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# *Investing in Student Parents, Building Stronger Futures*





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*This brief is part of the series **Emergency Aid, Enduring Impact: Strengthening Families, Communities, and the Economy through Support for Student Parents** developed by HCM Strategists in collaboration with national experts to support Scholarship America's National Emergency Scholarship Fund for Student Parents. The series provides a roadmap for institutions and policymakers to better support student parents—ensuring they stay enrolled, complete their education, and strengthen their families, communities, and our nation's workforce.*



## SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION



What happens when student parents receive the financial, institutional, and emotional support they need to excel in college?

They don't just earn degrees—they lead, innovate, and uplift their communities.

Since its founding, [Generation Hope](#), a nonprofit providing direct support and national advocacy and research for student parents in college, has provided more than \$1.5 million in tuition assistance, along with emergency aid, mentorship, and critical support for basic needs through its Scholar Program. These investments don't just help student parents enroll—they help them graduate and build pathways to opportunity.

This brief highlights the stories of two remarkable Generation Hope Scholars, as well as one student supported through our FamilyU program—a two-year, evidence-based initiative that helps colleges become more family-inclusive by improving policies, practices, and support systems for student parents. Together, these stories illustrate how scholarships, emergency aid, and tailored institutional supports empower student parents to realize their aspirations, strengthen their communities, and drive lasting change.



Each of these mothers proves that when education is truly accessible, it becomes a powerful engine for generational change:

- **Bri Whitfield:** A healthcare professional and leader who, after surviving domestic violence, now mentors student parents and advocates for policy reform.
- **Ariana Dewberry:** A future occupational therapy assistant who, after losing her eyesight, returned to college with the support of FamilyU-driven institutional changes.
- **Kristina Fleming:** A policy advocate and social entrepreneur who, after experiencing homelessness, is now creating solutions for at-risk youth.

Student parents and their families face steep challenges in their pursuit of the American Dream. The stories in this brief show that their journeys aren't just about overcoming adversity; they're about hopes realized, determination, and the transformative impact of opportunity when resources are scarce.

Flexible emergency aid assistance can help unlock economic latitude, and improve outcomes for student parents. The following stories illustrate how scholarships and economic support have helped three student parents lift themselves and their families economically.





*Bri Whitfield*

**BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN EXERCISE AND  
NUTRITION SCIENCE, PRE-MEDICINE/  
PRE-MEDICAL STUDIES**

The George Washington University

*“I had always  
known I was going  
to college, I just  
didn’t realize  
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I wouldn’t.”*



## THE LEADER WHO REBUILT HER LIFE AND NOW BUILDS UP OTHERS

Bri Whitfield was up against a system that wasn't built for her.

She grew up in poverty. Her dad was a janitor, her mom a cashier. They told her that if she wanted a better life, she had to go to college.

She listened.

Bri worked hard. She was salutatorian of her high school class, earning a full scholarship to George Washington University—tuition, room, board, books, and food, all covered.

But just before she got her scholarship, she got something else: a positive pregnancy test. She was 18 years old.

Still, quitting was never an option.

"I had always known I was going to college," she says. "I just didn't realize people thought I wouldn't."

She enrolled. Moved to Washington, DC. Started classes. But nothing about her life looked like a typical college experience.

For one, she didn't have a place to live. Only 8% of colleges and universities in the United States offer on-campus housing options for student parents.<sup>1</sup>

Though her scholarship covered campus housing, dorms weren't designed for student parents. There was no place for her son. Her school had on-campus daycare—but only for faculty and staff, not students.

Bri had to find her own housing, an expensive and seemingly impossible challenge in Washington, D.C. Without any formal support for student parents, she pieced things together on her own.

She was living with her son's father and the relationship turned abusive.

He isolated her. Told her that her family didn't love her. That her friends didn't care. That people trying to help were just using her.

She started to internalize what he was saying.

Financially, she felt stuck. Emotionally, she felt alone. Academically, she was overwhelmed. She was on the verge of losing everything—her scholarship, her place in school, her hope.

Then, wraparound support and emergency relief from Generation Hope's Scholar Program helped remove barriers. "The support literally changed my life. They connected me to resources I didn't even know existed, and more than that, they made me feel like I wasn't alone. They gave me the support I needed to not just survive college but to graduate and build a future for me and my son."

Her coach at Generation Hope connected her with a women's and children's shelter. It was strict—curfews, chores, endless rules. But to Bri, it felt like freedom.

"It was easier than what I had at home," she says. "For the first time, I could breathe." With structure and stability, her grades rebounded. She found work. She built a new life.

In four years, Bri graduated with a degree in Exercise Science and a minor in Public Health. Her son, who had spent his earliest years watching his mom study, stood proudly beside her in graduation photos.

