



## “Learn about Generation Hope”

Today, Nicole Lynn Lewis is an accomplished author, CEO, and mother of five. But she didn't always feel a sense of stability and pride. She was raised to prioritize her education and had been accepted into several colleges when she learned that she was pregnant. When she arrived on campus with her three-month old daughter, she instantly felt out of place and didn't know who to turn to for help. Her feelings of isolation, financial stress, and a lack of community later inspired Nicole to create her nonprofit, Generation Hope, that supports the mental health journeys of student-parents. In this episode, reporter Sophia Fox-Sowell talks with Nicole about her organization and how its two-generational approach is helping other parents achieve educational success.

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David Croom: Welcome to season two of 1 in 5, which takes its name from the 1 in 5 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 degree or credential, and a roadmap for overcoming obstacles to access support and opportunity.

In this episode, we discuss the mental health challenges of being a student-parent. Financial stress, isolation, and a lack of community support can all take a toll. An organization called Generation Hope is there to lift the burden.

Reporter Sophia Fox-Sowell has the story.

Sophia Fox-Sowell:

When she and her three-month old daughter Nerissa arrived on campus, Nicole Lynn Lewis thought she'd be among the [more than half of student-parents who leave college without a degree](#).

Nicole Lynn Lewis:

I stepped foot on campus and thought, 'these feet don't belong here.' You know, it was very, very isolating. There I was, at a school where a lot of the students didn't look like me.

You know, I was an anomaly as a young mom. And so, so many things were working against me.

Fox-Sowell: As a single mother, Nicole says she struggled to maintain a sense of stability while going to school at the [College of William and Mary](#). First, she had to find housing.

Lewis: I was really fortunate to find a family housing apartment on campus that wasn't intended for undergraduates with babies, because the assumption is that we wouldn't exist at William and Mary. The building was primarily for graduate students and adjunct professors with families, you know, that were married and had kids. So I was on campus quite a bit with my daughter and I was often, you know, walking with her to get my mail across campus. And so I almost became the “girl with the baby,” people kind of referred to me as that.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole is now a CEO, book author, and mother of five. She’s radiating confidence through my computer screen, speaking with such poise and purpose that it’s difficult for me to picture her as a young college student struggling to find her footing.

But navigating the world of higher education as a first-year student and new mom proved quite disorienting—literally. Nicole got lost her first day on campus.

Lewis: They lumped me in with a transfer student orientation group. I wasn't a sophomore, you know, or a junior. I was a brand new college student, and I didn't know where anything was. The higher-ed experience was completely foreign to me. So I soon had to find my way around campus that first day on my own without, really, support from the college that was targeted to me as a parenting student.

Fox-Sowell: [According to the National College Health Assessment](#), parenting students consistently report feeling isolated and disconnected from campus life.

Lewis: I didn't have people to talk to when things were really going badly, or I was having a really difficult time.

Fox-Sowell: A sense of belonging is vital for good mental health, and it can also be a factor in whether parenting students stay in school. [38% of student-parents surveyed](#) said that they had considered dropping out of school in the past month, compared with only 25% of non-parenting students.

To find the socio-emotional buffer she needed, Nicole created her own community of peers.

Lewis: I did end up building out a support system on campus, and a group of girlfriends. And that was wonderful. And they essentially became aunts to my little girl, which was wonderful.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole was lucky to find support like that. Not everyone does. Parenting students [represent over 20% of the total undergraduate population in the U.S.](#), but, Nicole says, they're often an underserved population on college campuses.

So she created [Generation Hope](#), an organization to help fill that gap.

Generation Hope works directly with young parents in college to help guide them towards stability and success. Nicole founded the nonprofit in 2010 in the Washington, D.C. area, with a singular mission: to ensure that more student-parents can earn a college degree.

Lewis: It was so hard for me. It didn't have to be that hard. And I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure it wasn't that hard for other people.

Fox-Sowell: That starts with making sure student-parents have support systems in place—whether it's in their community or on campus—because, as Nicole knows, not every young parent has the support of their families.

Lewis: We all need support. We all need lifelines. We all need cheerleaders, people who care for us, and authentic support, support that doesn't come with a lot of strings and barriers.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole says her own parents had mixed feelings when she became a teen mom. She was raised to prioritize her education, and to work towards college. In fact, when she learned she was pregnant, she had already been accepted to several colleges.

Lewis: So much of what we had been working towards, you know, me personally and collectively as a family, was now in jeopardy when it came to my future. So I think my parents struggled with being supportive in the midst of a lot of disappointment and sadness and shock. And so it was really hard.

