



“Meet Lourdes Grijalva”

As a child of immigrants, Lourdes saw the efforts her hard-working parents made to give her a memorable childhood, and how they always stressed the importance of education. Then, in high school, Lourdes became pregnant, and the birth of her daughter inspired her aspirations for higher education, leading her to a career in nursing. As a single mother and nursing assistant, Lourdes was spending all of her time caretaking—at work and at home—and found herself living paycheck to paycheck. But Lourdes’ hard work didn’t go unnoticed, and with encouragement from her peers, she enrolled in a nursing program at her local community college. Local El Paso groups like Project ARRIBA and Workforce Borderplex gave Lourdes the training, resources, and financial support she needed to stay the course. Reporter Andrea Henderson follows Lourdes’ higher education journey from the delivery room to the graduation stage.

David Croom: Welcome to 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 spotlight how the support student parents receive while they finish school can extend to their careers in the workforce. We follow one woman’s eight-year path from teen mom to nursing student in the border town of El Paso, Texas.

Lourdes Grijalva:

Once I had my daughter, I started to think, like, hey, I need to take things more serious. I need to focus on myself. I need to do something about it because nobody’s going to do it for me.

Croom:

The odds were stacked against Lourdes Grijalva in a number of ways – limited support for her daughter, not enough financial aid to afford childcare and school, a language barrier, and a learning disability. But she overcame steep odds with the help of caring parents and her community, including an organization that specializes in developing the majority-Latino workforce in West Texas.

Roman Ortiz: Our vested interest is to see them be successful in school, but our goal is to get them into a great job in this region.

Croom: Roman Ortiz is the president and CEO of [Project ARRIBA](#), an El Paso nonprofit that every year supports hundreds of college students, most of whom are parents. Organizations like Project ARRIBA understand that student parents are key to a healthy economy, and that the right boost at the right time can lift them and their families out of poverty.

Reporter Andrea Henderson has our story.

Andrea Henderson:

Lourdes Grijalva's weekday schedule is jam-packed. She starts by getting her six-year old daughter ready for school.

Grijalva: I wake up at six in the morning. I get ready and then I get her ready around six-thirty.

Henderson: After dropping Hailey off, Lourdes heads to nursing school at the University of Texas at El Paso. After class, she picks her daughter up and rushes home to make dinner.

Once Hailey is asleep, Lourdes studies until about 2 a.m. and some nights even later, if she has an upcoming exam. Then she gets a few hours of sleep and wakes up to do it all over again.

Grijalva: It's hard. It's really stressful.

Henderson: Lourdes is 24, shy and soft-spoken. She's raising Hailey on her own. And she's doing what she needs to because she is committed to becoming a nurse.

The birth itself was a turning point. During the birth, her daughter Hailey breathed in fluid and other material, causing her heart rate to slow and her blood oxygen to plummet. Hailey had to stay in the NICU — the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. During that time, Lourdes was inspired by the nurses who took care of her.

Grijalva: Cause I saw the NICU and where my daughter was there for about like a week or two. The nurses were really kind. They helped me emotionally-wise as well. They were just great. So I actually liked how the nurses treated me and Hailey as well. So that's when nursing got into my mind.

Henderson: Lourdes knew her parents would help her with Hailey, but she felt it was her responsibility and she had to get a job.

Grijalva: Cause Pampers are so expensive, milk is so expensive. I have to get my face together. So that's when I decided to become a nursing assistant.

Henderson: For Lourdes, nursing could be more than a job. She wanted to provide the same nurturing experience she and Hailey had to other families who trust nurses to restore their loved ones back to good health.

Lourdes is among the [3.8 million students in the nation](#) who are raising children while also attending college. She is a child of immigrants, and learned English as a second language. Her parents came to the U.S. from Zacatecas, Mexico decades ago. They met in Mexico and decided to move to the U.S. to make a better living. They settled in El Paso, Texas, where about 81% of residents are Hispanic. Lourdes says she knew they didn't have much.

Grijalva: I don't even know how my parents did it, like with our uniforms. Our hair was always, like, nicely combed. And they did so much with, like, just as much as little money they have.

Henderson: Lourdes' parents were adamant that their kids stay in school and be on time every day. As a result, Lourdes had a perfect attendance record. But her parents couldn't help her or her siblings much beyond that.

Ortiz: Early on, children of immigrant parents have to translate for their own parents.

Henderson: Roman Ortiz is the president and CEO of Project ARRIBA, the job training and financial assistance nonprofit in El Paso that supports student parents, including Lourdes. He's also a child of immigrants.

