



## “Meet Soren”

Soren’s interest in higher education has always been rooted in an interest in the environment, even from childhood. As an adult, after struggling with their own mental health, Soren became interested in psychology, and pursued jobs in the medical field, but was soon discouraged by the for-profit medical system. Soren went through challenging transitions in their life—a cross country move, the birth of their son, and coming out as a non-binary person. When they moved to Minnesota, Soren regained clarity of what they wanted to pursue, and they went back to school in environmental studies. As a single parent, Soren was hardly making ends meet when someone from their university contacted them about emergency grants, many specifically for queer parents. With the support of the university’s student parent HELP center and a local foundation, Raise the Barr, Soren is launching their academic career with the hope of helping future generations, like their son’s, to live healthier lives. Reporter Natalie Rivera brings us Soren’s 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 U.S. 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 Soren. Soren has had a unique journey in parenthood and education. They asked that we not use their last name out of respect for their privacy. A series of life events interrupted Soren's pursuit of what they always truly wanted to study, the environment. Now they're back on the path toward their life's calling with the company of their son Emerson and with the support of their community. Reporter Natalie Rivera brings us their story.

Natalie Rivera: Applications can be so time consuming. It can take hours to complete and you're almost always repeating the same information. Soren, a student parent who uses the gender pronouns they/them has been there. They're constantly applying for scholarships, grant money and anything that will help keep the lights on because every cent can make a difference for them and their son Emerson.

Soren: It's really overwhelming trying to find the right scholarship, trying to distinguish which ones are scams, trying to keep track of all of them and apply for them and follow up.

Rivera: Applying for financial support seems especially difficult for Soren because they're non-binary.

Soren: I have passed one or two that are geared just for mothers because it doesn't feel like they're for me and I don't want to take away from somebody who they're meant for, if that makes sense.

Rivera: Soren studies plant science at the [University of Minnesota](#). They showed interest in environmental science growing up and felt concerned about conserving energy and keeping the planet safe since they were little.

Soren: I was one of those little kids that's always turning off the lights and telling you to save energy and whatnot.

Rivera: Soren was born in Mexico, though they credit Chicago for their upbringing. They moved to Chicago at 16 after living with their brother in California, but they've been on their own since getting their first apartment at 18. They're now 28. Soren's academic pursuits often take root in their personal experiences. While living in Chicago, they struggled with mental health, which sparked an interest in psychology and the arts. They earned an associate's degree in liberal arts and pursued jobs in the medical field.

Soren: That was a bit of an adventure by itself. It was something that I was really interested in and it was fascinating, but the industry and the system really discouraged me from it.

Rivera: How so, if you don't mind me asking?

Soren: A lot of the way that the systems are set up are not really to help the patients or to help people and unfortunately a lot of it is for profit. I have worked in private hospitals, I worked in not-for-profit organizations and nursing homes and long-term housing facilities for people with mental health issues and it was always one thing or the other that would happen with management where it would clearly show where their priorities were at.

Rivera: Soren moved to California in 2018 when they became pregnant with their son. Because they and their partner at the time had almost no family in Chicago, most of Soren's family lives in Mexico, they moved to California to be closer to their partner's family. A job there confirmed their doubts about the medical field.

Soren: I was working for this private hospital. I was just really disappointed with the way the system was. I was planning on transferring to a four year university to study neuroscience. I was really interested in finding alternative methods of rehabilitation that do not rely so heavily on medications.

Rivera: Soren's experience at the hospital was disheartening for them, so much so that they didn't know whether they'd go back to school, if at all. It was a period of a lot of self-reflection and it wasn't just the career that brought that on.

Soren: I had never really identified myself as much of a female presenting person and going through something, the most, I don't know, cliché, feminine thing as giving birth. That's the

embodiment of femininity. I think it was just really hard for me and I struggled a lot with coming to terms with that.

Rivera: Soren knew two things after their son's birth. One, they loved their son with all their heart. Two, they didn't identify with being a "mother".

Soren: After my kid was born, I came out as a non-binary person and that whole transition was kind of challenging to me. The idea of being a parent was something that I liked. I just didn't like the idea of being a mother, if that makes any sense. But he was just the light of my days and he continues to be, regardless of all the challenges that I have faced in the past or currently. He is such a sweet child. He's such a gentle soul, but he can be challenging sometimes too. He likes to be a little butt.

Rivera: Soren, their son and their then partner moved to Minnesota when Emerson was around two. It was during this move to Minnesota that they got more clarity about what direction they wanted to take their life.

