



## “Meet Daria Willis ”

Dr. Daria Willis brings her extensive education and her own experience as a student-parent to her role as president of Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland. Daria had her daughter Lyric during her first year in college. She shares how keenly she felt the social stigma of being a single parent. It took a perceptive administrator to notice that she needed help with childcare, and thanks to the continued support of those around her, Daria graduated and went on to pursue both a master’s degree and a doctorate. Reporter Sophia Fox-Sowell brings us her story.

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David Croom: Welcome to season two of 1 in 5, which takes its name from the one in five college students in the US who are also parents. I'm David Croom from Ascend at the Aspen Institute. This season, remarkable student parents past and present share their educational and professional achievements and the pitfalls they've encountered along the way. Each episode reveals a different stage in the journey toward earning a college degree and a roadmap for overcoming obstacles to access support and opportunity.

In this episode, we meet Dr. Daria Willis, a past student parent, and the current president of Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland. Daria has had a long and successful career in higher education as both a faculty member and college president. But before her career in academia, she struggled as a young mom. Like many of her students, Daria juggled school and worked to build a better life for herself and her daughter. Reporter Sophia Fox-Sowell brings us Daria's story.

Sophia Fox-Sowell:

Dr. Daria Willis is the fifth president of [Howard Community College](#) in Columbia, Maryland. She's the first African American to hold the position and the school's 50 year history, a milestone she doesn't take lightly.

Willis:

This is my second time being the first. So one, it's a little exhausting because of the expectations that people have, but on the other end I'm very fortunate. I am blessed to be in this position and I am my ancestors' wildest dreams. So I'll be the first. I'll rock it and I'll make sure that our students know that they can be the first, second, third, whatever they're going to be, but whatever they do, wake up and kiss excellence and make it happen for somebody else.

Fox-Sowell:

Daria is speaking to me from her office on a Friday afternoon. Through my computer screen. I can see past her L-shaped desk to the bookshelves behind her. They're littered with awards, books on leadership and framed photos of her family. She's a big believer in

the community college model. She considers community colleges the most accessible option in higher education, offering students the opportunity to work towards their degree no matter their age, income, or lifestyle. As president, Daria sees herself as an advocate for her students. Something she says she didn't have when she was an undergraduate student at [Florida A&M University](#).

Willis: It was really difficult once I got pregnant, had my daughter and tried to navigate the college experience. People weren't talking about student parents like they do today. Honestly, I don't think people really cared that you had student parents on campuses, so a lot of it was I had to learn it on my own.

Fox-Sowell: She had her daughter, Lyric, when she was a first year. Her mother suggested the musical name as an homage to Daria's love of music, her major before she switched to history, the subject she would eventually earn her doctorate degree in. [According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid study](#), the majority of student parents are single mothers and people of color. At only 19 years old, Daria was all three. Throughout our conversation, Daria talked about the social stigma she faced as a student parent. She said people would treat her as if she'd done something wrong. It's a stigma she says that still exists today.

Willis: And especially in the south, and it may appear in other areas, but people, they don't favor pregnant women who are by themselves. There was a different stigma, almost like a scarlet letter that was attached to you. Forget about the fact that I can't impregnate myself, but there has to be this guy that helped make that happen. And in the beginning of time, I was married to him, but I got divorced and I still had to deal with that social stigma on my own.

Fox-Sowell: Daria recalls the intersection of single parenting and other realities of life as a college student.

Willis: So besides the issues of trying to study and find time to do things, trying to have the appropriate amount of resources to take care of my daughter, there is also that social stigma that to me weighs just as heavily on single parents the same way that food insecurity or housing insecurity does.

Fox-Sowell: When Daria was at Florida A&M, she says she worked too many hours to qualify for food stamps or public assistance. In reality, she was living paycheck to paycheck, working two or three jobs to cover basic expenses like food and rent. Although she faced a downpour of obstacles as a student parent, the biggest was especially hard to handle.

Willis: What am I going to do about childcare in the evenings or if I had childcare and the babysitter just didn't show up?