Ortiz: Then you start to realize that when you come home with homework, they're not going to be able to necessarily help you with that homework. You've got very proud parents who work very, very hard and do the jobs that no one wants to do. Nobody wants to clean houses and to dig ditches and to farm and to do the hard stuff. That's not what people want to do. But we know that immigrants do this and do this to the benefit of the communities that they live in.

Henderson: Even with limited funds, Lourdes' parents found ways to make her childhood memorable. They threw her a lively quinceañera, the 15th birthday party that's a pivotal cultural moment for Latina girls and their families. It's like a wedding mixed with a coming-of-age party. And traditionally, families go all out to celebrate their daughter's introduction to society. The young lady often wears a big, whimsical ball gown adorned in crystals and intricate beading. The guests enjoy food and dancing.

Grijalva: It was something that my parents didn't really have the money for it, but I mean my mom, she made it happen. She did my quinceañera for me and my sister together, the oldest one and it was fun. My friends were able to go, my family were able to go and that's pretty much what the best part of my life was my quinceañera. My ballroom, everything was pretty nice. I enjoyed it.

Henderson: But within a year, Lourdes' life would take an unexpected turn when she learned she was pregnant. She was terrified to tell her parents because she thought they would be angry.

They had sacrificed so much so that she could have a chance to finish school without any disruptions.

Grijalva: My mom was a little bit surprised like she didn't expect it, but the reaction wasn't as bad as I thought. My dad told me, 'Well, as long as you're in school, we could help you.'

Henderson: For teenage mothers, staying in school is difficult. [Only 53% finish high school by the time they're in their 20s.](#) Lourdes was also up against another challenge in school. Learning and understanding didn't come easy to her.

Since grade school she'd had trouble reading in English, and she was also dyslexic. She was in a special reading program in elementary and middle school that helped her with her learning disorder, and she took English language learner classes –or ELL– throughout school.

Lourdes : It did make me feel like a little bit, if I was dumb. But the teachers, they were like really great motivator that would have me read. They'd teach me.

Henderson: [There are 5.1 million English language learners in public elementary or middle schools across the nation, about 10 percent of all enrolled students.](#) For nearly [75% of those students](#), their primary language is Spanish. In Texas, [over 90 percent](#) of ELL's primary language is Spanish.

Lourdes was lucky to have extra support in school, and she completed the reading program for dyslexic students right before entering high school. Although her family continued to show her love during her pregnancy, Lourdes wasn't sure if her friends and teachers would be as supportive.

She played soccer and basketball, but once she found out she was pregnant she felt she had to quit.

Grijalva: Not being able to play kind of, I did become a little bit depressed. The coaches were like, 'Well, we need you.' I'm like, Sorry, but I'm not going to be able to. I just didn't want to tell them the reason why I was not going to play.

Henderson: At first, she kept the pregnancy secret from everyone at school.

Grijalva: Once I was with my belly I kind of figured, okay, well everybody is going to know I'm pregnant. So while the days were going, I told one of my friends that I was always with and she's like, Oh my god she spread it all over.

Henderson: But her friend wasn't trying to shame her.

Grijalva: She made me feel like if I was so pretty about being pregnant and she would tell others.

Henderson: That acceptance, the support from her family, and her own drive to build a good life for herself and her unborn child would go a long way to protect Lourdes from the more dire realities faced by teen mothers and their children.

Children of teen moms in the U.S. [are more likely to enter the foster care system](#), go to prison, become teen parents themselves or end up in poverty. Like many teen moms, Lourdes worried that she wouldn't be able to afford to take care of her baby.

In many states, childcare can exceed the cost of a college education. [According to a 2018 study published in the Journal of Higher Education](#), if low-income families or teen parents don't have family members to watch their children, education takes a backseat to parenting and paid work. After her daughter was born, Lourdes felt that same pressure. She started missing school, and one of her teachers reached out to her.

Grijalva: So she called and she told me, 'hey, like you miss school. Like, what's happening? What's wrong?' And I told her, like, well I need to figure it about, like, what am I going to do? Cause I need to see how I could take care of my daughter because I didn't have the money, I didn't have nothing. And she told me about a program for the daycare to help me with the services.

Henderson: Not only did the program provide daycare, it made it possible for pregnant students to take their regular high school classes while learning about baby nutrition, delivery expectations, and how to apply for health and financial assistance once the baby arrived. The teacher even gave Lourdes a space to take naps if she was exhausted, and extra food if she wanted it.

