



## “Meet Ignacio Angel ”

Ignacio Angel has decided to define for himself what success looks like as a college student and father of four. He faced setbacks to his pursuits for many years. The for-profit trade school he went to, which was later investigated for preying on vulnerable students, never delivered on promises of a job, and landed him in debt. He says he turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the pressure and disappointment he felt, even as his high school sweetheart Lilly and he grew their family. A drug possession charge sent him to jail for a year. That’s when he decided to make a serious change. With Lilly’s help, he found a support system designed for fathers who want to pursue higher education called the Alameda County Fathers Corps. Reporter Steven Rascón follows his journey.

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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 Ignacio Angel, a husband, father, and college student. Ignacio's story reminds us that it's not always about how you start, but about how you finish. Reporter Steven Rascón brings us Ignacio's story.

Steven Rascón: Ignacio Angel is a 30 year old father of four living in Culver City, California. He lives with his wife, Lilly, who is a full-time student at the [University of California Los Angeles](#). I spoke with Ignacio as his kids were leaving for school. He's walking me through their morning routine.

Ignacio Angel: This is our extra room, so it's a playroom/my wife's office that we're turning it into. And oh, there he is again. Yeah, he's just trying to come inside here and just trying to... Hold on. Sorry.

Rascón: Ignacio's third youngest child runs inside the room to grab a toy before heading out the door with another toy.

Angel: All right, Thank you, baby. Bye. I love you.

Child: Bye.

Rascón: He says it's been hard raising the kids since he and Lilly moved out of her mom's house this past year.

Angel: Okay, go with mommy.

Rascón: Now Ignacio is getting a taste of what it's like to be a parent and a student.

In 2022 he enrolled at [Santa Monica College](#) and he says he wants to transfer to UCLA, a decision he never considered when he was younger because he didn't have a lot of examples of people pursuing higher education in his family or his neighborhood.

Ignacio's parents are from Mexico, but he grew up in Orange County, California. He's the youngest of five siblings. He sometimes goes by his nickname, Nacho or Junior. His father worked as a truck driver and at one time ran a restaurant to provide for the family while his mother took care of the kids and managed the household. Although he learned the value of hard work from his parents, Ignacio says higher ed rarely came up.

Angel: You really didn't really hear about any people of color or Hispanic people going off to college. If they do, it'd be a trade school, but you never hear like, "Oh, man, this guy got his AA, he's a Hispanic, he got his AA right here at so and so college, and now he's transferred over to this university."

Rascón: And even if he wanted to go to college, no one in his family knew how to navigate the process.

Angel: My parents never even finished elementary school. My older siblings, they went to trade schools. They didn't know about financial aid or grants and all that, so they were just like, "If you go to community college, it's going to be longer. You going to have to pay more money and da, da, da, and all this stuff." So it was just all these things telling me like, "Okay, well, I don't want to go to community college."

Rascón: Another reason? He didn't think school was for him, and after high school, he'd never go back, but he did meet a girl in school, Lilly. Even though they went to different schools, Ignacio and Lilly lived in the same neighborhood, partied with some of the same friends, and started dating, and their relationship grew. Lilly finished high school while Ignacio dropped out and started working, and a few years later they decided to have a baby.

But during Lilly's pregnancy, she miscarried. They were devastated, and that loss, Ignacio says, lit a fire under him to either look for a job or finish high school. Instead, he decided...

Angel: If I'm going to go to college, I'm going to go to a trade school. And I did. I went to Everest College.

Rascón: So in 2011, Ignacio enrolled at Everest College, a for-profit trade school, and he was excited about it.

Angel: All the things they told me and everything, all the words they used really sucked me in. And I was like, "Oh, man, if I do this, I'm going to have a better life. I'm going to have a career and everything." They knew the words to say to get to me.

Rascón: At Everest he studied to be a dental assistant. Then in 2014, when he graduated, Ignacio says, Everest College promised him an internship that would turn into full-time employment.

Angel: Actually, they promised me a career, not a job. Promised me a career, and I did the program, I passed it, I got my certificate being a dental assistant, I finished it, and then my internship.

Rascón: But Everest College's guaranteed job offers never materialized. Around the same time, former California Attorney General Kamala Harris, opened an investigation into fraud at Corinthian Colleges, Everest College's parent company, the state and federal investigations caused Corinthian campuses to close their doors for good. And soon Ignacio was faced with a much bigger problem than not being able to get a job.

The money he had borrowed to pay for tuition had gone straight to collections, and he was forced to pay it all back.

Angel: And I was like, "Okay, well, I can't make no payment if I'm not working. You guys told me you guys were going to help me get a job, and you guys wouldn't stop until we're in a field working." They were like, "Yeah, but we did put you in a job and that was your internship, and they didn't hire you for a reason. We already did our part, and you need to pay us the money."