Fox-Sowell: Her parents' concerns about her future were founded on the harsh reality facing teen moms.

According to a study by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), a federal entity that collects education data, [71% of all student-parents are women](#) and 43% of them are single mothers. And fewer than 2% of teen mothers earn a college degree before age 30.

Lewis: I found myself becoming a parent at a young age and, and all of a sudden, college became this really evasive target. It was really difficult for me to see a pathway... nevermind just getting to college, but definitely also getting a degree.

Fox-Sowell: Parenting students are up against a lot, including financial stress. [More than 88 percent of student-parents](#) have incomes at or below the federal poverty level. That's around [\\$17,000 for a household of two](#).

That stark fact is just one that puts into sharp relief the realities facing student-parents. And every year, we learn more, thanks to the [Hope Center for College, Community, and](#)

[Justice at Temple University](#), which conducts an annual assessment of students' basic needs at over 530 universities across the country. They call it [#RealCollegeSurvey](#). The 2021 #RealCollegeSurvey found that student-parents who had difficulty paying rent, who worried about whether food would run out before they had money to buy more, or who had difficulty paying bills, all had [significantly higher rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms](#) than students who did not experience these stressors.

Lewis: When I look back at my time as a young mother in college, I am really proud. I think it was hard to be proud of myself in those moments, the days were so hectic and long.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole says that's why Generation Hope focuses on providing student-parents with the mental health support she never had. Parenting students are more likely than non-parenting students to report having trouble paying for mental health care, [according to the Aspen Institute](#), this show's presenter.

So Generation Hope offers free mental health services.

Fox-Sowell: Before the pandemic, Generation Hope's mental health manager, Asia Vianna Leek, a certified and licensed professional counselor, would travel to meet with students for sessions.

Asia Vianna Leek:

Close to their home or close to their school or on their campus, as long as we could find a private space where we could have our session.

Fox-Sowell: Asia speaks deliberately, yet delicately, like someone who understands it's not just what you say that matters, it's also how you say it.

When the pandemic ended in-person meetings with student-parents, Asia became board certified to offer sessions remotely.

Asia says that she and her team tailor their services to best fit the individual scholar, keeping in mind there's no such thing as a "one size fits all" approach to mental health support, especially when serving a marginalized population like student-parents.

Vianna Leek: Being flexible. So, if a scholar has an exam that they are at a study session for and they ran over, we can reschedule our session and they're not punished for it. This service is there for them, so it doesn't make sense for me to punish you. If you've missed, you know, three sessions, maybe we need to talk about using the mental health services a different way—maybe it's better if you use our Non-Crisis Text Line, if it's not a crisis and safety situation. So we can just be creative about how we approach the mental health services instead of punishing them if something's not working.

Fox-Sowell: Asia says a number of Generation Hope's scholars have also had adverse childhood experiences – like domestic violence, sexual trauma, substance abuse, and incarceration. These types of experiences can impact their mental health.

Vianna Leek: If you're in a classroom, nobody may know that your dad was in jail or that your mom was in and out of jail. But that is something that can affect a child, that does affect kids when that happens. And so these unseen, ambiguous types of traumatic experiences or lost experiences can compound often and be something that scholars do need to address.

Fox-Sowell: Asia practices empathy and understanding because she knows the pressure and anxiety that can build up if internal conflicts go unresolved.

Vianna Leek: The dual role of being a young adult with also being a parent can cause a lot of stress. If we can layer mental health support, and not have people come to us just when it's a crisis, and just when they've reached their edge, then I think we are more likely to see some of the long lasting benefits that we want to see.

Fox-Sowell: Generation Hope also has a mentoring program that connects scholars with a mentor who stays with them from the start of their college journey through graduation, and sometimes beyond. A few months before Generation Hope scholars start college, they meet with their mentors to discuss any obstacles blocking the path to graduation.

Here's Nicole.

Lewis: We talk about housing, we talk about food, we talk about childcare, we talk about relationships, getting a sense, is there an intimate partner violence situation? Is there a relationship with a parent that could go south and jeopardize housing. Really trying to get an understanding. We talk about their mental health, we talk about their physical health.

Fox-Sowell: Sometimes, those obstacles show up on campus, like finding professors who are open to tailoring their syllabi or office hours to make their classes more accessible to student-parents, who often have very rigid schedules and limited time.

Lewis: At times, it felt like their response was punitive. And so there would be almost like higher expectations or a little more pressure, and just kind of inflexibility around assignments and attendance and things like that. And so from those experiences, I also learned that it wasn't always safe to disclose that I was a parent.

