:

Her principal understood. But he wanted to leave it up to the teachers to decide whether or not they'd give Yoslin the class credits. So he invited them to the meeting to ask,

Hernandez:

And they're like, "No," like, right off the bat, "No".

Kirkland:

The principal asked her if she had anything to say to her teachers, an appeal.

Hernandez:

I was like, "I unfortunately made wrong choices during that time," I was like, I was the only one that knew what I was going through. So I was like, it's fine, that's their choice.

Kirkland:

A couple weeks later, those teachers did end up giving her the credits and she was able to graduate on time. But all this hassle, all this having to fight for yourself, to believe against all odds that you can succeed and you have nothing to be ashamed of—that's hard.

But Yoslin did have some strong supports. Besides her counselor who fought for her, and Fermin who believed in and encouraged her, there was also Eden Durbin.

Eden Durbin:

So I was a volunteer with A Wider Circle, and A Wider Circle is an organization in Silver Spring, Maryland. And their mission is to end poverty.

Kirkland:

One of the [Wider Circle](#) programs was life skills classes for pregnant and parenting teens that would take place in various high schools in the area. It was in one of these classes that Eden and Yoslin—or as you'll hear Eden refer to her, "Jocelyn"—met.

Durbin:

What was interesting is that there was something different about Jocelyn-- there's a grit that you can identify almost immediately.

Kirkland:

One of the first times Eden recognized this grit was in a class where she had asked the students to do some future planning exercises.

Durbin:

And I looked around and really only Jocelyn was actually going through the exercise and was engaged and the others were on their phone. They were texting. Many of them had so many layers to their story that they couldn't envision their future, but Jocelyn always could. And she had the smarts and the willingness to really work hard, because the obstacles come fast and furious when you live in poverty and when you're a teen mom.

Kirkland:

Eden noticed Yoslin's commitment in the class, and over time, the two really bonded. She even showed up for Yoslin as she navigated some challenging times as a new parent—Yoslin had to give birth to her son Andrew an entire month before he was due because of a pregnancy complication, and when Andrew was born, he immediately had some health issues. The support Yoslin got from her mom, Fermin and Eden at this time made a big difference.

But with final exams only a few weeks away, Eden was also interested in making sure Yoslin graduated from high school.

So Yoslin talked to her counselor and it turned out, because her situation was technically a medical emergency, final exams were waived. She immediately texted Eden.

Hernandez:

And I texted her and I was like, "I'm done," and, "They'll see me in graduation in June." She's like "Okay!" And she's like, "and what are the next steps?"

Kirkland:

Yoslin was planning to stay home with the baby, but Eden encouraged her to keep an open mind about her options.

Hernandez:

And so, after I graduate in June, she texted me back and she's like, "What are your thoughts about college?" And I said, "I want to go to college. I do."

Durbin:

if you can hold a newborn and still visualize your future, that's nine-tenths of the game right there. So I knew that it was worth investing my time and energy and love into.

Kirkland:

Yoslin took just a few months to spend quality time with newborn Andrew, and to recuperate from the stressful year she'd just had. And then, she and Eden started seriously looking into [Montgomery College](#). It's a community college near where Yoslin was living at the time—still with Fermin and his parents.

Yoslin and Eden went to campus for an information session. Even though it was too late to apply for fall classes, Yoslin could apply for the following Spring semester.

Hernandez:

They're like we, we can waive the application fee if you want to fill it out today.

Kirkland:

Eden spoke up.

Hernandez:

And she's like, "Do you want to go?" And, I do, but I'm like, "I can't afford to pay half of it, like I can't."

Durbin:

And I said, "I will, I will pay whatever it takes to get you through school."

Hernandez:

And she was like, look, she's like, let's make this deal.

Kirkland:

Eden would pay for Yoslin's classes—about \$500 for each—if Yoslin promised to try her best.

Yoslin:

And I'm like, "That's a done deal." That's a done deal. Like, I have no issues.

Durbin:

And so she could have taken that as a free ride, but what she turned around to do then is then really sussed out scholarships.