Fox-Sowell: Childcare in the United States is notoriously expensive. Across the US, [parents spend on average over \\$14,000 a year](#) on daycare, nursery schools, and preschools. According to data from a [2022 Lending Tree report](#), that amount is up from about \$10,000 before the pandemic. Today, childcare facilities are a lifeline for parents offering educational activities

that foster development for young children while their parents are at work or school. But that was rarely an option for Daria. Luckily, an administrator at Florida A&M noticed Daria's situation and offered support.

Willis: This lady, bless her, Mrs. Phyllis Green. I'll never forget her. Anytime I had an issue with childcare, Mrs. Green was in the Office of Grad Studies and research and I would take my daughter and just drop her off in her office and she never asked a question. She never asked for any money. She just asked me to graduate and that's what I did.

Fox-Sowell: Phyllis Green remembers helping Daria.

Phyllis Green: What i did was not for my name to be called, what i did was because a woman was in need. A student was in need.

Fox-Sowell: Phyllis is now a supervisor with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But 14 years ago, when she met Daria, she managed graduate student assistant funding at Florida A & M. Phyllis recalls one day that she and Daria talked about childcare for Lyric, and she realized she could help.

Green: Lyric was probably about three or four. She was a young one and I was in the office and I said, Well, you know, I'm not doing anything. Whatever I'm doing, you know, Lyric will be fine. So we, you know, had at that time a collection of little stuffed animals and then we of course bought more cuz we knew Lyric was gonna be coming in the office.

Fox-Sowell: Phyllis says that most of the staff in the School of Graduate Studies and Research were women and mothers who were – in her words – “pro-student.” And now that help they gave students – lives on through people like Daria.

Green: When they go through their particular periods, when they get through on the other side of that, like Daria, they remember. And now she's creating so many programs with the support of wherever she is, her staff, her leadership team, creating, never forgetting what it was like to have someone go through and struggle, but try to keep moving forward. And so she's paying it forward every day. Every time I see something that she's doing for students, it makes me proud.

Fox-Sowell: Informal networks of support like these were a lifeline for Daria.

Besides Mrs. Green, to the best of Daria's knowledge, there weren't any on-campus resources for student-parents at Florida A&M, like a food or clothing pantry. No daycare facility. None of her professors offered evening office hours or made it easier for student-parents like her to attend class or complete assignments on time.

But even if she had known about any official school resources, Daria says she wouldn't have felt comfortable going to the administration for help. Given the social stigma she perceived as a student-parent, she felt she might be more likely to be punished than be offered support. That kind of fear of reprisal is still felt by student parents today.

Melissa Curtis: A student in an evening class had brought her eight-year-old son and sat him in the lounge near her classroom. He acted up a little, he got curious and maybe a little bored. Campus Security pulled the student out of the classroom, asked her for her identification, told her about the rule that children shouldn't be on campus, and so she left with her child.

Fox-Sowell: That's Dr. Melissa Curtis, who works with Daria as [Vice President of Student Success](#) at Howard Community College. She's describing an incident that occurred during Daria's first month as President. Melissa says the student could no longer afford daycare. Her rent had increased and she had to choose between paying for her son's childcare or remaining in their home.

Curtis: It was important not to accept that citation of the student at face value. At Howard Community College, we have the resources and the personnel to provide assistance. We needed to use them to help her. It only took a little nudge from leadership. Sometimes our staff just need approval to do what they know is right, and that's what happened in the circumstance. Dr. Willis's strength is to give that permission. Yes, the rule may have been broken, but more importantly, the rule wasn't right.

Fox-Sowell: Following the incident, Melissa connected the student to the school's parent cohort program and a mentor. She also helped secure emergency funding to help with childcare expenses. Daria says this student will now get the resources she needs...

Willis: ...so that her son can be in the appropriate level of childcare while she's in class or that she has the funding to pay the extra \$200 a week. But it took us a week and a half to track her down, when we could have addressed it immediately. So when you talk about that social stigma, I think it still exists because our policies say that only students who are registered for the class can be inside the classroom environment. That's just another way of saying don't bring your kid.

Fox-Sowell: Though Daria was happy her school was able to provide the necessary resources so the student could continue her studies...