Fox-Sowell: A study from the [Jed Foundation](#), a nonprofit that works to prevent suicide in young adults, [showed that 57% of student-parents](#) report having an experience with a faculty member who was unsympathetic to their situation as parenting students.

For Nicole, one experience stands out.

Lewis: I had a theater class and my professor, I explained to her that my daughter had walking pneumonia. There was a test or a midterm or something that was happening in class, and I asked if I could make it up and be able to stay home and take care of my little one.

And she said no, and asked and required that I come to class, and even if I had to bring my daughter. And so here I was walking through the snow with my daughter, who I think was

like maybe one, a little over one, who had walking pneumonia, and she had to sit on my lap, miserable in class, so that I could get that credit.

Fox-Sowell: Despite that experience, Nicole says she often felt supported by her professors.

Lewis: I had some professors who were really wonderful. And so in awe of the fact that I was juggling all of these things, that I was a mom and I was going to college and were definitely like, hey, whatever I can do. And if there's ever something that comes up, let me know.

Fox-Sowell: But even that level of flexibility and support couldn't help Nicole feel less guilty for sometimes prioritizing her education over her child's health.

Lewis: I feel like I'm endangering my child so that I can stay in this class and not fail.

Fox-Sowell: Asia says that feeling of guilt is common among student-parents, who are balancing parenting duties that affect their children now with academic responsibilities that will pay off in the future.

And Asia would know—she's the child of a student-parent. Her mom went to college right after high school, but then dropped out and started a family. Years later, when Asia was about to enter high school, her mother decided to go back to college.

Vianna Leek: She started her freshman year again, and I started freshman year, and we graduated, me from high school, her from college, the same year.

Fox-Sowell: Her mother's busy schedule, balancing a full-time job while also attending school full time didn't leave much time to spend with Asia or her younger siblings.

Vianna Leek: I know what it's like to not be able to see my mom all day or for my mom not to be able to come to an event that I had, because she was at school. And I also know what it's like to be extremely proud of her, you know, and you get your grades, and she gets her grades like, so I definitely resonate with their experience.

Fox-Sowell: In her role at Generation Hope, Asia sometimes acts as moderator if there's a conflict between a parent and their child.

Vianna Leek: Maybe the scholar is dealing with, you know, some guilt around not being able to read their bedtime story, because they've had exams all week, and so they've missed bedtime story all week. And it's kind of causing frustration and building up.

Fox-Sowell: I wanted to find out more about why tension can build up between student-parents and their children.

So I reached out to Zainab Okolo, a practicing therapist who provides mental health support to student-parents, and a strategy officer at [Lumina Foundation](#) in Indiana, which focuses on making higher education more accessible for marginalized populations.

Okolo: Student-parents, wanting to give their all to their families, end up putting the needs and the care of their families before their own, and to the sacrifice of their own self care, wellness—everything from sleep, all the way to their academics and their personal pursuits.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole remembers feeling exactly that way.

Lewis: I was in constant survival mode. I was just always focused on the basic needs that needed to be met every day, you know, making sure my daughter was fed, making sure she had a roof over her head and getting her into childcare and, and keeping my head above water and making sure I was doing well academically.

Fox-Sowell: Zainab says many student-parents falsely believe that self-care is selfish.

Okolo: And in reality, engaging in self care, especially as a student-parent, becomes a model for the beautiful children that you're raising around how to fill up your cup, and to pour from that full cup.

Fox-Sowell: With clear messaging, Zainab says, higher education professionals can ease this sense of guilt student-parents feel by pointing out the value of staying the course.

Okolo: If you complete your degree, your child is twice as likely to pursue to complete their degree and go on to college. If you find joy in your work, your child is twice as likely to do the exact same. And because student-parents work really hard to set those good examples for their families, that's their motivation.

Fox-Sowell: Asia says her family was more financially stable after her mother earned a college degree. Witnessing her mother's journey as a student-parent motivated Asia to consistently perform well in college.

It's a feeling she brings with her to Generation Hope's play therapy group, called [Let's Play](#), focused on children ages 6-9 whose parents are in Generation Hope's scholars program. It's part of their two-generation model that strengthens the parents' academic success while setting up building blocks for their children's success, too.

Asia uses Legos, playdough, and bubbles to uncover and help a child express what they might be feeling. There's one bubble-based exercise that has wide appeal.

