



“Meet Isis Patterson”

Growing up, Isis Patterson and her family were constantly operating in survival mode. School offered her the safety and security she lacked at home, so she took a liking to it. When she found out she was pregnant at 15, she kept herself immersed in her schoolwork, graduated with honors, and received a full-ride scholarship to college. Driven by her own experiences with housing insecurity, she studied public policy as an undergraduate student, and pursued housing equity work, leading her to want to better understand the root causes of housing instability. But a graduate program involved financial risk, and she needed affordable housing, childcare, and a tuition package to make her dream feasible. Fortunately, Isis secured housing on an income-based sliding scale, and was able to lean on the support of friends and mentors to pursue a Masters Degree in Urban Planning at Harvard University. Isis is again balancing being a mom and a student, with the same motivation in mind—the future of her children. Reporter Lisa Bartfai brings us Isis’ story of overcoming generational poverty, achieving educational success, and always striving for more for her family and her community.

David Croom: Welcome to season 2 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 meet Isis Patterson, a student parent who built networks of support around her and her children ... so she could graduate college, work for a Member of Congress and eventually enroll at Harvard University for graduate school.

Reporter Lisa Bartfai has her story.

Lisa Bartfai: Isis Patterson is sitting in front of her computer in her home in Beverly, Massachusetts. It’s a windy day but Isis is cozy where she’s sitting, focused on her task. Next to her is a half drunk iced coffee from Dunkin, a leftover from breakfast that Isis has forgotten all about. Her attention is fully on the computer screen, where there’s a map with lots of large pinkish and reddish bubbles on it. Isis moves the bubbles around on the map and adds new ones.

Isis Patterson: I'll show you. I was working on a map for my spatial analysis class. What I have to do for this class is basically be able to analyze spatial information. And you know, right now, I am mapping out the location of parks and basketball courts to schools in St. Louis, Missouri.

Bartfai: She just started a masters program in [Urban Planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design](#). It's an intensive, full-time two-year degree. Isis has a personal interest in urban planning.

Patterson: It's something that's impacted my life, my family's life. Both access to it and in-access to it, really showed me, you know, why we had the experiences that we've had growing up, and why my Mom struggled so much to be able to, you know, maintain one stable location. We had to move around a lot.

Bartfai: At 25, she carries herself as if she was older. She is quick to laugh, but there's a confidence and calm about her. Like a person who reflects on herself and her situation. She wants to understand the world around her, and she's deliberate and thoughtful in how she speaks. Isis' studies have always been influenced by her experiences of insecure housing and homelessness as a child.

Patterson: When I was studying housing policy in my undergrad, I was kind of, like, in an information gathering, putting vocabulary to experiences that I've had, experiences that my relatives had, friends had growing up. I was finally learning, like, there were problems that was bigger than us, you know? Even if we worked as hard as we could, there were still bigger systems at play. From redlining and segregation and discrimination, these were factors that it wasn't our fault that we weren't living in certain neighborhoods or had access to certain things.

Bartfai: Past policies of redlining and segregation, and current housing discrimination, have contributed to a situation where Black families like Isis' are [three times more likely to be homeless](#) than the overall US population, according to HUD. When she learned that, something shifted for Isis. She became determined to do something about unequal access to housing.

After college, Isis [worked for her congressman, Seth Moulton](#). She was hired as staff assistant and later got promoted to District Senior Aide. In his office, she acted as liaison between constituents and federal offices and institutions that the residents were having difficulties with. The issue was often housing. She liked her role as District Senior Aide but felt frustrated that she couldn't do more for the constituents she tried to help.

Patterson: That work really inspired me to think about like, well, what does that actually mean to develop housing policy? What does that actually mean to put funding and deals together to be able to construct affordable housing? And I realized I didn't really have the answers to that, and I felt like it was important to go back to school to find those answers.

Bartfai: That's when she began thinking about a Masters degree. But there were some hesitations and hurdles. Grad school is a big commitment. It would mean quitting her full-time job with the Congressman.

Patterson: I felt like if I'm going to go back to school and do this for me, I wanted to be able to do it full-time just because of my personal learning styles. And my ability to kind of multitask is sometimes not, not always the best.

Bartfai: Besides learning styles, there were other big and important considerations. Isis has two children. Kaiden who is ten and Genevieve who is one. She's also a single mom.