Willis: It broke my heart. We've got to do a better job at getting people to understand that people still have real problems and they need real solutions to their problems and not punitive measures because honestly, we could have lost that student. Thank goodness we were able to reach her because she could have left us. But I want for the next time we have something like that happen that a professor, a staff member, one of our security personnel says, "Let me take you to the department who can help you with this," instead of taking her ID, writing her up, sending it to Student Code of Conduct.

Fox-Sowell: Under Daria's guidance, Howard Community College recently applied for a [CCAMPIS Grant](#). The program supports low income parents in higher education through campus based childcare services. Melissa says the college is also rethinking their approach to having children on campus. The library created a family friendly study room stocked with children's books, games and snacks.

- Curtis: Children can eat their cheerios while their parents are studying. We are making a difference now to make sure that the resources are front and center for students. So we're normalizing being a student and a parent at the same time.
- Fox-Sowell: A typical week for a student parent is one non-student parents or non-parents in general will have trouble relating to. Daria recalls her own hectic schedule as a student parent.
- Willis: A typical week would consists of getting up early in the morning, getting Lyric ready for daycare, getting myself together. I don't really remember eating much of a breakfast besides whatever I could find, maybe a pack of crackers. Take my kid to daycare, I'd go to class. I'd go to work after that, then I'd pick her up and then if I had a night class and then if I had to study, I'd take her with me to the library.
- Fox-Sowell: Class assignments, multiple jobs and being a single parent left no room in Daria's schedule for anything else. And more than once she had to miss meals because she ran out of time. As a remedy, her mother gifted her a crock pot and stocked her freezer with meat. Daria learned how to prepare multiple meals at a time. Meal prepping saved Daria a time at night, but she found another way to save time during her morning routine.
- Willis: And it got to a point where I couldn't take care of my hair anymore. So I went to the barbershop and told the guy just cut it off. So that saved me an extra 30 to 45 minutes in the mirror.
- Fox-Sowell: Daria is still sporting a crop cut today. Despite the challenges, Daria looks fondly on her time as a Florida A&M student. She played trombone in the [Marching 100](#), one of the most successful and innovative marching bands in the network of historically Black colleges. Daria even brought little Lyric to some of the football games.
- Lyric Willis: So growing up while my mom was in college, one of my best memories or a memory that's never left is when my mother, she was out playing in the band. It was late at night and every college student was there having a great time. And then there's little me just running around everywhere trying to find my cousin or just watching my mom play in the band. And everybody knew me and they were like, "Oh hey Lyric." But yeah, I was just running around while my mom was out there sweating on the football field.
- Fox-Sowell: Daria is grateful for moments like these when she was in school, but she also remembers feeling isolated from her peers who didn't share her parenting responsibilities outside of school.
- Willis: And even some of my so-called friends and I say so-called because I learned really quickly that these folks are not for me, they're against me and so I've got to drop them like a bad habit.

- Fox-Sowell: She remembers professors doubting her sincerity when she would request an extension on an assignment or if she had to miss class to take care of her daughter because there was no one else who could.
- Willis: From a professor's point of view, they're thinking, "Oh, this must be just another excuse," right? Because they're getting all the excuses under the sun from everyone else. So I used to have to bring in, "Here's the documentation." I spent just as much time trying to prove to my professors that I'm telling the truth versus having an advocate for me to help me with those things.
- Fox-Sowell: Daria even remembers being judged by hospital staff when she would take Lyrica in for a doctor's appointment.
- Willis: They treated you like you were nothing. That's the way I felt when I would take her to the health department to try to get her seen after, and she was up to date on all her shots and things of that nature.
- Fox-Sowell: Fortunately, Daria never let that stigma dissuade her from pursuing her goals. And in 2005, she graduated from Florida A&M.
- Willis: It was a time of great discovery. I learned a lot about myself, not only as a woman, but my history, my ancestry, just the things that I don't think you would learn at a majority institution.
- Fox-Sowell: The following year, Daria started graduate school at Florida State University. Although Lyric was a year older, a budding toddler, it didn't alleviate the stress of once again balancing schoolwork and parenting. If anything, Daria needed more help because her master's degree program was so demanding.
- Willis: Every stage of childhood brings something different and whether you have an infant or a 10 year old, it's a different set of challenges and you always need support, whether it's I just need after school care or it's daycare or I need somebody to help my kid with their homework while I'm trying to do mine. It's just a different set of unique challenges at each stage.
- Fox-Sowell: During grad school, support came as new people entered her life. People like fellow graduate student, Isaiah Brown.
- Brown: The first day that I really was able to grace her presence, I'd seen her walking around with her African garbs on. You don't see at an HBCU, a female, short haircut just like she has now. Her fade was looking better than my fade.
- Fox-Sowell: All kidding aside, Isaiah says that Daria's drive and ambition the way she threw herself into her schoolwork and pushed for bigger and bolder goals drew him into her orbit.