Grijalva: If I was hungry, she was like, 'Hey, we'll just come and then I have some snacks here.' Or 'if you need someone to talk with, I'm here as well.' So I went in a couple of times to speak with her, like there was times that i was just my emotions were like, up, down, up, down like I was just and it was a great resource.

Henderson: Thanks to the program at Lourdes' school, she graduated a year early – three months after having her daughter.

After graduation, she enrolled at both [El Paso Community College](#) and a local nursing school to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. Then she worked as a nursing assistant at a nursing and rehabilitation center. For almost four years, Lourdes fed patients, tidied them up, monitored vitals and reported any changes to a supervisor.

Grijalva: I enjoyed it because being able to hear from the patients telling me like, 'hey like you're great, thank you' Like just hearing a thank you for them. By the end of the day it filled my heart.

There was this lady, she walked up to me and she's like, 'look, come here.' So I go in her room and she presented me to all her family and she's like, 'Look, this is my nurse. She's

the great one. She's really nice to me.' It was something that I didn't expect from her to say.

Henderson: In contrast to how highly regarded she felt by some of the patients, her take-home salary left her living paycheck to paycheck. And she was so committed to her job that her social life began to suffer.

Grijalva: I didn't have time to, like, go play with my friends. Instead I was over here working, taking care of my daughter. Even though it was challenging, I kept pushing myself. There were times that I would cry. I would like, go away and just cry for a little bit. But by the end of the day, well, like, I need to just keep myself pushing.

Henderson: About a year into working at the nursing home, her coworker mentioned that Lourdes should continue her education and get a nursing degree.

Grijalva: My coworkers told me like, 'hey, you like your a good person, you should become a nurse,' like.' I see you as a nurse, continue,' like, 'the way we see you helping the patients, you even go way and above, and we see all of that, even though you don't see that we are looking at you.'

Henderson: She didn't hesitate. She started the nursing program at the [University of Texas at El Paso](#) in fall of 2021.

[Less than 6% of registered nurses identify as Hispanic](#), but over the past five years, Hispanic enrollment in nursing bachelor degree programs has jumped nearly 50 percent. Roman Ortiz of Project ARRIBA says those brand new nurses will be in demand when they hit the job market.

Ortiz: Now employers are saying we need people that look and sound just like you Lourdes, because the people who are coming into our hospital are afraid and don't want to talk to someone that can't speak Spanish and you're going to be the one that's going to be able to help them through the greatest time of need. We want people who look like the people that our hospitals serve.

Henderson: Bilingual nurses can even help limit health disparities by bridging the gaps in communication between medical staff and patients.

Ortiz: During the last 15 years, the military base here has expanded their hospital and has invested a billion and a half dollars on creating a hospital for their Army veterans. The Medical Center of the Americas was established to help bring in Big Pharma groups to do research and development on this Hispanic community. This region was the first region to have a medical school opened up in almost 50 years.

Henderson: In other words, Lourdes' chosen profession is in high demand. In nursing school, Lourdes enrolled in rigorous courses, including biology, introductory nursing, pharmacology, mental

health and research classes. She says she continues to struggle a bit with her studies, but she is putting in the extra work.

Grijalva: Focus on my vocabulary, learn those words. I would have to, like, look up videos on YouTube and make sure to know what is it that I'm learning. I needed to have some pictures. I needed to have everything so that I could know what the subject was about for my readings.

Mimi Duran: Lourdes is very compassionate and she genuinely cares for other people. That is a very, very highly recommended trait for someone that wants to go into nursing.

Henderson: Mimi Duran is a case manager at Project ARRIBA. She works with students like Lourdes who are going into the healthcare field and need support with financial aid, food stamps, books, child care assistance or Medicaid.

Duran: She needed assistance with tuition balance. She did have financial aid, but it did not cover the entire tuition bill because tuition in the nursing program is very, very expensive. Not to mention added expenses that they have.

Henderson: Lourdes connected with Mimi through [Workforce Solutions Borderplex](#), a workforce development board that links people with resources that can help them graduate from college or personalize their career path. Workforce development boards are largely funded by taxpayers, as part of a government effort to help develop and train skilled workers across the country. They also help people get jobs. Workforce Solutions Borderplex specifically addresses the unique challenges and talent in the West Texas border region. Workforce partners with Project ARRIBA to help clients get the resources they need and put together training workshops.

Project ARRIBA will serve almost 500 students this year, the vast majority of whom are parents. More than half are single parents. Here's Roman.