Rascón: Ignacio was one of thousands of Everest college students in debt and without a job. A year later, the Department of Education saddled [Corinthian colleges with a \\$30 million fine](#). The department found that schools like Everest were preying on vulnerable students and lying about job placements.

Angel: They had all these hopes and promises that they didn't complete, and they were just worried about the money that I owed them.

Rascón: The whole experience crushed Ignacio. He says he turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the disappointment, something he says he struggled to control.

Angel: I don't want to go and get into more debt and have to go to school and not be guaranteed a job. I felt like I was up against a hard place and a rock, and I didn't know what to do, where to go.

Rascón: In 2014, Lilly and Ignacio got married and had a child, so he got a job at a big box store, shipping appliances and other products.

Angel: So I was doing warehousing in the back. I was doing the receiving end, and then just from there, I just went to different jobs and I had various jobs, I had a lot of jobs.

Rascón: He bounced around working in kitchens and retail for a couple of years. He was a delivery person for a bit. And at this point, Ignacio's family was growing. He and Lilly had two children with a third on the way, and they were concerned about their ability to make ends meet.

So Lilly decided to make a change. She went back to school and enrolled at [Santa Ana College](#).

Lilly: I realized like, "Dude, I don't want to do this. I'm going to go back to school. I'm going to finish at least my AA."

Rascón: Lilly worked as an ultrasound technician to support the family, but wasn't fulfilled by it. She loved writing and wanted to be a teacher, maybe even teach English, and she was determined. She finished her last semester of school while she was pregnant with her third child. Lilly's journey inspired Ignacio to consider going back to school.

Angel: I'll just see how my wife does. I pretty much said, "I'll work and you go to school. Then once you're done with school and you're in your career, then I could probably think about going to school."

Rascón: But Ignacio couldn't catch a break. Right after Lilly earned her associate's degree, Ignacio had to turn himself in for drug possession charges that had caught up with him.

Angel: I got sentenced a year.

Rascón: At the same time Lilly was due to have her fourth child, a baby girl, and she had just been accepted to UCLA.

Lilly: The day after she was born, he had to turn himself in. And so on the way home from the hospital, we had to drop him off where he was turning himself in. And then I drove home with my daughter and to my other kids, because my mom was watching them. And then two weeks later, I start UCLA.

Rascón: Ignacio was incarcerated at Theo Lacy Facility Jail in Orange County, and it was there that he began to reevaluate how to make meaningful changes in his life.

Rascón: Ignacio was at a low point in his journey and dealing with the stresses of day to day life in jail.

Angel: And then on top of that thinking, "What are my kids doing?" Or, "How's my wife doing?" I know she's in school, stressing out about everything on the outside as well. At the time I went to jail, I was the main provider at the house. I was the sole provider, the breadwinner.

Rascón: Being incarcerated spurred Ignacio to make a serious change. One of those changes, figuring out how to get his high school diploma. And while he was in jail, Lilly was also looking for a way to help Ignacio. While she was at Santa Ana College, she worked for a program called [Project Rise](#). It's a program that advocates for incarcerated people to further their education.

Her former boss, Ruth Ramirez, taught at the high school education program at the juvenile hall facility next door to where Ignacio was staying. So she asked her if she could help out Ignacio?

Lilly: So she was like, "You know what? Give me his booking number and I'm going to send him packets and we're going to enroll him into the high school diploma program."

Angel: They gave me homework and they were just sending me packets and packets and packets and I'm like, "Man, do I have to turn everything in? That's a lot of work." I was getting two packets a week and each packet contained at least 50 to 70 pages of homework.

Rascón: The communication between Ignacio and the program was challenging. At one point, he wasn't sure how much progress he'd made, only that he needed 15 credits to graduate. After six months, Ignacio became eligible for parole and was released. A few days after his release, he says he got a call from a staff member who helped run the high school diploma program.

Angel: She told me like, "Hey, I just want to meet you up to give you something." I'm like, "What is it?" She goes, "Your high school diploma." And I was like, "Really?" She goes, "Yeah, I have it for you. I just need you to come. We have a cap and gown for you. You're going to put it on, we're going to take a picture, and we'll give you your diploma. You can be on your way." She's like, "Congratulations, you completed all your credits. Here's your high school diploma." Yep.

Rascón: So your wife also helped you get your high school diploma too?

Angel: I'm going to emphasize on this because I know my wife would appreciate me doing this, but if it weren't for her, I probably wouldn't have my high school diploma. I wouldn't be where I am today. She is a really big motivation for me that pushed me to be where I'm at today.

Rascón: Ignacio was finally back at home with his family and with a thoughtful and more serious mindset.