- Brown: But it was just something about her that stood out and she would apply for a job and there's 80 applicants and she would always come out on top. And then she would say something like, "Oh, I didn't study for my test. I'm nervous," and something like that. And then here she comes, she'd get an A-plus on the test, perfect scores. And so she's always been like this, "Oh, I'm not going to do this," and then really meeting her goals or exceeding expectations, in my humble opinion.
- Fox-Sowell: Daria has a history of exceeding expectations and breaking tradition. Back in Atlanta, she graduated high school in three years. In her final semester at Florida A&M, she took 21 credits so she could complete her degree early. Something else made Daria so different in Isaiah's eyes, her constant on campus companion.
- Brown: She had a little baby girl and everywhere she went, she had Lyric with her and she was still trying to balance that. And I couldn't do anything but respect that. And it was a part of me saying like, "Well, wow, any man that would see a young Black female working to better herself in this regard, higher education, you'd be a fool not to want to help and support this young woman."
- Fox-Sowell: In 2010, three years after earning her master's degree in history at Florida State University, Daria moved to Texas to serve as Dean of Academic Studies at [Lee College](#), one of her first leadership roles in higher education. After more than a year of job hunting, Isaiah joined her in Lyric in Baytown, Texas. They married a year later at the courthouse in Houston on their lunch break. Daria and Isaiah added two more children to their family, a son named Izzy, who's now 10, and daughter Imani who turned four in September. Now Isaiah also works in higher education. He's a faculty member at [SUNY Oswego's College of Business](#), a four year college, about 25 miles outside of Syracuse, New York. He helped develop the school's online course offerings when Daria was still president of [Everett Community College in Washington](#). When the pandemic forced both teachers and students into online learning, Isaiah had been teaching remotely for over a year. Working remotely allowed him to better support Daria as her career took off.
- Brown: I'm a full time dad. I have daddy daycare, so I take the kids to school in the morning starting with Izzy at nine, and then I drop off Lyric to campus and then I drop off Imani and then it starts again all over at 3:30.
- Fox-Sowell: When he talks about his family, Isaiah's face lights up with pride. For Daria, the feeling's mutual.
- Willis: Dr. Isaiah Brown, who's so amazing, he is a man before his time and he is my rock. Isaiah, he stays home, he takes care of the kids, he works online. He takes them to football practice, soccer, theater, whatever they've got. He cooks, he cleans. I don't know where I would be if I didn't have him in my life.
- Fox-Sowell: Both Izzy and Imani are home from school when I speak to Isaiah. 10 year old, Izzy is waiting for his dad to get off the computer and four year old Imani's eating a Popsicle,

excited to be hanging out with her dad, but more determined to be in the video. Lyric, now the oldest, can attest to that.

Lyric Willis: Izzy, he's great. He's a character, really. He loves video games. He can so funny, and he's really smart. He's really, really smart when it comes to technology. When it comes to technology, then he knows exactly what he's doing. Imani, nobody likes to admit it, but she's really the boss of the house. She never knocks on your door. She'll just bust right in.

Fox-Sowell: Daria and Isaiah bond through their love of learning and shared academic ambition. They understood that investing in their education would serve them well, values they'll pass to their children.

Brown: And understanding how this investment will pay off in the future, not knowing exactly what that future was, but we knew that we were a lot better off if we were able to really accomplish our higher education goals.

Fox-Sowell: Since having Lyric at 19, Daria has earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a doctorate. She's held leadership positions in four schools in five states, but all that education couldn't spare her from a harsh reality faced by millions of students.

Willis: I also had to take out an exorbitant amount of student loans to pay for childcare because even with working, I didn't have enough to subsidize my rent payments or pay for childcare.

