



“Meet Nicole Alkire Grady”

Nicole Alkire always excelled in athletics and academics at Standing Rock High School in North Dakota. But being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse meant Nicole turned to dating, and eventually alcohol, to cope with the trauma. In high school, she became a mother, and worked hard to graduate – leaning on the support of her family and especially her mother. She was determined to go to college, and tried several options to find a place with the right support for her growing family. She eventually found help for her substance abuse, and

reconnected with her Lakota values, and is pursuing a legal career. Reporter Ambriehl Crutchfield follows Nicole’s journey in 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.

In this episode, we meet Nicole Alkire Grady. Nicole is a mother of five and a student at Sitting Bull College in North Dakota. Higher education was always a top priority for Nicole's parents, and now earning a bachelor's degree is a priority for Nicole, but it wasn't always that way. Painful events knocked her off course and it took time and the support of loved ones to find her way back. Reporter Ambriehl Crutchfield picks up Nicole's story from the beginning on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

A quick note, this episode contains brief references to child sexual and substance abuse, so please take care of yourself as you listen. Listen with someone who can support you or read the transcript if that's more comfortable for you.

Ambriehl Crutchfield:

Nicole Alkire spent her childhood immersed in nature. She's Lakota, a subset of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, and grew up on the reservation. Standing Rock straddles the border between North and South Dakota. It's dotted by prairie plains and rolling hills near the Missouri River. But unlike the panoramic surroundings of her youth, some aspects of Nicole's childhood were less than picture perfect. When she was three years old, her father started drinking heavily, which caused problems in his relationship with Nicole's mother. Her parents separated and her father moved out. Nicole stayed with her mother, Tina White Mountain Leingang.

Tina White Mountain Leingang:

I never had any problems with her when she was young. When she started college, that was a different story. But she was a middle child, so she was pretty mellow.

Crutchfield: Nicole's grandparents emphasized the importance of knowing and honoring their culture as Lakota. She says the most important value in her life has been....

Alkire Grady: Be honest about who you are. In the end, that what's going to matter, is your integrity. And you always want to carry that with you, you always want to hold that close to you. As much as other people are maybe lying to you or whatever else, you just always want to keep that authentic in yourself.

Crutchfield: Nicole says she struggled as an adult to uphold this value because of childhood trauma. She says she was sexually abused when she was between eight and 10 years old by a family member at her maternal grandparent's house. At first, she told no one what happened until the summer before her first year of high school. Nicole opened up to her best friend. They were resting on a trampoline, and the sun was starting to rise.

Alkire Grady: She was like, "Oh, I'm sorry." I mean, it was a long pause, but we just hugged each other and then we just never talked about it again.

Crutchfield: According to the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#), one third of sexual assault survivors, women and girls, say they were assaulted or raped for the first time between the ages of 11 and 17.

Alkire Grady: So I guess living in that shameful feeling, but I didn't really know it was shame until I got older.

Crutchfield: After telling her best friend, she wouldn't open up again until adulthood. Nicole is 5'4 with straight brown hair that reaches past her shoulders. As a budding athlete, sports teams capture Nicole's attention. In high school, she played for the Standing Rock High School warriors on the volleyball and basketball teams. Eventually, she added golf and played all three sports during the school year and competed in the Class B girls golf tournament.

Alkire Grady: I also loved school subjects, math, reading, science. I always did pretty well in school. And when it came to sports, maybe that's why I also excelled in school, is because you had to do good in school to be in sports.

Crutchfield: That ethos was passed down in her family. Tina says that her father instilled the importance of getting an education in her family.

Leingang: I thought it was something that he was teaching us to provide for ourselves with our education. I guess, have better jobs.

Crutchfield: Growing up, Nicole saw her mom work eight-hour shifts and then go to class two or three times a week to earn her bachelor's degree. She says she admired Tina's hustle as a single parent trying to provide a better life for her children.

Throughout high school, Nicole remained a top student and athlete, even though she says she occasionally drank at social gatherings. She says she started dating guys as a distraction from the trauma of being sexually abused and to drown out memories of her father's alcoholism. Eventually, both would alter her life plans. Nicole's mother, Tina, remembers the night of the Lakota Nation Basketball Invitational in Rapid City, South Dakota. Nicole's brother had traveled from Colorado for the game, and Nicole didn't disappoint as a starter on the team. In fact, her mother says it was her best game, so she was surprised when later that evening...