Angel: I wanted to go to school and I was always pushing myself to do it, and I just didn't have... these bumps on the road that made me feel like I couldn't do this and I shouldn't be here. And the way I lived my life before I should be either in jail or dead. So it's like, you know?

Rascón: While Ignacio was in legal custody, Lilly continued her studies at UCLA and chose to research the effects of incarceration on families.

Lilly: I am currently a [Mellon Mays scholar](#), so I'm pursuing research on prison literature and trying to understand the effect that incarceration plays on the family members outside of the physical space of the prison and the way that it affects folks that are physically free, but also emotionally imprisoned as well.

Rascón: As part of her research, she learned about a program for fathers who want to pursue higher education, and it was open to formerly incarcerated dads. Lilly saw it as a big break for Ignacio.

Lilly: I was like, "Oh hell yeah." So I told him, "You better go and do this. You could benefit from it."

Rascón: It was the [Alameda County Father's Corp](#) based in California's Bay area.

Angel: She was like, "Look, it's a program for fathers who have been formally incarcerated and trying to get back into higher ed, and I think it would really benefit you to do it."

Rascón: And although Ignacio wanted to present himself in a certain light during the application process, Lilly insisted that he opened up about wanting to be a better dad.

Lilly: And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no. You needed to tell them you literally just got out. You don't know how to be a father." You are a good dad, but you were not taught the tools to be an active dad the way that these kids need you to be.

Kevin Bremond: Everything's harder when you're a parent. Being a student is harder when you're a parent.

Rascón: This is Kevin Bremond. He's one of the founders of the Alameda County Fathers Corps. An organization that helps fathers come together, share their experiences, and learn new skills to help them achieve their goals as parents.

Bremond: All of the dads that we talk to, they want to be good parents. They want to be present. And I'm not just talking about physically present. They want to support their children to reach their potential.

Rascón: The Father's Corp is part of a county-run program in California's Bay Area called [First Five Alameda County](#). They help out parents with resources like clothes and baby diapers, child development classes, and language interpretation services.

Kevin says that for the longest time there was no programming directly aimed at serving fathers. "Most family programs," he says, "centered around moms and put all the pressure on them to run the family." Kevin's hope is that the Father's Corps changes that

Bremond: We're here to support organizations with being more father friendly, becoming more father friendly, and being intentional about serving fathers.

Rascón: Moved by their own experience as fathers, Kevin and co-founder Gary Thompson started the program in 2013. As a network of nonprofits and facilitators who host workshops for fathers on trainings like...

Bremond: Navigating the family court system, navigating police encounters so that you can get home alive and safe to your child. You got to meet families where they are and provide the supports that they need in that moment.

Rascón: Other workshops include how to support teen parents or under-resourced families in need of food and shelter.

Bremond: If you're doing any sort of direct service to fathers, you need to be able to meet them where they are. So yes, if a dad's in between jobs and you need to connect him with a workforce development program, if a dad is having issues with child support payments, then you need to connect him with a representative from child support.

Rascón: Kevin became a father when he was 19 before he helped start the Father's Corp, he struggled to balance caring for his daughter while also being a student parent.

Bremond: I see myself in every one of the dads that we work with. At some point in my journey as a father, I was going through a similar experience. I was experiencing similar feelings. I was experiencing similar joys and challenges. Fatherhood is a journey, so it's important that they have someone who understands and respects and honors that journey.

Rascón: So Ignacio signed up. When he signed onto Zoom for his very first day of the program, he thought the other dads would judge his parenting skills.

Angel: I was nervous. I was just expecting to go there. So they could ask me about my parenting and how do I discipline my kids? And this is how you're supposed to do it and this how you do this.

Rascón: But it wasn't like that at all. Ignacio's group was led by a facilitator named Khalid White. He's a faculty member in the history department at [San Jose City College](#). The group met twice a week over eight weeks. Ignacio says Khalid became his mentor and supported him in a way that he'd never experienced before.

Angel: He actually did give us a lot of positive messaging. He made me see a lot of things that I really wasn't paying attention to before that I was just like, "Man," I was raised in a machista home. We didn't share our feelings, we didn't talk about our feelings. We didn't even cry because we're men. So it opened up another door that I've never opened before in my life.

Rascón: This was huge for Ignacio and with Khalid's help, he's been learning a lot about himself.

Angel: It actually helped me get out of that comfort zone and try new things to see if maybe that will work better. Because I didn't know, take a pause and come back. No, in my house you have to either deal with the right thing and there or that's it or it's over. You can't bring it up later on.

So I had to work on that a lot. Really to this day. I still work on that because I know my temper's still short. But I have a lot of patience though. I have a lot of patience, especially for my kids.