Fox-Sowell: Now, as a college president, she has the power and resources to create policies and practices that set student parents at Howard Community College up for success.

Willis: I've had an opportunity to just ring the alarm for our student parents, to make sure that people can see them and notice that they are there. And it plays a major part in what I do on a day to day basis because what it has impacted is that experience of what I went through and what I know our students are going through, that I'm using those relationships, those experiences, that memory, and I'll say the trauma that came along with that, to change others' lives. Because that's what it's all about, is transforming the lives of others.

Fox-Sowell: Melissa, who serves on Daria's executive team, calls her one of her favorite people.

Curtis: Because she's authentic and down to earth, she creates a trusted foundation for our work. Because she's inspirational, she encourages me, so I'm my best self as a leader. I believe in the students and my colleagues and the good work we get to do. And Dr. Willis helps me get there every day because she does the same. The changes she's bringing to the school are very energetic, very student focused, equity centered. We have a great energy and feel on this campus and Dr. Willis is at the heart of that.

Fox-Sowell: Isaiah, Daria's husband, can also speak to that. He says she's a natural born leader, but he's not just saying that because Daria is his wife. Isaiah has a PhD in leadership and has



studied the qualities that make an effective leader, listening, confidence, collaboration, and intelligence.

Brown: I've seen her in action that she's really a well-rounded leader in my humble opinion. So she loves working with people. She's big on collaboration and so some kind of way she has this way of internalizing and understanding perspectives and the humility that people bring to the leadership team.

Fox-Sowell: That rings true both in and outside her work in academic institutions. Daria currently sits on the advisory board for the [Phi Theta Kappa International College Honor Society](#). Her family is so proud.

Brown: I'm glad that other people see what I saw in her so long ago.

Lyric Willis: Her intelligence is the one thing that I've always admired.

Fox-Sowell: [In 2021](#), the Aspen Institute named Dr. Daria Willis an Ascend Fellow, recognizing her work and dedication to empowering children and families across the country. Later that year, the [Howard Community College Board of Trustees](#) voted unanimously to appoint her as president of the college.

Willis: This is my mission, serving others, serving the underrepresented folks in society, serving people who look just like me, helping them make it to wherever it is they say they want to be in life. We can help you get there.

Fox-Sowell: Daria has two pieces of advice for student parents struggling to complete their education.

Willis: Keep it moving because when you drop out, it's harder to come back in. Several of my friends got pregnant in college, went back home and still to this day, haven't gone back.

Fox-Sowell: And second...

Willis: Speak up. Closed mouths don't get fed. So It was a hard lesson for me. I had so much pride as a youngster thinking that I knew everything under the sun, which I got a 18 year old now, the one that I'm talking about today. She's into that stage. But girl, if you only knew. But keep advocating for yourself. You have a voice and it's okay to ask for help. Don't think that you have to go at this alone.

Fox-Sowell: As [president of Howard Community College](#), Daria plans to craft policies that better support student parents, whether it's working with professors to create a more flexible syllabus or training campus security to recognize when a student is in need of school resources. She believes that every staff member has the ability to be an advocate and will work tirelessly to achieve that goal.

David Croom: Dr. Daria Willis is an [Ascend Fellow](#), President of Howard Community College and a past student parent. Through the fellowship, Ascend invests in a diverse cadre of leaders well

connected, well prepared, and powerfully positioned to build a political will, change systems, and drive the agenda needed for wellbeing and prosperity of all children and families.

1 in 5 is produced by [LWC Studios](#) and presented by [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#), which is a catalyst and convener for systems policy and social impact leaders working to create a society where every family passes a legacy of prosperity and wellbeing from one generation to the next. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, please visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](#) and follow [@AspenAscend](#) on Twitter. Sophia Fox-Sowell wrote and produced this episode. Monica Lopez is our editor. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Our theme song is Ascenders by Kojin Tashiro, who also mixed this episode. Haylee Millikan fact checked it. I'm David Croom. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

**CITATION:**

Fox-Sowell, Sophia. "Meet Daria Willis" 1 in 5 Podcast, Ascend at Aspen Institute, November 15 2022. [Ascend.AspenInstitute.org](#).