



“Meet Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin”

Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin was taught to always take care of those around her, but never saw education as a way to make her community stronger. After dropping out of school and later finding herself incarcerated and pregnant, Yolanda was determined to change the course of her life. Once she was released, Yolanda focused on establishing a relationship with her son, all while juggling two jobs and school. As she continues to reach new educational heights, Yolanda uses her experiences to uplift others and create opportunities with and

for her community. Reporter Ava Ahmadbeigi follows Yolanda’s journey through incarceration and higher education.

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'll meet Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin, a past student parent who mentors formerly incarcerated women by drawing upon her own educational and criminal justice experiences. Yolanda holds bachelor's and master's degrees, and is the Head of Housing Initiatives for the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. To get to this point, Yolanda had a few detours, some more painful than others. Producer and season one host, Pamela Kirkland, narrates for Ava Ahmadbeigi, who reported this story.

Pamela Kirkland:

Yolanda is a parent ambassador at Ascend, an organization that creates pathways to educational success and economic mobility.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And I enjoy that work. I am probably the oldest and no, I'm not going to tell you my age.

Kirkland:

As a parent ambassador at Ascend, Yolanda mentors college students by sharing lessons from her own years as a student parent. And because of her personal experience, Yolanda is passionate about the power of education. From the outside, it can seem like she's working off an endless supply of energy to help others benefit from the lessons she has learned, earning an associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees. But the journey here has

been long, and at times, grueling. And it all started in her hometown of Brownsville in East New York, Brooklyn.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Brownsville in East New York is probably the most impoverished parts of Brooklyn per capita, and unfortunately, it's where people would probably not want to grow up to live.

Kirkland:

Brownsville is not only one of the most impoverished parts of Brooklyn, it has one of the highest incarceration rates in New York City. But for Yolanda, this is only part of the story. Growing up in Brownsville, Yolanda had her dad and siblings nearby, but she grew up with her mom.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Growing up, it was like me and my mother against the world.

Kirkland:

Yolanda describes her mom as a powerful woman who introduced her to another side of Brownsville, a side that was about faith, community, and taking care of one another.

Johnson-Peterkin:

It was a very interesting skillset that my mother taught me very, very early, even as much as driving me around the community and packing bags for folks that may have been not feeling well. And she'd say, "Run this upstairs to 3A," or, "Run this upstairs to this person." She taught me from an early age to care about people, and my mom always said, "Well, they did something good for somebody else, and God wanted us to go over there and do something for them." So I was like, okay, Mom. But after a while, it became second nature to me.

Kirkland:

Still, as Yolanda entered her teens, she started pushing back against her mom.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And then I started to rebel, like, "I don't want to do this." And not just I didn't want to go to church, I don't want to do everything that you do. And then as you start to get older, you want to hang out, in my day, you want to hang out and smoke what they now call legal marijuana, and just get into the streets. And so there is where the separation of growing up became a little bit challenging for me.

Kirkland:

At this time, Yolanda was also attending school in Brownsville, but like she pointed out to me during her conversation, she didn't have the same kind of educational opportunities and support that, say, kids in Long Island had. She didn't even have anyone around who truly appreciated the value of education. Her mom was a working woman and she had always emphasized getting work instead of a degree.

Johnson-Peterkin:

She did the best that she could. And later on when I went to school and became a social worker, I learned that my mom was operating in the nucleus of what she could operate in.

Kirkland: By the 11th grade, Yolanda decided to drop out of school and leave her mom's house. She started working, like she'd always been taught, but she didn't think forward.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I knew that there was a forward, but there was no goal for me to get there. It was more of hanging out and working here or there and doing things, but not really planning a future. I didn't realize the importance of education, years ago. I had no clue that that was going to be the catalyst to what I do in my future.

Kirkland: But before Yolanda got to this future, she got thrown into another chapter in life that she didn't see coming.

Johnson-Peterkin:

The next big chapter was getting in trouble.