Patterson: And so, you know, that's difficult because, you gotta also consider, like, all right, we gotta do the pickups and we gotta do the drop offs at school. Things like kids getting sick in between. And so sometimes at a full-time program that stuff gets tricky and you gotta have backup plans, you know, in case those things happen.

Bartfai: Another big question for Isis was if she could afford grad school. Black single mothers with a higher degree [also have some of the highest household debt](#), according to The Education Trust. Knowing that gave her pause.

Patterson: And so I know that I'm already kind of in a position where I'm trying to fight generational poverty that my family have experienced. And so, you know, to be able to also set myself back with having more debt is something that I really did not wanna do for myself. I didn't wanna do for my children, as well. I have a lot of goals in terms of being able to establish some kind of inherited wealth for my children and specifically a house.

Bartfai: In 2019, [only 18% of Black households headed by women](#) who have children owned their homes, according to the Urban Institute. That number is up from what it was thirty years ago, but fewer Black women in that group – women who have never been married and who have kids – own homes than their peers of other races and ethnicities. These are statistics that Isis, a housing policy wonk, knows inside and out. The question she was debating was if she could beat these odds and come out of a graduate program with greater possibilities to prosper.

Patterson: It was a lot of consideration. I knew that it was gonna be hard, you know, going to a full-time program. But, I have a lot of support. I have a lot of people that want to see me thrive and help me in whatever way they can. And so knowing that I had that I took a leap of faith. It's a risk, but I think it was a risk that, you know, was too good not to take.

Bartfai: Isis already knows the value of a degree and how it can propel her life forward. Next to the couch hangs a framed photo of her in a cap and gown at her high school graduation. She looks happy, smiling and hugging a little boy.

Patterson: This is a picture of me and my son after graduation we were in the auditorium, and I have my diploma in my hand and I'm hugging Kaiden. It was a great day. This was back in 2015, just a few months before heading off to college with Kaiden.

Bartfai: The photo is from a [Wall Street Journal profile of Isis](#). A friend cut it out and framed it for her. Isis graduated with honors and a full scholarship to [Endicott College](#). Something she accomplished while living in a group home. A feat so rare that a staff member at the group home called the Wall Street Journal to come do a story on Isis.

Patterson: There was an expectation that, well, you're, you know, 15 and pregnant, there's no way you're gonna finish school. But I kept on going, you know. Kept on going because it was what I knew best. It was a place that I always felt secure. I always felt safe. It was always calm and quiet and it was always somewhere where I just felt really comfortable being, I enjoyed being. So despite the fact that I was pregnant I was like, that's not gonna stop me from going to school.

Bartfai: [Research shows that, nationally, only half of teen mothers](#) receive a high school diploma by the age of 22. Isis was different. She stayed in high school because it felt safe, away from a homelife that could be chaotic and that involved a lot of moving. And she was good at school. But she'd never given college much thought.

Patterson: You know, my mom, she didn't finish high school. My dad wasn't around and every day was just trying to survive. It was about, you know, how are we gonna put food on the table? There wasn't enough time. It wasn't our priority to have a conversation about college or anything like that, even high school.

Bartfai: There were teachers at Isis' school who wanted to have that conversation. They encouraged her to join advanced classes and organizations that were focused on student development and college prep.

Patterson: This was the first time anyone in my life has talked to me about college, you know? Given the lack of confidence I had in myself because of my pregnancy, you know, I really also was shy of the idea of college. I didn't understand it, and I also felt like I wasn't a candidate for it. And you know there had been exposures. There was one time where they took me on like a college trip and, you know, I just didn't wanna be there because I didn't want people looking at me, you know, as if I had the audacity to be in those places in that situation as a teen parent.

Bartfai: Some adults around her saw it differently. They saw that Isis belonged. Especially Beth Dorfman, who mentored Isis in high school through a program called [Financial Women's Association](#). Beth convinced Isis that college was the right path for her.

Patterson: She saw past, you know, my current situation and she was like, You know, this doesn't mean that your life is over. You know, if anything, you have so much more to do this for. You know, now it's not just you, you're thinking of it's your child. And so when Beth came along, it was the first time where, you know, someone's taken a chance to show me that I could be there and now look.