Leingang: I got a call from the coach telling me that she was in the emergency room. I panicked. I didn't know what was going on. I went there and she calmed me down. She said, "Nicole has something to tell you."

Crutchfield: It was just Tina and Nicole's older brother in the room, when Nicole told them she was pregnant.

Leingang: I broke down. I didn't know what to do. I was just shocked and mostly shocked, but I had my emotions and everything that night.

Crutchfield: At that point, Nicole had been in a two-and-a-half-year relationship with her boyfriend. On Christmas Day 2006, Nicole gave birth to her daughter Layla, who was born four months early. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports teenagers are one of the groups with increased odds of having premature births. Tina knew that teenage mothers sometimes had tougher pregnancies, so...

Leingang: She had a lot of support from me, especially with Layla being born so premature. I was very overprotective of her, I guess.

Crutchfield: Tina bought clothes and diapers. She also made sure Layla got to and from daycare. Fortunately, Layla's paternal grandmother ran a licensed daycare, and when that wasn't open, she'd go with her dad. During this time, Nicole was still in a relationship with Layla's father. In 2008, the support from multiple family members allowed Nicole to focus on her senior year of high school and compete in basketball and golf. But one year after Layla was born, Nicole gave birth to her second child, Gunner. After this, she was no longer allowed to play on the basketball team.

Alkire Grady: I guess I understood. My mom was really upset with me. I don't think she talked to me for a long time after she found out I was pregnant with my son. And then a lot of older adults, I just felt that they were all disappointed in me, so I just was disappointed in myself in turn.

Crutchfield: So Nicole put all her energy into academics and did her best to avoid her teachers and classmates. The lack of support didn't limit her big dreams. The following spring, she applied to several colleges.

Alkire Grady: My mom gave me the letter and she was like, "I didn't know you were applying here." And she just gave me this crazy look, but she was just smiling. I thought it was going to say like, "You've not been accepted." So when I took it into the room and I read it, and I remember I was just so happy.

Crutchfield: Against all odds, Nicole was accepted into her dream school, [New York University](#). Even though she and her mom celebrated with a hug, Nicole knew in her gut that NYU wasn't an option. She knew that moving far away to a big city with two kids with a basic financial aid package wouldn't be enough to support her family. So Nicole decided to go 200 miles west to [Bismarck State College](#) and study nursing part-time. She chose a smaller school because it was affordable and would allow her to be closer to home. Plus, she'd already earned some college credits from a dual enrollment program in high school. And her mom was an inspiration.

Alkire Grady: So I knew that no matter what obstacles were thrown in my way in my academic career, I could still get through it because my mom was able to do it. I could do it.

Crutchfield: When Nicole crossed the graduation stage in 2008, she was recognized as the class salutatorian. Right after high school, while transitioning into college, Nicole got straight to work as a full-time records clerk at a government hospital. She continued until it was time for school to start. Then she'd drive back and forth from Bismarck to Standing Rock, which was about two hours away.

Alkire Grady: I thought I could be a superwoman and do the 8:00 to 4:30 and then go to school at... I think my classes started at 5:30 or 6:00, and it always went until 9:00 PM. I would do my homework, which would be until about midnight, and then I would get back up at six o'clock and then get ready and then head out of town by like 6:30, 7 o'clock.

Crutchfield: A schedule like that may work on paper, but in reality, with two children, the end result for Nicole was burnout, and she says her worsening relationship with Layla and Gunner's father was weighing her down. They broke things off in 2009, and the children stayed with her. Then in 2010, during her sophomore year, Nicole moved back to Fargo and transferred to [North Dakota State University](#). Nicole was familiar with the school. While she was in grade school, her mother and siblings moved almost five hours away from Standing Rock to Fargo, so her mom could take classes. Though the [university had a childcare facility](#) while Nicole was on campus, there wasn't room for both of her kids. So she took Gunner with her to Fargo, while Layla moved in with grandma, Tina. The arrangement was supposed to be temporary while Nicole found a place where she could keep both children.