Kirkland: At the time, it seemed to a lot of people, including a guy Yolanda had met, that selling drugs was a fast way to get some cash.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I was hanging out and I met a guy and I was with him, and we would just wake up every morning and sell a little bit.

Kirkland:

And the rest of the day, she'd be hanging out or working odd jobs, and it would go like that until at some point, Yolanda realized maybe she had gotten pregnant.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I kind of thought that something's going on.

Kirkland: She didn't really know anything about having children at that point, but she had decided to go ahead with the pregnancy. And one day, she was hanging out and-

Johnson-Peterkin:

Somebody knocked on the door to get something, and I just so happened to be the one to pass it.

Kirkland: Yolanda was arrested.

Johnson-Peterkin:

For the sale of a controlled substance worth \$10, and sentenced to two and a half to five years, pregnant.

Kirkland: If two years sounds like a long time to lock up a pregnant woman for selling \$10 worth of drugs, the sentence came at the start of a bigger historical moment.

Johnson-Peterkin:

If you can remember, in '88 and '89, the war on drugs was to lock them up and throw away the key, and I got caught in that wave of locking someone away and throwing away the key.

Kirkland: Yolanda didn't know it at the time, but her experiences while being incarcerated would deeply impact the direction of her life. When she got arrested, Yolanda was sent to Rikers Island, where she gave birth to her son, Demetrius. The prison had a nursery program, where mothers could be with their babies for the first two years while incarcerated, and the officers in the nursery program were specific to the program, so the babies came to recognize them. One day, Yolanda's mom came for a visit.

Johnson-Peterkin:

They would bring the child on a visit as well. My son was nine months when he cooed for the officers. He was reaching for that officer, and my mother went berserk. She was like, "Oh, he knows he's in prison. He can recognize the people." And back then, I didn't know. I thought he could too. And I'm like, "Oh my God. He recognized her. He knows." He's like, he knows he's in jail, and he knows her and he knows. And I'm like, "Oh yeah, he sure do." I had no idea, not thinking that he was adapting to the person, not necessarily that she was an officer. And my mother convinced me to send him home.

Kirkland: Yolanda sent her son home with her mom when he was just nine months old. And she says that experience was so formative that she still performs a play about the moment of their separation to process that trauma. With her son out of Rikers Island, Yolanda was taken out of the nursery program and sent to a maximum security prison for women, called Bedford Hills, in New York State.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And it was daunting. It was horrible. I met women who would spend the rest of their natural life in prison. And I didn't know at that time how I was going to get out and stay out, but I knew that I was going to get out and I was going to stay out.

Kirkland: That's where Yolanda was given an opportunity to participate in something called Shock Bootcamp. Basically, you could take six months to complete the program and then get out, but Yolanda says if you weren't able to get through the program, you'd be sent right back to prison, and none of the months you had spent in bootcamp would have counted towards your sentence. Yolanda was hesitant to say yes.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I went back to the housing unit where I stayed, and I remember telling some of the elders that had 15, 18, 25, 50 years sentence, and I said, "They trying to get me to go to bootcamp, and I ain't going to no bootcamp." And I remember them saying, "Well, if you don't go, we going to whoop your ass for every day that you stay." Now, I wasn't really scared of them, but I kind of was. I was like, oh. And so I went to bootcamp, which was a total different experience.

Kirkland: The way Yolanda describes the Shock Bootcamp is a harsh crash course of mental and behavioral tools, combined with the same kind of physical training members of the military get before service.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Back then, I had sense enough to know, to me it was some kind of brainwashing. There's a lot of people of non-color yelling at me and calling me a dying cockroach, and saying that I had come from nothing. Yes, because remember, bootcamp is to break you down, back then. And so that when you got back to the community, if somebody called you a dying cockroach, you wouldn't care because you knew that you wasn't a dying cockroach. But that's not necessarily the way that we get it. But I got it.