Bartfai: Mentors continue to be important to Isis' journey as a student-parent. Andrew DeFranza is among them. I met him in his office in Beverly, MA. The office is housed in what looks like an old Victorian building on the outskirts of a residential neighborhood. The Bass River is visible from the windows. Andrew first met Isis when she was in college in the area.

Andrew DeFranza:

Josh McCabe was a professor at Endicott College. And Isis was his student and he reached out for some reason, she was interested in land use policy and how it affected housing and how that affected people. And so he reached out and asked if I would talk with her. So I did a presentation in his class and then talked to her after I believe, and then we had coffee at the Atomic Cafe in Beverly and talked about her interests and her hopes and her future.

Bartfai: An internship was part of Isis' college program at Endicott. She asked to intern at [Harborlight Homes](#) where Andrew is the Executive Director. Harborlight Homes is a nonprofit that develops and manages affordable housing in Massachusetts. They also [work with communities](#) to advocate for more equitable housing policies. So their day-to-day work and their mission aligned perfectly with Isis' interests. After graduation, when the internship was over, they hired her part time. And Andrew and Isis kept in touch after she moved on from the organization.

DeFranza: And then periodically I would see her for coffee and check in and ask her how it was going and what she was thinking about for next steps, and how was the work? And that's when it came up, I think I'm, maybe I'm gonna go back to school. And we started talking about that process.

Bartfai: Andrew knows how driven Isis is. He believes she can pull from her own history and education to contribute new solutions to the housing crisis. He was certain that a masters degree would mean that Isis could create a better life for herself, her kids, and her community. But for it to be feasible, she needed help.

DeFranza: We're talking about mathematical impossibilities without certain support systems. So in her case, she really needed three things, right? She needed support for childcare for the kids, which she did the legwork for. She needed to get that done, and done in a way that was affordable to her. Secondly, she needed to have a financial package from the institution that was viable. Meaning they're gonna pay for tuition and some sort of income stream that she can manage her basic needs and the kids' basic needs on. And so she looked at a number of schools and got a good package from a couple and went with the one I think that she felt the strongest about in terms of quality and package. So a way in which she wasn't gonna have to pay tuition and there would be resources. And then the third is she needed a place to live that was gonna be affordable.

Bartfai: This is where Harborlight Homes comes in. They build and manage rentals in Beverly which are priced well under market rate. Some buildings are specifically for older people, or for those who are formerly unhoused. But a recently completed house was built for

young families. To get one of those units, all Isis had to do was to [enter a lottery](#) that anyone who meets the income criteria can enter.

Bartfai: Luck was on her side and Isis won the lottery and got a unit in a brand new construction in downtown Beverly. The rent is adjustable at 30% of her income. So now that she's a student and earns less, she also pays less for rent.

DeFranza: So, you know, her biggest expense essentially is on a sliding scale based on her income. And so she knows she's got a safe place to live that is durable. She's got a package with the school that is viable economically and she has childcare. So that essentially creates for her, home, time, and money. And she needed all three of those things to pull that off.

Bartfai: Isis marshaled the support she needed as a student-parent from a number of directions. A [childcare voucher from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#) helped with Genevieve's daycare. Affordable housing through a lottery. An elite institution in her area, [Harvard](#), gave her a package to help with tuition.

Bartfai: It's still quiet at Isis' place. Kaiden is in school, and Genevieve in daycare. One of Genevieve's teachers helps out when Isis is busy with school. It's perfect because she's already at the daycare, and she knows the kids so well. But pick up is still a few hours away and we have time to linger a bit longer in front of her photo wall.

Patterson: And right underneath here, this picture is actually funny. This picture was taken at Harvard Yard. This was before I actually got accepted. I think this was last year. This was actually before I even applied. My daughter, I think at that point she must have been like maybe five or six months. So we just took a walk around Harvard and Cambridge and, you know, walking around, taking pictures and I didn't even know yet sitting right there that I'd apply, let alone get accepted to Harvard. So I really like that picture.

Bartfai: In the photo Isis is sitting on the granite steps outside of a building with baby Genevieve in her lap. She's wearing a pretty summer dress and a big smile. She looks radiant and at ease. Like she belongs there. A Harvard Graduate student. But none of that was on her mind when she framed and hung that photo up. That was about creating a loving home for her kids.