Kirkland:

At the time, Yoslin, Fermin and Andrew were living on Fermin's salary of \$34,000 a year. Any financial help for school would go a long way.

But [while 84% of DACA-eligible students are enrolled in public colleges](#), scholarships serving this population are hard to come by for those with a low GPA. Even though Yoslin was now in college—starting with just one course, paid for by Eden— she had a 2.0 high school GPA.

But there was one scholarship program that was still a possibility: [Generation Hope](#). It's a non-profit that aims to help teen student-parents in the DC metro area become college graduates. They offer some tuition assistance, as well as [training, mentorship, and tutoring opportunities](#). There's also access to [mental health support and an emergencies fund](#).

Generation Hope required a 2.5GPA, but Yoslin decided it couldn't hurt to apply. So in April 2016, she put in her application and hoped for the best.

While Yoslin waited for a decision, the entire country was facing another inflection point.

[Donald Trump:](#)

The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems.

Hernandez:

You know, at the same time, these conversations' about Trump coming into, you know, the race for the presidency.

Kirkland:

Yoslin and Fermin were talking a lot about what that meant for the two of them.

Hernandez:

We don't know what that's going to look like if he ends up winning the election. At this point, like he hadn't won the nomination, but he was already in the debates and he just kept attacking DACA.

Kirkland:

Yoslin and Fermin had a loving, supportive relationship, and a beautiful little kid together. And given the uncertainty of what would happen to Yoslin as a DACA recipient if Trump won the election, they decided to get married. This would also give Yoslin the opportunity to apply for a green card as Fermin's spouse.

They made a good couple--they kept pushing each other to grow and do better. So when Yoslin started at Montgomery College in 2016, she brought Fermin along for the ride. Using financial aid, he started taking ESL courses in preparation for a degree program in construction management.

Hernandez:

So like, my first semester, I'm feeling on cloud nine, like I've passed my first class with an A. I received an award my first semester in school. My husband passed his classes and we

were able to balance this first semester really well with both of us being in school. Then comes June, and I find out that I'm pregnant, again.

Kirkland:

At this point, Yoslin had passed just one class in college. She'd had an interview with Generation Hope but hadn't heard back yet about their decision. She knew she had to tell Eden about the pregnancy, but she was scared of disappointing the one person besides Fermin who had believed in her on this college journey.

Hernandez:

I'm at a gas station, you know, putting gas into my car and you know, my heart had been racing, and I'm just like, "I don't know how to tell her," like, "I'm going to let her down" Like she, she just had like all these expectations of me, like, and I disappointed her like, all these scenarios just kept, you know? Um, and I call her and she's, she's silent for a moment.

Durbin:

I was scared. I thought that the doors were going to close on her. I felt we were so close and we were always making progress that I just, I didn't want the rug to come out from underneath us. It's hard raising two babies.

Hernandez:

And that's when she brings up the conversation about abortion. And I, obviously, I tell her, "No, that's not an option." And she's like, "Okay." And she was like, "So what are your thoughts on school?" And I was like, "I don't know." I was like, "I think I'm gonna drop out," because I was like, I don't think I can do it with two kids...I ended my conversation with her and before I'm getting ready to drive off and I'm sitting there and I'm like, no, no, I'm, I'm not going to school anymore. I'm not, I'm - this is where it ends. My phone rings and it's Caroline.

Kirkland:

Caroline Griswold Short, the Director of Programming at Generation Hope.

Hernandez:

And she calls me and she tells me, "Congratulations, you've been accepted into the program."

And I knew this was the universe's way of telling me, no, we're not done just yet. Like, we're still gonna continue.

Kirkland:

But they had accepted her as the mother of one child. Would Caroline and the people at Generation Hope judge and blame her for getting pregnant again, like the teachers had done the first time around, in high school?

Hernandez:

I ask Caroline, I'm like, "Look, I just found out that I'm pregnant." Like, "Is that going to be an issue?" And she's like, "No," she was like, "Of course not." She was like, "We'll help you. We'll support you. We'll guide you." And it was like something that I had never heard before. It was like someone telling you that they're going to help you and support you. And I'm just like, you know, it's like, I expected someone to tell me, "Wow, like you're trying to go to college. So why the hell are you getting pregnant again?" And I got absolutely none of that.