Kirkland: The methods bootcamp used were far from gentle, and at first, Yolanda hated it. She even got voted most likely not to succeed. But then something changed.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I remember somebody saying to me, "You the badass from Brownsville and you can't even play the game." Ding, light bulb. It's a game. I should be playing it. And that was the turning point, I realized then that I should be able to do anything once I knew the parameters of what it was.

Kirkland: Over time, Yolanda started to see her cohort come together and she really leaned into the mental and behavioral lessons of bootcamp, even while going through physical challenges like moving big piles of rocks from one area to another.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And I remember your peers would confront you. It's a program. They have programs that says what I feel like saying, what did I do in my past that I won't do in my future? Giving you steps of how you can do something before you actually react. I still know those steps to this day, and it is 32 years later. And so learning with your sisters and being able to push your sisters when they think they're most weak. When they had me doing those rocks, my sister would march by and say, "You can do it because you are the best. This is a test." And I remember that, and I used to love that because I love to sing.

Kirkland: Yolanda experienced a change in perspective so big that it became a turning point not just in bootcamp, but in the rest of her life.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Kirkland: When Yolanda went back into her community, she had all of this perspective and she wanted to use it, but it seemed like the community hadn't changed one bit.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I really believed that there was going to be a ticker-tape parade, that people was going to be standing around where I lived in the housing development, which some call the

projects, but I don't call it that. It's a housing development. I thought people was going to be standing outside, it was going to be a parade, and it wasn't nobody standing nowhere. Everybody was doing the same thing. The people that was drinking wine, they were still standing on the corner, drinking wine. And there was no big deal that I had all this new energy and this brand new epiphany that I had in my mind, and all the things that needed to happen. And freedom has been great, but it also has been a fight.

Kirkland: Although there was an Aftershock program connected to the bootcamp that Yolanda had to participate in, life back in the community was unstructured. She had to figure out exactly what she wanted to do.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I definitely knew to go to work, go to work, get a job, and you'll be just fine.

Kirkland: That's what her mother had taught her. So Yolanda quickly got a job working at a Tupperware warehouse, and a second job working as a receptionist at the Aftershock program that helped formerly incarcerated people coming back into the community. As she pieced together a life she wanted, she relied on the tools she had learned at bootcamp.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And I mean, those tools were instrumental, let's just say that, very instrumental in my freedom because I use those tools in everything. See the situation clearly, know what you want, expand your possibilities, evaluate and decide. Please note that I'm using my fingers to do that because that's how we learned on our fingers, right? 32 years later, think about it.

Kirkland: Yolanda has practiced these steps so many times that they've become second nature to her. But 32 years ago, she had to mindfully take each step to cope with all the new challenges that came her way, including reuniting with her son, which was more complicated than Yolanda had anticipated.

Johnson-Peterkin:

My son was so used to my mother, so he looked at me kind of strange and it's like, "I think I might like you, maybe not." And then I went through a period of that, which was very hurtful because I didn't know that.

Kirkland: Yolanda was hurt, but she relied on her support systems and her professional networks to stay on track, even though she still wasn't sure what that track was.

Johnson-Peterkin:

My boss used to say, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" He said, "Get a book while you're up there."

Kirkland: Her boss at that Aftershock program encouraged her to aim big and set goals, and Yolanda rose to the challenge.

Johnson-Peterkin:

There was a class that taught people how to use their future, which is still taught, it's called CEO at this point, the Center for Employment Opportunities. And I said, "I want to be the counselor for that. I want to teach that class as people are coming out."

Kirkland:

Yolanda wanted to help other people in her situation, and plan for their future as to plan for her own.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And so I started teaching it. I went to the teachers college, Columbia Teachers College, and took the course, and I started teaching it. And then somebody asked about education.

Kirkland:

Her life experiences and work had catapulted Yolanda into social work and human services. And a lot of the opportunities that existed in that field required an associate's degree.

Johnson-Peterkin:

But I really didn't think I was smart enough. There was no one in my community saying, "Go to school." Just people that I was meeting at work kept saying education, education.