Alkire Grady: But it didn't really happen that way. I actually struggled while I was up there with Gunner, and I didn't really do too well in school, and I didn't really have any friends in Fargo. I didn't really think about that. So it was just really lonely for me just having me and my son there. I mean, I really missed Layla too.

- Crutchfield: By the summer of 2012, Nicole had figured out her childcare situation and moved Layla to Fargo. By the following fall, Layla and Gunner were in grade school, which allowed Nicole to attend classes during the day and to work in the evenings. They stayed in Fargo for a year and a half while Nicole made progress towards her bachelor's degree. Soon, Nicole started dating someone and drinking frequently. During her junior year of college, Nicole says she'd become addicted to alcohol. She'd also been in a relationship for seven months and told herself that she had the drinking under control.
- Alkire Grady: But looking back and seeing now, it's like I didn't, and I actually was... I dropped out of college by then. I was barely even keeping the job that I had, and we were just barely living. I was living paycheck to paycheck.
- Crutchfield: So Nicole took almost a three-year break from school. After leaving school, she gave birth to her third child, Nora, and found herself in an unsustainable situation with her boyfriend. Although her boyfriend was struggling with his own addiction, he moved with their daughter Nora, to be near his family in Minot, North Dakota.
- Alkire Grady: It just was like, it really heartbreaking for me. I had to go to counseling whenever he left. I ended up checking myself. I went into an evaluation. I told him that I did have a problem, so I was trying to get all this help by myself.
- Crutchfield: Nicole's mother, Tina, was the only person who knew that she was struggling with substance abuse while trying to maintain custody of her youngest child. That Lakota's self-authenticity that Nicole said she'd always prided herself on.
- Alkire Grady: I always said it and I always preached it, but it really wasn't that important to me until two years ago, two and a half years ago, because I was lying about who I was, about what I was doing every day. I was just trying to paint this picture that I was the perfect mom. I don't have this drinking problem. I don't have a drug problem.
- Crutchfield: Her cultural pride and the value she placed in honesty, pushed her to a fresh start. The first time Nicole started getting help with her substance abuse was at the [South Central Human Service Center](#) through the North Dakota Department of Human Services. The program staff worked with low-income families to pay for addiction treatment and counseling. The addiction center estimates that outpatient rehab, what Nicole calls aftercare, costs \$5,000 for a three-month program. For her, the program was free. Nicole really wanted help, but there was a long waiting list.
- Alkire Grady: They knew that inpatient wasn't on the table for me because I had kids at home, so they recommended the aftercare.
- Crutchfield: So every day she'd go to [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) for two hours to share her story and to hear other people's struggles.

Alkire Grady: I kind of stayed quiet for, I think like the first two sessions. It was nice to be in a room full of people that were almost going through or had went through the same thing that I did, whether it be in my addiction or in my childhood.

Crutchfield: And Nicole says she began to realize just how much being sexually abused marked her childhood and led to drinking in the eighth grade.

Alkire Grady: I can't even imagine my freshman son or my sophomore, my daughter. I can't imagine them drinking now or sneaking out and doing that. They're totally in a different zone than when I was, in that age.

Crutchfield: For a while, Nicole was on a rollercoaster in her personal life. She moved several times and her relationship with Nora's father was full of starts and stopped, but this was all pushing her closer to prioritizing her education and finding her internal motivation. A major kickstart was moving to Bismarck where Nicole returned to therapy at the [Village Family Service Center](#), an outpatient program. Outside of that, Nicole's family, especially her younger sister, Savannah, offered her advice and tools.

Alkire Grady: Whenever I came into my sobriety and started coming back around, she really did have a lot of good therapy techniques. She got me my own journal. She got me a book just about self-love.

Crutchfield: In time, things started to turn around for Nicole. In 2020, she and Nora's dad Morgan were married, and then Nicole had a conversation with her mother. Tina had attended and worked at [Sitting Bull](#), which is a tribal college with two locations on the Standing Rock Reservation. So Tina was able to tell Nicole about scholarships and student housing opportunities.