And I call Eden and I'm like, "I got accepted into Generation Hope," and I'm crying. And I'm like, "And my pregnancy is not an issue, like, they said they'll support me." Like, and she's like, "So?" And I was like, "I'm going to go, I'm going to continue going." And she's like, "Okay," and she was like, "Well," she was like, "If you're going to continue going, I'm still going to continue supporting you."

Kirkland:

Yoslin went back to Montgomery College in the fall semester of 2016, this time taking two courses instead of one. But there was still one major challenge in her student parent journey that she had to resolve. Yoslin and Fermin didn't have enough money to pay for childcare, and they were hesitant to get childcare vouchers from the government because of the so-called "[public charge](#)" rule, which could jeopardize Yoslin's chances of gaining more secure legal status in the U.S.

In their first semester of college, they had handled childcare themselves, but now with a heavier course load, they would have to rely on family — scheduling their classes around their relatives' availability to babysit.

At the same time, Donald Trump had become the Republican presidential nominee, heating up national conversations around immigration.

Hernandez:

That's when I shifted my degree into politics. Because, you know, I had heard this quote and it said, "If I'm not at the table, I'm on the menu." And that for me meant, right now, I'm on the menu. I'm who they are after. And if I'm not at the table, making the choices with them, we're always going to continue being on the menu. So that's when I realized, this is what I need to do.

Kirkland:

Her plan was to get her general associate's degree at Montgomery College and then transfer to the [University of Maryland](#), where she could get a BA in politics.

But before Yoslin could continue her studies, she had to deliver her second baby.

Hernandez:

I knew for a fact, I had to take off because my son was going to be born in February, I was like, "I'm not going to be able to do it."

Kirkland:

So Yoslin took a semester off to have her second son, James.

Around that time, she also decided to renew her DACA and work permit, in case Trump decided to end the program. The application fee is about \$500 and it can't be waived, so Yoslin turned to Generation Hope. They gladly helped her, using the emergencies fund.

It took Yoslin another two years to get her associates degree, and it was an incredibly hectic time. In her last semester at Montgomery College, she had also taken on a job as a janitor to save up more money. After college classes, she would pick up her kids from her family's house.

Hernandez:

I'm coming home at like four in the afternoon. I'm picking up my kids and then I'm coming home and I'm doing the cooking. And then, I cook, so dinner's ready, and then I leave for work at five. I'm not getting home until 9:30 and then at 9:30, that's when I'm doing my homework and I'm not getting to bed until like two, three in the morning. And then I'm waking up at seven in the morning because that's the time that my kids wake up. I'm waking up at seven in the morning and I'm trying to do some sort of activity with them in the morning for their development and just being engaged with them, or do homework that I was too tired to do the night before.

Kirkland:

Finally, in 2019 Yoslin transferred to the University of Maryland to get her bachelors. But her experience there was even more challenging than what she faced at Montgomery college.

For one thing, she now had a long commute—over an hour each way. On some days, she was spending more time commuting to classes than she was in the classes themselves.

Because not all of her credits transferred, in order to graduate in two years, Yoslin had to take a full course load, plus another class and an internship to get her BA. And, she was still working.

She had a lot going on, and so did Fermin.

Hernandez:

So he's going to work obviously from Monday to Friday, full-time. He gets up at four in the morning, usually gets home at like 4 or 5 p.m. So he's stepping up to the plate.

Kirkland:

They were both determined to not just make it work, but thrive—to get their education and work at the same time, to achieve financial security and save up for their own place.

On top of class, work and being a mom, Yoslin even took on more projects like becoming an Ascend Parent Advisor, helping to design the [Aspen Parent Powered Solutions fund](#).

And for her internship, she got involved in the office of Maryland State Delegate Jared Solomon, where her mentor Eden is the chief of staff.

It was a lot, but they got into a rhythm.