Kirkland:

With their encouragement and the support of a program called [College and Community Fellowship](#), Yolanda started work on her associate's at [Borough of Manhattan Community College](#). This was a big moment in Yolanda's life because every aspect of her life was at a tipping point. She was reconnecting with her son, working to build a better future for him, and pursuing a new-found purpose in life. And at the same time, she was getting to know a very special person.

Keith Peterkin:

Yolanda was very outgoing, strong, positive. She left a impression, she was a presence.

Kirkland:

This is Keith Peterkin. He and Yolanda got to know each other working nights at the Aftershock program. They got closer once Yolanda suggested Keith apply to also work at the Tupperware warehouse during the day.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And then I remember in the Tupperware warehouse, though, I remember the thought process of when I thought, I was like, "Oh, this is kind of a nice guy." And so then we went to lunch, and we would do everything together. And then my mother, she used to give bus rides all the time to Atlantic City and to different places. And so he went on the bus ride, his mom and everybody. And then we just started hanging out and it kind of happened like friends, like real great friends.

Peterkin:

That's pretty much where most of our relationship blossomed. The two of us alone in a Tupperware warehouse for eight hours a day. You get to spend that amount of time with the person and you get to spend, and really get to see all of the beauty and strength and intelligence in a person. And we drew closer, absolutely.

Kirkland: Yolanda and Keith were friends for a long time before they got together, and they were together for a long time before they decided to get married, but they were always a family.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And my son loved him and he loves my son. And so that's his dad.

Kirkland: The three of them, along with Yolanda's mom, were the daily support team for what turned out to be a grueling chapter in their lives when not only Yolanda was going to get her degree, but so was Keith.

Peterkin: I had hit my ceilings, like I said, in the early '90s, maybe '91, '92. I became a credentialed alcohol substance abuse counselor. That was pretty big for the substance abuse field at that time. And it took me into a decent, low-level management position. But then when it came time for me to move up, that wasn't enough.

Kirkland: Keith followed Yolanda's footsteps in higher education. First, Yolanda finished her associate's degree, and then went for a bachelor's in human services in Springfield, Massachusetts, at a college where she could take all of her courses every other weekend. Then, Keith attended the same bachelor's degree program in Springfield. Between their college courses, jobs and parental responsibilities, they had a lot on their plate.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I think it was grueling. And I also remember in between jobs, the two jobs was killing me, but I needed it in order to pay my rent. We kind of tag teamed, and my mom tag teamed in at that time as well.

Kirkland: While Yolanda and Keith were working on pursuing their degrees, Yolanda's mom would take care of her son after school. And after work, Yolanda would go over there and pick up her son.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And I would wake him up at 10:00 and 10:30 and 11 o'clock at night and walk him maybe five or six blocks in the cold and the rain across to my place.

Kirkland: At the time, this way of approaching the student-parent life seemed like the only possible way to do things.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And so you don't really get the fact that there are people who don't go anywhere. When their kids come home, they're standing at the door and the kids come in and get their homework and get their food and get their whatever it is that they need. You have no clue. At that time, I had no clue that that's a different way of doing stuff.

Kirkland: This sort of parenting may not have been accessible to Yolanda, but now looking back, she realizes there could have been an option in between.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Just learning that there's different things that you can do. Now, they have programs where your children can also learn. And there's a [Jeremiah Project](#) that's part of Ascend that I think is fantabulous, and they tried to bring it here to New York, where moms take their children and put them in the daycare center for early learning, and they go around the corner to college.

Kirkland:

It was only after getting involved with Ascend that Yolanda started to understand how some of these circumstances of her life could be traumatizing to her, her son and her husband. She sees this now in retrospect, and she works hard at her job and her community to make sure that student parents now have better resources and know their options. Yolanda is a powerhouse, but even she considered quitting at some point. She had finished her bachelor's.

Johnson-Peterkin:

And it seems that every time I got a degree, they'd want another one.