Patterson: I always think deliberately of things that I wanted to see as a kid growing up and like, I loved seeing pictures of us in the house framed. And so I try to do that in the house and be deliberate about that.

Bartfai: The apartment is bright and open. There's a big bay window in the living room. And in front of it an L-shaped desk, where Isis is working on her school projects. She can see her kids playing in the living room from there. The toys are neatly put away in baskets by the couch for now, but little traces of them are everywhere. Kids' cups on the kitchen counter. Photos of them on the walls and side tables.

Though she loves her place in Beverly, the forty-minute drive to Harvard's campus in Cambridge impacts how Isis participates in school.

Patterson: Most of the time they're scheduling times to meet when I gotta go ahead to pick up the kids, or it's just too late for me to be able to have a babysitter watching the kids. I also have to pay a babysitter, so I have to budget for the amount of hours that I'm using per month to be able to help with pickups. And sometimes if I wanted to attend those meetings, it would be more expensive for me as well. So, you know, those things have definitely played a big part in my own kind of experience thus far in the program. Just in that I don't think that there has been a certain level of kind of student-parent accessibility. It's something that I'm actually hoping to change. I think for this first semester I'm just kind of trying to, you know, test the waters right now.

Bartfai: There's a hesitation in her voice when she talks about the student-parent support. [Research shows that students from historically underrepresented groups](#) report that participating in extracurricular activities help them succeed in college. Joining student clubs and reading groups, being part of a learning community, can be helpful to academic success. But Isis hasn't met any other student-parents in her Urban Planning program. She knows that there is a [graduate student-parent organization at Harvard](#) that she could connect with. So there might be more of a community out there for her to tap into, but finding the time and money to do it is hard.

Her experience as a student-parent at Endicott College was so different. Isis was enrolled in a program called [Keys to Degrees](#) that was specifically created for single parents. As part of that program, she lived year-round in suite-styled dorms on campus together with other student-parents. They studied together, they raised their kids together. They became very, very close.

Patterson: One of the reasons why I decided to actually be a commuter student was because, like, I really didn't wanna leave the ecosystem of support that I've established for myself in where I live now, in the city that I live in now. I've made a lot of good friends who've helped me to get to where I am today and who I love very much and who support me and so it was hard for me to imagine leaving that to go to a new city to now establish that kind of support again, that network again, those friendships again. Not to mention the fact that I have kids. And so I didn't want to have to relocate my children who attend schools and programs with kids they've known for a long time.

Bartfai: Isis moved from New York to Beverly in 2015 to attend college at Endicott. She doesn't have any family in Massachusetts but those friends she made in college, and later on coworkers, and even teachers at her children's schools, have formed a new chosen family.

Patterson: You know, those are the people that I am connected to. And they just remind me sometimes when I'm down and I'm trying to figure out like, you know, can I make this work and I'm tired and whatnot. I remember the people that hold me up, that help me stand. And they're right here. They're right here with me.

Bartfai: Paying that support forward and offering it to other student-parents is important to Isis. She's a [Parent Advisor at Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#). Ascend works to create better opportunities for children and their families. As a Parent Advisor, Isis and ten other student-parents use their expertise to shape Ascend's work. The Parent Advisors weigh in on what kind of support and structures student-parents need to succeed in higher education—all based on their own personal histories.

In the role of Parent Advisor, Isis also wants to make herself available to other student-parents who might be struggling. She knows that a lot of them are plagued by self-doubt. Just like she once was.

Patterson: When I graduated from college and then I found myself in line at a food pantry cause I couldn't afford to pay for groceries on my own, cause all of my money was going to rent, I was really upset and I was really hurt. And I wondered, what was school all for if I'm in this situation now, you know, what was it all for? But when I was able to get access to affordable housing and then affordable childcare, it completely changed it for me.

Bartfai: [Although having a college degree increases student-parents' earnings over a lifetime](#), and their kids future earnings, it also often means more debt. That debt can make those first years after graduation very financially challenging. The debt is made up of high tuition, high childcare and living expenses.

For Isis, the financial challenges she initially faced after college graduation came as a shock. They made her hesitant to pursue another degree. But she leaned on friends and mentors for the courage to go back to school. Their support keeps her in grad school even when it's hard. And Isis is there for student-parents who don't have the same backup she does.