Vianna Leek: When we're working with unhelpful thoughts, you know, we might blow some bubbles. And then one person says the unhelpful thought and another person can pop it with a positive thought. Reframing how we're thinking or, you know, being aware of a thought that's not very nice to ourselves, and incorporating that into the game.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole says mindset is important, not just for student-parents and their children, but for the community around them. She remembers a student who came into the scholars' program several years ago. Nicole says she was shy, nervous, and guarded.

Lewis: This is a population that is very much ostracized and stigmatized and judged. I think parenting students in general have that, but it's so acute for teen parents, because teen pregnancy is such a polarizing issue, people have strong feelings about it. And the knee-jerk reaction is to judge that young person. And to put them in a box and a category, which is essentially you're not deserving, you're not worthy of resources and support. And so a lot of what we do at Generation Hope, when students first come into our program, is working at chipping away at that wall, and really working at establishing trust and making sure that they know this is a safe space. This is not a space where they're going to be judged or criticized, but really celebrated for who they are, and their family is celebrated.

Fox-Sowell: Recently, that same student was a panelist at a conference Generation Hope hosted for prospective scholars. She had earned a degree and was working as an accountant.

Lewis: Just watching her on that panel, share insights, talk about being in the workforce and feeling so empowered by her degree and by what she had achieved was such a proud mama moment for me, where I was just like, 'Oh, my God,' you know, to see her thriving. It's a testament to what college can do for folks, which is that self exploration that pushing you out of your comfort zone and learning new things and doing things you may not have thought you could do before.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole says earning her own college degree was transformative.

Lewis: Life definitely got easier. I wasn't always worried about how I was going to pay rent, or whether or not our car was going to break down. I was able to do the things that I had always prayed about and dreamed about.

Fox-Sowell: Nicole's daughter Nerissa, who was four at the time, walked across the stage with her.

Lewis: It was an incredible moment, it was, you know, achieving something that people tell you is impossible. And I heard that as soon as I discovered my pregnancy, and I felt it every single day after bringing my daughter into the world, that I wasn't going to be successful, I was going to be a failure, I was never going to graduate from college. And to have this moment where we're walking across the graduation stage together, it was surreal. It was triumphant..

Fox-Sowell: While her graduation marked a milestone, Nicole says she wasn't able to fully appreciate the moment because she was thinking of what needed to happen next—getting a job to support her small family as a single mother.

Lewis: I didn't take the time to really just take a step back and appreciate, you know, what I had accomplished. What I was accomplishing every day, which was a lot. And so I look back



and I'm really, I'm really proud of what I was able to do, what we were able to do, Nerissa and I together. I think about our college journey, because it wasn't just mine, it was both of us.

Fox-Sowell: In addition to supporting scholars, Nicole says Generation Hope helps colleges, universities, and policymakers better understand the needs of the nearly 4 million parenting students in the U.S.

Lewis: A lot of folks working across higher education still don't know how significant the parenting student population is, and that, that they're in their classrooms, they're walking their campuses, And that they are a part of, of, you know, the community, that campus community and that they deserve to be there and need support.

Fox-Sowell: One focus is changing the attitudes and behaviors of college faculty members, like the teacher who pressured Nicole to bring her sick child to class. Another is advocating for federal emergency aid programs to continue post pandemic to alleviate the financial burden for student-parents.

Lewis: We had really created a proof point for how to do this and how to do it well. And so we felt like it was important for us to take that important lessons-learned insights, all of that, into these systemic change conversations where we can talk about policies, legislation, at the public policy level, but also at the institutional level, that can similarly remove barriers, but at a larger scale.

Fox-Sowell: One of those barriers—the cost of being a student-parent—has ballooned.

Lewis: There's a very real, valid question of whether or not I would have been able to graduate from William and Mary today, given the cost of college, given the cost of childcare, versus 20 years ago, when I actually did graduate. So those are things that have changed for the worse.

Fox-Sowell: Generation Hope tries to ease the financial burden on its scholars. It collects useful items from the community – anything from laptops to diapers. It also [provides tuition assistance, and emergency funding](#), to help scholars pay bills or buy groceries.

Generation Hope's support, in all its forms, makes a big difference. [62% of student-parents in Generation Hope's](#) scholars program earn a degree within six years, which is on par with the national 63% rate for undergraduate degrees.

Starting Generation Hope was a labor of love, Nicole says, especially because convincing donors to see her vision for the organization proved incredibly difficult at first.

Lewis: There was no one knocking at my door, saying we want to give you some seed funding. We believe in your vision. I was starting this organization from the ground up with a population that was really ostracized and stigmatized. I had people asking me, why are

you doing this? Why are you working with young parents? You know, they're going to be a hard population to fundraise for.