Ortiz: Many of our families have dependent children, but they don't have a very good income. And so they have to make a decision: Do I stay and work and take care of my children, or would I like to go to school, but I can't afford daycare?

Henderson: Roman says many of Project ARRIBA's clients receive [Pell Grants](#) from the government to attend college, but that assistance often isn't enough, sometimes covering only half of what they need.

Ortiz: My wife and I have had two kids and we've gone to the El Paso hospitals and every single nurse that helped us in our delivery of two kids, were all Project ARRIBA graduates. without Project ARRIBA I wouldn't be a nurse today.

Henderson: For over 25 years, Project ARRIBA's work supporting students has added an estimated [\\$893 million dollars to El Paso's economy](#). Roman says that investment has a ripple effect.

Ortiz: It happens a lot here in this region, where one electric bill will stop somebody from finishing college. One water bill will stop somebody from finishing college. And that's a shame because we're missing out on the Lourdeses of the world that are going to be there to help save my life.

Henderson: Before finishing school, students who work with Project ARRIBA make an average of \$8,000 a year. After they graduate, that jumps to almost \$60,000. And the organization continues to work with colleges in the area to help students get jobs in the healthcare sector once they graduate.

Duran: By giving them the appropriate training, they'll be able to graduate and have a job that's going to pay them a living wage, which is more than \$14 an hour. Our nurses right now are making over \$28 an hour.

Henderson: Mimi has been working with Lourdes for about a year. During their weekly sessions, Mimi goes over job training efforts that include interviewing skills, resume writing, dressing for success, time management and budgeting. Basically, anything to give her more confidence and help develop her career.

Duran: She really has set herself goals. She's not letting anything get in the way. She knows where she's going because she knows where she's been.

Henderson: But this confident Lourdes was not the person Mimi met in December 2021.

Duran: I remember her doing her very first mock interview. She really didn't know, and she would start laughing, you know, And it was okay. I mean, it was a mock interview. But then as she progressed in her education, I saw Lourdes flourishing.

Henderson: Mimi manages 45 healthcare students and 15 of them are single mothers.

Duran: It's hard to be a single parent and going through nursing school. It is tough, you know, and my hat's off to all these some single parents that are doing it because I think they're going to have a level of empathy and a higher level of compassion for their patients, because they've been through a lot more than those students that don't have any kids.

Henderson: Lourdes often confides in Mimi about her personal struggles as a student-parent, and Mimi encourages her to take time with her daughter, so her family life won't suffer. Lourdes works hard so her family can be proud of her.

Grijalva: I found my mom as a great example as a mother. Even though they didn't have the money, they were always there pushing us. And for me not to finish school was something that I'm like, all of that is just going to go to the trash, like I can't.

Ortiz: When you have to pay for something, and I'm not saying just monetarily, but when you got to pay for it with blood and sweat and tears and you got to let go of that baby because you got to go to school and you're there at school and the baby's with your mom, and your

mom has been complaining that I'm taking care of too much the kid and and you got all this investment, that when you finish, oh, don't you believe you're going to be grateful, you're going to be thankful and you're going to be one that is going to help lead another generation of people who say, 'Well, I can't do that because I have a kid. And my family status is one in which they can't help me financially.' Well, let me tell you how I did it, because even the most successful person at the end of the day needs to look and say, I did not do it alone.

Henderson: This year, Lourdes will graduate—the culmination of a long road and overcoming so many challenges.

Grijalva: I just can't believe it. I still can't believe it once I'm there in the ceremony. I'll probably, like, believe it a little bit more. But I just know that once I'm there the sacrifice and everything, like, all the late nights, it was. It's all worth it. I feel excited to start my life journey, and I can't wait for that moment.

Henderson: She can now easily imagine one day becoming a doctor. She's happy that she's been able to include her daughter Hailey every step of the way. She hopes Hailey sees her commitment to education as a roadmap to success.

Grijalva: I want to give her the example for her to finish her career and know that life is not easy. Like it's something that you need to earn. You could pick your pathway. Either you go, like, the easy way, or you could go the hard way, like with challenges. But you're going to be fine.

Henderson: Lourdes' story is not unique, but she is certainly one of a kind. Throughout her life, she has demonstrated selflessness, despite the challenges she faced as a young mother. She brings commitment and determination to the work she loves, and she's taken every opportunity—and all the support—that's been offered to her and paid it forward.

Croom: Lourdes Grijalva is a nursing student at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Thank you for listening.

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, and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter.

Andrea Henderson 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. Catherine Nouhan 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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