Until COVID hit. They suddenly had to figure out virtual learning not just for themselves but also for their kids, while all living in one bedroom of Fermin's parents' house. And as for Yoslin's job,

Hernandez:

I still have to show up to my job because I'm a janitor, so we're essential. And at my job we're not even being provided PPE. So what did they bring us — paper towels, a roll of paper towels, a stapler and rubber bands for us to make masks with. Because I needed the money, because we were in the middle of an immigration proceeding, I was showing up for work that way. It was tough. It was tough.

Kirkland:

Yoslin ended up finding another job, this time as a receptionist. She also got promoted to legislative assistant at Delegate Solomon's office to help with their COVID response. She had a full plate. And then, with just two weeks left of fall 2020 classes, Yoslin got COVID.

Hernandez:

And I let my teachers know, "Hey, look, I just tested positive for COVID." And I let them know, like all of these things that I'm going through, and no resources were offered. no help was offered. The most they could do was give me a two or three day extension on my final exams and my papers. That's all they could do.

Kirkland:

Yoslin made sure to finish out her classes while she was sick, but she found out later that there was an alternative: the professors could have given her an incomplete, meaning she could complete her work at a later date. With the help of Delegate Solomon, Yoslin sent a letter to her dean at the University of Maryland —and later got a meeting—to advocate for better communication and resource sharing in the future.

Hernandez:

And I'm like, "I need you to take into consideration that there are plenty of people out there, like me, who are working, raising kids. And this pandemic has not made it any easier on us. And I need you to be sure that your teachers know, the people in this department know what resources the university is offering. Instead of just telling me at this point, 'Well, look, I'm sorry. At least you pass your classes,' because if I wouldn't have passed my classes, if I would have failed anything, what did, what did that mean for me that I was going to be stuck in another semester here and spend more money that I already don't have."

Kirkland:

It's not clear if that meeting will bring about real action, but the fact that it happened shows how Yoslin has learned to advocate for herself, against all odds. She's planning on bringing that determination into the long career that awaits her.

Eden says she can see Yoslin going to law school. Yoslin sees herself on Capitol Hill. But she says her most important job is as a mom, and knowing that she's setting an example for her kids.

Hernandez:

My dreams and aspirations were to just graduate from school, break this cycle of poverty, just give my kids a financially stable life. That's what I wanted for them.

Kirkland:

Over the past few years, she's gotten closer to that dream of financial stability. What kept her going was her kids

Hernandez:

My son was so proud that I had graduated. Every time we were driving by and he would see these buses with the Montgomery College logo, he was like, "Mommy, you graduated from there." And then he would tell me, "I'm going to graduate from Montgomery College, too."

Kirkland:

But first, Yoslin's kids need to master waking up for school...

Hernandez:

James, James wake up

Andrew:

Wakey Wakey!

Hernandez:

Vamos! Levanante!

Kirkland:

Yoslin is on track to get her Bachelors in political science from University of Maryland this year. She and Fermin even saved up enough money for a down payment on a condo apartment, where they live now. Yoslin says they've created a stepping stone of wealth for their children just by owning this condo and they're truly happy about being able to do that.

Yoslin's also waiting to see what happens with her spousal petition. If immigration accepts her waiver and pardons her unauthorized entry, she can submit a green card application. If that happens..

Hernandez:

I will have to leave the U.S. for about six weeks and go back to my home country.

Kirkland:

16 years after leaving El Salvador as a child, Yoslin might have the chance to return -- this time, as an accomplished adult, parent of two beautiful kids, and with a college degree. Tears fill her eyes as she considers what that means— seeing her beloved grandmother again.

Yoslin:

Um, that's all I'm looking forward to.

Kirkland:

Ava Ahmadbeigi reported this story, with Dhanesh Mahtani.

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

Credits:

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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 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

CITATION:

Ahmadbeigi, Ava and Mahtani, Dhanesh. “Meet Yoslin Amaya Hernandez” 1 in 5 Podcast, Ascend at Aspen Institute, May 18, 2021. [Ascend.AspenInstitute.org](#).