Fox-Sowell: Zainab also understands this roadblock well. As part of her work, she studies underserved populations, like student-parents, and proposes solutions to university administrators, local community groups, and even government officials.

Okolo: I have encountered a lot of curiosity about the possibility of institutions really being able to address this issue, not only the possibility, but the responsibility. What is the actual responsibility of institutions to ensure that students have the mental health services that they need to persist on campus? Isn't that something that they should have figured out before they got to campus? Aren't there other sectors that should be more responsible for this than the education sector? And that question, oftentimes, for me, reading between the lines is really a question around resources.

Fox-Sowell: But Zainab is seeing a change happen in how higher ed institutions approach mental health support, specifically.

Okolo: What I'm starting to hear from institutions is they're starting to think about creative ways to not only make more counselors available on their campus, but also engage with platforms, online platforms that allow students to always have a place to reach out and gain support. I think some of those look like ensuring that students have flexible hours when it comes to counselors. There are quite a few institutions that have separate counseling hours just for, for example, student-parents, LGBTQIA students, students of color, and other minoritized groups on campus. And this is a great step in the right direction.

Fox-Sowell: Fortunately, Nicole did find donors who would champion her vision.

Lewis: Twenty years ago, people weren't talking about parenting students. There wasn't a #student-parents. There wasn't a 1 in 5 podcast, you know, these, these things didn't exist, people, I think maybe knew that there might be one or two parenting students. But there was no concerted effort to really advocate for this population. But I do see that there is a movement that has grown, even since I started generation hope and 2010, around this population and awareness and mobilization, you know, for this population. And that's really encouraging.

I think institutionally, there are definitely schools that are doing a wonderful job and saying, 'How can we really transform our environments to be more supportive of these students?' But those are not the norm. When we're talking about first gen students, every conversation should then say also, what about parenting students? When we're talking about students of color, we also want to be talking about parenting students. So how do we elevate the conversation around parenting students so that it becomes one of those key populations that we're always thinking about and considering? I think that is something that still needs to happen.

Fox-Sowell: Asia says thinking about student-parents, considering them, doesn't have to mean taking care of them.

Vianna Leek: I think a lot of times we see people who we will place in a vulnerable population as needing help, from like a pity perspective. Whereas if we see this whole person, and we see the ways that they've been resilient, we've seen the ways that they've already tapped into their strengths, even if it was only for a period of time, then we're more likely to highlight that and hone in on that, and they can build from there.

Fox-Sowell: Zainab points out that [student-parents are more likely to have higher GPAs](#) than their non-parenting peers.

Okolo: We have an opportunity now to better support them, unlike what it might have looked like 20 or some odd years ago, when the stigma, you could cut it with a knife, and perhaps the student would be blamed if they couldn't persist. It was counted as they were being weeded out, because they didn't have the resources. In reality, there are brilliant students, extremely talented students that are just at a crunch for time.

Fox-Sowell: Here's Nicole.

Lewis: We often get caught up in the college degree as being the thing that validates us, the thing that makes us worthy. In reality, I want our scholars and parenting students to know that you're already amazing without the college degree. It's a credential that is going to get you to that family-sustaining career, it's going to get your foot in the door, but it is not defining you. You are already incredible and amazing. You're doing these seemingly impossible things each and every day. So remember that. Hold that tight, know that you're worthy today, with or without the degree, of all the things that the world has to offer.

Fox-Sowell: Parenting students face a barrage of obstacles to earning their degree, including the stigma and judgment they receive from peers, parents, teachers, and even strangers. Nicole and Generation Hope are showing how these constant challenges can be met with consistent opportunities, and that sometimes what student-parents need most is to be celebrated.

Croom: Generation Hope is a nonprofit organization that surrounds motivated teen parents and their children with the mentors, emotional support, and financial resources they need to thrive in college and kindergarten, thereby driving a two-generation solution to poverty. Nicole Lynn Lewis is the CEO and founder. She is also a [2022 SOAR Fellow](#) for Women and Girls. Thank you for listening.

Croom: 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 well-being from one generation to the next. To learn more about student-parents and resources for them, visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org), and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter.

Sophia Fox-Sowell produced and reported the episode. Mark Betancourt is the editor. Paulina Velasco is our Managing Producer. Our theme song is “Ascenders” by Kojin Tashiro who also mixed this episode. Mary Mathis fact checked it. I’m David Croom. Follow 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

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