Patterson: If you feel like you can't, then reach out to someone who is going to let you know that you can do it then I would say reach out to us. We were in that same, same, same boat. We were in that same situation. Each and every one of the current parent advisors, previous parent advisors, we were at some point doubting ourselves and someone was able to step in to help us see, you know, what we see now.

Bartfai: Being a student-parent is possible. It's a point Isis comes back to again and again. It's not easy, but possible. In many ways, she says, being a parent has made her a better student.

Patterson: I think scheduling is everything. Scheduling is something that's become like a second nature for me as a parent. Between scheduling, school meetings and doctor's appointments and whatnot, you kind of really gotta be able to really understand and schedule a lot of the time of your day.

Bartfai: But even with the best scheduling, things happen that throw a wrench in her plans. Kids get sick. Assignments are due. Traffic is bad. Life gets stressful with often-conflicting demands. Those times Isis reminds herself of her priorities. School is important but her children come first. And she has to save some of her energy for herself.

Patterson: I think the other thing is being able to say no. I think sometimes, like as parents we gotta understand when to tell our kids no and explain why we have to say no and just being able to really be able to do that. It's hard sometimes and as a parent I've really taken that kind of skill set and being able to break down and understand why we have to say no sometimes.

And that's the other thing, sometimes you wanna be nice. You don't wanna sound mean for saying no. But it's not about being mean, it's about knowing this is my limit. I'm not able to do that right now.

Bartfai: When she says no, she does it for her children. School is for them, too. It's a legacy she wants to pass on to Kaiden and Genevive. To let them know that these opportunities are open to them.

Patterson: At times where certain barriers, like one would imagine they would never allow me to be in a position or a place that I'm in right now. You know, he won't have to face those same things. And I'm working hard so that he won't have to go through those same things.

Bartfai: When Isis was accepted to grad school she brought Kaiden with her to Cambridge to visit. They dressed in Harvard swag and took pictures around campus.

Patterson: I think he was really excited for me. And the fact that he could understand the gravity of what this meant, that his mom was going to Harvard. And he would go around to his friends and his teachers and say, 'My Mom's going to Harvard! She got accepted to Harvard!' So I think that that's a big thing that he's happy for me right now. And I want him to grow to understand that this is for him. As much as it's a great thing for me to be able to establish that legacy for our family, to be able to show him that it's absolutely possible with all the things that at times were against me in my life.

Bartfai: Graduating high school and going off to college was the first time Isis experienced education as a pathway out of poverty and violence. She knows the power that a degree holds for her. And there's data to prove that getting a college degree does that for most people. [A study by the College Board](#) shows that having a college education increases a person's chances of moving up socioeconomically. Earning more, having more personal lifetime wealth. These positive effects are enhanced by the networks attending an undergraduate or graduate program places alumni into.

Patterson: People in some of the highest positions in this country still rely on networks from schools and whatnot. And I've seen that become more and more possible, and I just want my kids to be able to experience that as well. Everything that I do, it's with them in mind. And so he's very proud of me and it's a good feeling to have your kids be proud of you.

Bartfai: It's time for Isis and I to say goodbye. But not before stuffing my hand full of cough drops for the drive home. She only has a couple of hours left to finish her spatial analysis assignment and add all those red and pink dots to the map of St. Louis before it's time to

pick up the kids at school. And she's eager to use that time for school work, because once she's with the children, she's with them. They are her only focus. Even on a busy weekday when there's a whirlwind of things to do between pickup and bedtime-- homework, hers and the kids', dinner, baths, storytime -- there's time to cuddle and play.

Or be goofy in front of the TV together.

Patterson: When I'm able to pick them up from school instead of a babysitter or a friend picking them up cause I'm in class. Being able to make the ride home fun, putting on some fun tunes and singing some songs, you know, just making it so that we try to make laughter and, and good moments out of small times we have.

Bartfai: This is Isis' number one mom hack, making everyday moments together count. Because as a student-parent there are times when she's not able to be with the kids. But she knows that even if going to school sometimes keeps her from them, it is still for them. Getting a college degree helped ensure that her children grow up in a more stable home than she did. And with a graduate degree, Isis is hoping to not just improve their lives but the community's too.

Croom: Isis Patterson is pursuing a masters program in Urban Planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Thank you for listening.

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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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