Rascón: Kevin says there are lots of dads attending workshops at the Father's Corp who also want to get a degree.

Bremond: Whether that be school, whether that be a trade, or some sort of certification that's part of supporting them with being the father that they want to be.

Rascón: And since going virtual, they've increased their participation outside of California.

Bremond: We've gotten dads from Detroit, from New York, from Arizona. We've gotten dads to log in from, literally, all over the country.

Rascón: One of the lessons covered in Ignacio's program was healthy co-parenting. Kevin says it's an area that a lot of fathers in the program admit to struggling with. And for Kevin, it's a personal subject.

Bremond: My brother was going through a very difficult breakup with his co-parent, and I watched him go through that fight to maintain access to his children. And I just was so hurt by the experiences that he had to go through just to be able to be in his kids' lives.

Rascón: One of the biggest takeaways for Ignacio from the Father's Corp has been the importance of being less emotionally reactive, especially when it comes to co-parenting with Lilly. He remembers one day during the program, Khalid noticed he was in a bad mode.

Angel: Usually when we start the day, they ask you, "How are you feeling today?" And you had to give one word of how you feeling. And I used the word frustrated because I had got into a big fight with my wife. And a lot of times when I fight my wife, it's kind of a lose/lose situation for me. So it's I fight with her, but I end up losing at the end.

Rascón: Ignacio says, Khalid had given him tools to manage his emotions, like breathing exercises or taking a three second pause and reminded him...

Angel: Your wife is your best friend and she's going to be with you thick and thin, but there's only so much they're going to put up with before they're finally like, "You know what? I don't want to deal with this. I could do better." And that's when they're trying to make the change, but that's too late already.

When it's right there, when you are already at that point, it's already too late. The damage is done. Sure you could fix it, but it's not going to be the same.

- Rascón: It was a hard hitting moment for Ignacio. He respected Khalid and knew he was right. A real moment of tough love.
- Angel: I was done with the class and I went talk to my wife. I told her, "Look, I'm sorry, I don't want to fight. Can we just please start over?" If you're on good terms with your wife, you are going to have a peaceful home. It's going to be better. Everything's going to go smoothly, your classes are going to be easier. You're not going to be stressed out.
- Rascón: And for the most part, Khalid's advice has helped Ignacio and Lilly communicate better. When Ignacio completed the Father's Corp program, he enrolled at [Santa Monica Community College](#). He's now a full-time student and he's majoring in sociology with the goal of becoming a drug counselor. Lilly is a program coordinator for [Bruin Underground Scholars at UCLA](#), a program similar to Project Rise for formerly incarcerated students.
- Ignacio and Lilly take turns picking up the kids from school and daycare. He says it feels like two full-time jobs, but the experience has also helped him understand his children's needs.
- Angel: I'm going to change PJ Masks.
- Speaker 8: No. I don't want to watch PJ Masks.
- Angel: Okay, then go watch PJ Mask. Here I got the cards.
- Rascón: I caught up with Ignacio at the end of his school week and asked him how it was going.
- Angel: It was smooth, so I'm not behind on my classwork. I was listening to what the teacher was telling and I was understanding everything. I wasn't like, "Oh, what are we talking about? I'm kind of lost."
- Rascón: His first semester back at school was not as easy. He fell behind in some of his classes and had a hard time keeping up with the workload.
- Angel: Yeah, sure. I didn't pass the classes, but I realized if I just stay consistent and doing my homework and make time every day and just dedicate certain time every week to classwork, school, homework, and studying, then I should be fine.
- Rascón: Through it all, Ignacio and Lilly have developed the kind of resilience and determination that comes from overcoming tough times, personally and as student parents, on distinct educational journeys. Lilly says that their kids are their driving force and she and Ignacio want them to know that

Lilly: I know one day that they're going to be very aware of the type of dad, or life, that me and their dad has led, but you as a person, this is your way out. This is our way out for our kids to be able to be like, "I have two parents that are college educated individuals." That's going to set them up for a whole different life than we had.

Rascón: Ignacio continues to stay in touch with Khalid. He gives him updates on his progress with school and how his family is doing. Ignacio is also fully sober and hopes to bring his life experience to his future career as a drug counselor.

As for his educational journey, he feels that it doesn't matter where you start or where you came from in life because finding something to believe in is always worth the risk.

Angel: We already took all these risks before in the life that we used to live. Why can't we do the same thing for our education and bettering yourself?

Croom: Ignacio Angel is a father and a student at Santa Monica College. Thank you for listening.

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**CITATION:**

Rascón, Steven. "Meet Ignacio Angel" 1 in 5 Podcast, Ascend at Aspen Institute, November 15, 2022. [Ascend.AspenInstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org).