Kirkland:

She went for a master's degree at [Hunter College](#), and she was almost done when her life took another turn.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I remember when my mother was sick and I had six months left, and I was like, I'm done. Because if something happens to my mother, then I don't have another mother.

Kirkland:

Her mom wasn't just sick, she was dying. Yolanda wanted to prioritize caring for her mother, just like her mom had cared for so many elders in their community, and she almost gave up on her master's.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Yes, there are times when you want to give up, when you want to turn from all of the positiveness that you may see out there, no matter how many tools that you have, the community and the work and the environment will snatch you into a place where you can't. You feel like you can't.

Kirkland:

But she was encouraged to find a way to finish her degree.

Johnson-Peterkin:

My professor was like, "Oh no, that's not how it's done. You don't just drop out. Here's some things we can do."

Kirkland:

So Yolanda kept going to get her master's, and Keith kept going by her side, following the same path.

Peterkin: When she was able to do it, then I said, "Yeah, I need to do that also." And it definitely opened all the doors that are open to us right now. Of course, we still face challenges because of our history, but it definitely brought us to a level where we can compete.

Kirkland: Keith, like Yolanda, was formerly incarcerated, and he acknowledges that it makes life harder, not in the least because interviewers often gatekeep work opportunities from formerly incarcerated people, even if they have college degrees. Still, Keith and Yolanda are both big believers in the power of education to create new opportunities.

Peterkin: I tell everybody. I say, "Do it." Anybody that I supervise, anybody that I work with, advance your career. Don't wait.

Kirkland: Keith and Yolanda know better than anyone how hard it can be to do it. They know about the work, the childcare, the endless student loans. When I asked Yolanda what kept her going, here's what she said.

Johnson-Peterkin:

There was always something different about Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin, and it was a passion and a curiosity, and I wanted to make my mom proud. I wanted to hear my mother say, "I'm proud of you," and I wanted to lay a foundation for my son, and I didn't want what happened to me to happen to him. I also was learning. I kind of could see where it was fitting, especially by the time I got my master's. I could really see where my voice was.

Kirkland: Yolanda was learning so much in her studies, so much that helped her pinpoint the change she wanted to, and was empowered, to make.

Johnson-Peterkin:

The biggest goal of my life is to be able to do something for somebody that matters, other than myself. If I could take it and give it to you, I would, before you make the same decisions. I stay connected to [Ascend and College and Community Fellowship](#) and to the work that I've done for the entire 32 years because I want somebody else to have an opportunity before they make the decisions that I made. To hone that in and to be able to put it into a vessel that is able to help someone else, I think that's the reason why I live.

Peterkin: I don't know if she shared this with you, but someone said Yolanda is that train that pulls into the station and the train goes, "Woo woo, we're getting ready to leave," and if you don't jump on that train, Yolanda's train will be gone. You need to hop on, get on and ride. And I've been blessed to be able to ride, and every time she blew that horn, I hopped on. The wisdom behind that is Yolanda has a vision and she has some insight, and I don't know how she gets that insight, but you better ride with her or get left behind.

Kirkland: Yolanda has been clear on her vision and she has been working nonstop to serve women, people with justice histories and student parents. For years, she has worked in the nonprofit sector as a Director of Operations for [Reentry at the Women's Prison Association](#). Now, she works for the City of New York, bringing her service to a mass scale. But Yolanda always stays connected to the different steps in her journey.

Johnson-Peterkin:

You can find me at Rikers Island sometime, just because I want to talk to the women myself and understand what they might be going through.

Kirkland:

She has even gone back to teach at the bootcamp, but Yolanda says that isn't her reality anymore. Now, she uses her expertise to advise organizations like [College and Community Fellowship](#), which helps women with criminal justice involvement get college degrees. Yolanda is also involved with [Women Transcending](#) a part of [Columbia University's Center for Justice](#), where the focus is on women's leadership and ending mass incarceration. After all these years working in this field, Yolanda says attitudes towards people who were formerly incarcerated has changed a little, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I'm sure when we start talking about parents, that one of the parents that we're speaking about, if we collected the data that one of those parents or a few of those parents would have been incarcerated. But nobody is going to say that because it's not a good thing to say.