Soren: It wasn't until I was already living here that I was doing more research into it that I found out that it was actually a fantastic option for what I'm going for. In agriculture and plant science. The [University of Minnesota](#) has historically been kind of at the top of new advancements.

Rivera: Once in Minnesota, Soren was excited to tap into their love and curiosity about the environment again.

Soren: The more I realized I'm actually interested in ecology and evolutionary ecology. There's a lot of challenges that we're facing currently like pollution, environmental changes, weather changes, and they are putting our food security at risk. I'm just trying to learn all of the science to find better solutions.

Rivera: At the time, Soren's partner was getting his U.S. citizenship but his application got delayed. They planned to both work so Soren can go to school and Emerson could get cared for by whichever parent wasn't working or studying. That plan was thwarted when the naturalization process was delayed and Soren had to start working full-time in addition to studying while their partner took care of Emerson full-time.

Soren: I honestly push myself a lot. I have always kind of struggled with insomnia, so working overnights was kind of really easy for me and so I would stay up all night working. Then in the mornings I would stay up for class and since it was at home I would hang out with him in between classes or he would come in and just say hi to the camera to the rest of my classmates and then just try to go to sleep, get some hours of sleep and do homework at work sometimes when things are slow or during my breaks.

Rivera: Several months after moving to Minnesota, Soren decided to make the difficult decision of leaving their partner. Without their partner's support, Soren would need to take care of their son full time on top of school and providing for their family.

Soren: The most challenging part with that was not really the school section, but being the only support for my kid while also trying to take care of myself and trying to take care of both of us, make sure that we have the things that we needed, dealing with the aftermath emotionally and mentally.

Rivera: Being their son's only caretaker meant Soren couldn't work full time like they did before. They picked up jobs here and there, a lot of them temporary, taking up additional work whenever the opportunity came up. They started applying for scholarships and grants for single parents, but there were never enough hours in the day to track application deadlines and all the paperwork involved. Applying for aid was starting to feel like a full-time job itself.

Soren: I was out one day with my kid, just collecting bugs, and I ran into this person who was taking pictures. I ran into Susan Warfield and she told me, "Hey, I run the student parent center at school. If you need any help with resources one day just let me know." I just kind of forgot about it because that was a year and a half ago, I think. Maybe a year ago. Yeah, it was one of my first semesters at school and so this year when things were going on, I remembered about it and so I contacted her and she's just been amazing. Amazingly helpful.

Rivera: The woman Soren contacted with Susan Warfield. She's a program director at the [University of Minnesota's Student Parent Help Center](#) and still helps Soren to this day.

Susan Warfield: I have been with the center 22 years. When I initially started, the Help Center has a very long history of 60 years at the university. It existed as an overall program for all low income, underserved students for many years before it became student parent specific.

Rivera: The Student Parent Help Center has its own scholarships and grants as well as access to a network of similar organizations that supports student parents, ready to offer additional support. Some of the aid they provide are emergency grants. Emergency grants are exactly what they sound like, aid for student parents when there's an emergency. The University of Minnesota actually didn't start having emergency grants until four to five years ago, but the Student Parent Help Center has been offering emergency assistance for more than a decade. In fact, the center was an early adopter of emergency assistance in higher education.

Warfield: We were a very, very early adapter of the emergency grant model, a good 10, 15 years before it was even discussed in other student parent realms or at universities. That's because I'm a social worker and we tend to hire masters level social workers, so that framework of young, low income families needing an emergency support like that has been on my mind from the beginning and was something that General College and the original Help Center were also invested in.

Rivera: In recent years, the Student Parent Help Center has processed as many as 12 emergency grants a term in most years. That may not sound like a lot, but as Susan explained, that can

mean helping 20 plus families a year. That number dropped, though, during the height of the pandemic since a lot of student parents withdrew from school. But Susan says they're coming back again. She believes it might have to do with the eviction moratorium being lifted.

Warfield: I know people are getting sick of everything being blamed on the pandemic, but I think we're underestimating the long-term costs across the board of the pandemic and one of those is people lost jobs and the federal government recognized that rent was an issue and so they put a moratorium on evictions. Well, that moratorium has come off and we have students that are several months behind on their rent because they still have not recouped the income they lost during the pandemic. Right now we are seeing emergency grant requests like we've never seen before. In one week I released \$6,000 in emergency grant assistance and that might be what we typically release to students in maybe a three month period.

Rivera: In some cases, [student parents can receive up to \\$2,500 to \\$3,000 a year in emergency grants](#). Susan explained that student parents have used emergency grant money for things like utility bills or rent, especially now with rent prices spiking so much. What they and other organizations in their network have found is that helping student parents with living costs can go a long way.