Alkire Grady: My mom was like, "I think there's houses down here at Sitting Bull College." And that's where we're from and she was like, "There's just..." She mentioned more help, is what she said, down here. And I was like, "Yeah, maybe."

Crutchfield: Her husband Morgan was also urging her to enroll in school again. When Nicole visited the college, she was worried about financial barriers. She had a past due bill from North Dakota State that was almost \$4,000 and no access to federal aid, but a financial aid officer armed her with information to ease the anxiety.

Alkire Grady: All of these questions I had, and she had a good answer for every one of them. It was, "Well, if you don't have funding now, you can get funding at the end of the semester if you apply for it. Here's some scholarships."

Crutchfield: Nicole chose to attend Sitting Bull College for several reasons. The school offered housing opportunities. It was a chance to complete an associates degree program with fewer barriers, and Sitting Bull was her mother's alma mater. Nicole's tribe gave her money from its [COVID relief hardship assistance program](#), which helped pay off her bill from North Dakota state.

Alkire Grady: It just felt like I was in the right place at the right time, or it was just supposed to happen. It was in my plan.

Crutchfield: But she didn't want to transfer her North Dakota state credit and risk tanking her overall GPA, so she restarted her higher education journey from square one. Nicole is focusing on making each credit count in her associate's degree. The move back home brought her closer to her family and opened up doors to many opportunities. Nicole says her legacy is top of mind.

Alkire Grady: I hope would be just for my children to want to be educated, like be a lifelong student in life and in whatever they're passionate about. I know that from a young age I wanted to help people, and my path has never been like this straightforward path.

Crutchfield: Before sobriety, Nicole says her motivation to stay in school was mostly her family and children, but now she's also motivated to serve her community as a lawyer. She's currently taking classes to complete her associate's degree in criminal justice. Nicole is considering whether her focus will be indian, environmental or human rights law. Nicole says, although there are different firms that are familiar with Native American issues, it doesn't mean they are embedded in indigenous communities or intimately familiar with the culture.

Alkire Grady: But they don't know what this person is going through or what they have at home or what they don't have at home. I think that just knowing that somebody has the same background as you, and they're helping you with legal advice, they're going to want to help you more.

Crutchfield: Her family cheers her on for being a native woman who's chosen to answer the legal field to help her community.

Alkire Grady: The number one thing is no matter what you've been through and how painful it was or how hard it was for you to get through that, there's always a way forward. And I do believe that having your education is so important going through in life. I tried to do it for 10 years without an education. I tried doing these small jobs and yeah, I was making a living, but it just wasn't what I really wanted to be doing.

Crutchfield: Nicole is carrying on a family tradition of instilling how school can be a tool to live our true dreams. Recently, she was doing one of her check-ins with Layla and Gunner who are in high school.

Alkire Grady: Have you decided? Have you thought about where you're going to go to college yet? And they're like, "No, no, I haven't. Not yet." But it's coming. They gave me a couple schools and... I don't know. They just think it's so funny that I'm like talking about it now, but I'm like, "It's going to come fast, and once it does, you're not going to be mad at me. You're going to thank me."

Crutchfield: Nicole's mother Tina is beaming.

Leingang: Nicole has come a long way from high school. I thought she was lost and turned to alcohol. She has come a long way and I am so proud of her. I am very proud of my daughter to where she's at right now. I was proud of her then. I never lost that, but I'm very proud of her now. I'm sorry.

Crutchfield: Nicole is the recipient of multiple scholarships, including the [American Indian College Fund's Full Circle](#) and the Massachusetts Indian Association Scholarship. She's putting her energy into her community as a member of the [Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Department of Education](#), and as a student government president. She also works at the first financial institution on Standing Rock. As she completes her associates degree and continues on the journey of going to law school, Nicole wants to return to North Dakota State University. Nicole sees it as an opportunity to complete her bachelor's degree as the top student that she is.

Croom: Nicole Alkire Grady is a mother and student at Sitting Bull College. Anyone affected by sexual assault, whether it happened to you or someone you care about, can find support on the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE. Thank you for listening.

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Ambriehl Crutchfield produced this episode. Editors are Monica Lopez and Juleyka Lantigua. 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. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

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