Kirkland:

Yolanda sees the whole picture of what's going on. To her, it's not enough to talk about education in student parents if you're not going to talk about incarceration and the added layer of challenges it brings. She sees the way traumas and circumstances compound in different ways, and says in her advisory roles, now she doesn't assume that the people she serves share her exact experience.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I'm often the voice of individuals who have had justice history. I refuse to walk into a room today and say, "Hi, I'm Yolanda and I did two and a half ..." I'm not doing that no more, because what I did doesn't matter. What matters is that I can sit at a table in some of the offices that I work now and say, "No, no, that might not work. We need to ask the individuals who are coming out or in today."

Kirkland:

As much as Yolanda gives of herself to New Yorkers, to student parents, and formerly incarcerated people around the country, she also pours passion, love, and energy into her community. Like her mom taught her at a young age, she makes herself available to care for people and she has even become a reverend at her church.

Johnson-Peterkin:

He was preparing her for the future. Now, you know and I know that Jesus' mother was saved. He didn't really have to prepare her, but he did it anyhow. Can you be trusted? If I'm not here tomorrow, will you take care of Demetrius? Will you be able to make sure that you pour into him? Have you taken out a little bit of time to figure out who Demetrius is? Have you taken out a little bit of time? Can you be trusted with people's children? Come on, now.

Kirkland: For years, despite all the challenges she faced, Yolanda has given life her all, and she has made a huge impact in the lives of her family, community, and even people she doesn't personally know.

Peterkin: I've coined us Oprah and Stedman. I like to use that analogy, because her star is so bright and she's big and huge and well known, and people see her and know her. And I'm more in the background. I think the thing that both of us realized early on, that it was the work that was most important. And I think we've done the work throughout. We never looked for the profile or to be seen. It was just about doing the work. We grew from working at a small group setting with formerly incarcerated people, doing counseling sessions, lectures, seminars, and working in a Tupperware warehouse, to where we advanced to in our careers today. We put that work in to attempt to erase the ceilings that we faced as we attempted to grow our careers. And I think education was a key to both of us moving past some of the ceilings that were in front of us.

Kirkland: Looking back, here's what Yolanda says.

Johnson-Peterkin:

I don't do the what if I had did this, and what if I had did that, except for the fact that I do often wonder what my life would have looked like if I never had gone to prison. But that being said, now I don't count it as, oh, what if this, what if that? I realize now what my journey is and why it is. And I needed to go to places so I could be able to pour into someone else. And so, no regrets. We just have to keep putting it out there and eventually, whether it's today or some other day when we are not around, somebody will get it.

Kirkland: Yolanda doesn't know which of her work will stick or exactly when, but she keeps trying. Just a few days after I talked to her, she performed this play hoping that for someone, somewhere, it would have an impact.

Johnson-Peterkin:

Don't know if you mind me asking you a little bit about that thing that happened. I don't think I have to go into great detail into what happened years ago, as opposed to acknowledging the fact that it's there and it happened, and I am where I am now in spite of that. And that shows my resilience. I've learned quite a bit, and I have a lot to prove. In fact, I'll probably be the best person that comes in here today to apply for this position. Amazing. And I certainly do agree, after you tell me about that little thing. Let's just say that it's there and it happened, and I'm sitting here in front of you right now with a college degree, ready to work. And I have a community of support who I can rely on in time of need, and they are there for me. Well, since you put it that way, my name is Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin, and I have a master's in social work, and I am the ambassador of freedom. And we just want to say, our beginnings has been established and our end is nowhere in sight.

Croom: Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin heads up housing initiatives for the [New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice](#). Ascend parent advisors like Yolanda are a key advisor group for the [Post-Secondary Success for Parents initiative](#), or PSP, which is supported by funders

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