Warfield: We have a longitudinal [third party program evaluation](#) that is more extensive than anything I believe I've ever seen done in the student parent field that was funded by [Raise The Barr](#) and conducted by [Wilder Research](#), and that showed actually that there is a significant impact on graduation and retention from some of our services.

Rivera: The Help Center has received grant money from federal and state sources as well as private donors. The center works with the financial aid office to get funds to student parents as soon as five days, but sometimes it doesn't work out.

Warfield: There are times when students won't meet financial aid guidelines to get an emergency grant for us. This is actually a problem I feel with the federal aid system is its unmet need and the way students are packaged do not really fully take into consideration the differential needs of students with dependence. Yes, students with dependence can adjust for childcare and I believe they can assess for higher housing costs, but their overall package really needs to include more funding than it does in my opinion. So sometimes when a student needs an emergency grant from us, especially if they're a typically aged freshman that may be fully packaged and not running out of aid, our hands will be tied because there'll be no room on their financial aid account for us to even get a thousand dollars through.

Rivera: That's when the Help Center's extended network kicks in. They connected Soren with Raise The Barr, a similar support organization that gave Soren an emergency grant.

Soren: I ended up using that for gas money and a few weeks of childcare.

Rivera: A few weeks of childcare meant that Soren could pick up temporary work.

Soren: If I hadn't received that, I wouldn't have been able to work and we would probably have been even more behind on bills, which I'm still really behind, but I wouldn't have been able to pay for necessities if that hadn't come through.

Rivera: The emergency grant they received wasn't the last application Soren filled out with the help of the Student Parent Help Center. In fact, the Help Center has assisted Soren in finding scholarships and grants specifically for single queer parents.

Warfield: It's very important to us for students to define their own identity. From the moment of intake, we ask their preferred gender identification and we go with what the student wants more than what might be officially listed on their [FAFSA](#) for instance. Even if the name change or pronoun change has not been legal, we will refer to the person as they identify.

Rivera: Nationally, student parents benefit from a far reaching network of dedicated organizations. The Help Center and Raise The Barr are part of the [National Ascend at Aspen Institute Network](#).

Warfield: I believe Raise The Barr became involved first and then recommended to Ascend that they reach out to me because they had been networking with me to get information on what I felt were key student parent factors and service issues as they set up their foundation. They have been very, very helpful at raising just the profile of student parents nationally.

Rivera: Ascend at the Aspen Institute has more than 450 affiliated organizations nationwide in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Ireland. Their network also includes philanthropists, researchers, and policy makers. Soren continues filling out applications, tons of them, most of them sent to them by people like Susan. They believe this is still only the beginning of their academic journey. They're hoping to get a master's and eventually a PhD.

Soren: I don't think people realize how...people who are not parents might see being a parent as just this endless chore, but it is so rewarding and it's really what has driven me to do what I do. I am going to school and I'm pursuing this major, not for me, but to try and take care of some things so my kid can grow up in a better place or they don't have as many things to figure out otherwise, because right now I feel like we're leaving a lot for the future generations to figure out and it's not fair for them.

Rivera: Soren and I have been speaking in their son's room for almost an hour when their son Emerson comes in hungry.

Emerson: I can't find the bread.

Soren: The bread is in the fridge.

Emerson: I looked inside the fridge, but I didn't see it.

Soren: You didn't see it?

Emerson: Yeah. Can you help me?

Soren: Yes. Will you give me a little bit of time and then I can go help you?

Emerson: Okay. But I miss you when you will not be with me, so I'm going to..,

Soren: Well, could you take Bow out of the room please? Because he is kind of loud. Thank you. Sorry.

Rivera: No, you're fine. He sounds very self sufficient too, making his own PB&J sandwiches.

Soren: Yeah, but now the door's open, now my dog is in. Hi. Yep, it's usually the whole band.

Rivera: The whole band includes Soren, their son, their cat, and their dog.

Soren: Even though it's tough, even though I could probably do things differently, I don't have to go to school. I could just get a full-time job and put him in a full-time daycare and that would very likely be better for my finances, I still choose to keep on the struggle and keep going to school and try to be creative with solutions because I really think that I can make more of a difference that way for him than just be able to provide in the short term.

Rivera: Soren is ready to face the next chapters in their and Emerson's life, armed with PB&J sandwiches and, of course, their furry friends.

Croom: Soren is a student studying plant science at the University of Minnesota. Thank you for listening.

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