Today, Bri is a leader in healthcare and a member of the Generation Hope Board of Directors. She's shaping policy, mentoring student parents, and proving—every single day—that student parents don't just survive.

**They lead.**



## VISION & SUCCESS

After earning her degree while raising her son, Bri has built a successful career in healthcare, specializing in helping families navigate complex medical systems. Today, she sits on Generation Hope's Board of Directors, using her voice to push for reforms that support student parents.

*"I didn't just want to survive—I wanted to thrive. I wanted my son to see what was possible."*

## BARRIERS & SUPPORT

Bri graduated from George Washington University with a degree in Exercise Science and a minor in Public Health, where she balanced coursework, parenting, and rebuilding her life after leaving an abusive relationship. As a Generation Hope Scholar, she received tuition assistance and aid with essential needs items—timely support that kept her enrolled and moving forward.

Through the Scholar Program, she also gained access to mentorship, career coaching, and leadership development, all of which helped her transition into corporate healthcare administration. Additional support in the form of basic needs items from Generation Hope's wishlist drives helped alleviate the co-existing pressures of studying and

parenting, providing Bri with items like diapers, wipes, cleaning products, household goods, educational items for her child, and food.

Navigating college as a single mother wasn't easy—especially while recovering from trauma and financial instability.

With Generation Hope's tuition assistance, emergency aid, and mentorship, she secured stable housing and childcare, ensuring she could focus on her education.

Now, Bri is using her success to make sure other student parents don't have to walk their journey alone.

*"I know what it's like to feel invisible—to feel like you don't belong in a space that was never designed for you. But I belong here. We belong here. And we are not alone."*



*Ariana Dewberry*

**ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE, DALLAS COLLEGE**

Ariana is pursuing an additional degree in the Occupational Therapy Assistant program at Dallas College.

*“If you’re going  
to do it, don’t  
hold off. Life is  
too short.”*



## A FUTURE HEALTHCARE LEADER, INNOVATOR AND SCHOLAR

Ariana Dewberry always knew she was meant to go to college. In high school, she had a plan: graduate, go straight to Sam Houston State University, and earn a degree in criminal justice.

And that's exactly what she did—until her sophomore year, when everything changed. Ariana lost her eyesight suddenly due to a rare condition. Forced to withdraw, she spent years learning how to navigate the world as a blind woman. Life moved on, and college became something she put on hold. Until the day she became a mother.

"I knew I needed to provide stability—not just for me, but for my son," she says, recalling how she reminded herself, "If you're going to do it, don't hold off. Life is too short."

Determined, Ariana enrolled at Dallas College to pursue a degree in Occupational Therapy Assistance. She would take her own experience—learning to rebuild after vision loss—and use it to help others do the same.

But returning to school as a blind, single mother wasn't easy. Without a car, navigating transportation was a daily challenge. She had to schedule rideshares, plan routes, and wake up at 6 a.m. just to get her son to daycare and herself to class on time.

"I had to organize everything," she says. "How were we going to get to school? How could I budget for transportation? What were we going to eat for the week?"

One conversation with the accessibility team at Dallas College changed everything. She learned about a Dallas Public Transportation service that offered local and connecting routes for students with disabilities. With their support, she secured reliable transportation—one less battle to fight.

Financially, she caught a break. As a blind student in Texas, her tuition was completely waived. She still received financial aid, which she used to pay for childcare.

Even with those supports, there were moments of exhaustion. Moments of doubt. But she kept going—because quitting was never an option.

Dallas College offered basic needs support like food, home goods for parents, and tailored their support to her.

"Losing my eyesight changed my life," she says. "But it didn't change my purpose. I was always meant to help people. I just had to find a new way to do it."

**Today, she's doing exactly that.**

## VISION & SUCCESS

Ariana Dewberry is a rising leader in occupational therapy—a field she pursued after witnessing firsthand how people rebuild their lives after life-changing events.

After losing her eyesight, she adapted, retrained, and returned to college with a renewed mission: to help others regain their independence and dignity through healthcare.

With her degree, she is on track to become an occupational therapy assistant. But her impact is already visible—she’s helping shape how campuses support disabled student parents.

*“I had to provide stability—not just for me, but for my son. I wanted him to see that no matter what happens, you keep going.”*

## BARRIERS & SUPPORT

Ariana is currently enrolled at Dallas College, where she is pursuing a degree in Occupational Therapy Assistance. She receives specialized scholarship funding for students with visual impairments, which helps cover tuition and some basic living expenses.

The FamilyU program helped Dallas College implement tailored support for student parents, providing essentials like food, diapers, wipes, and in Ariana’s case carbon monoxide detectors to keep her home safer as a blind parent. FamilyU-supported policy changes at Dallas

College gave her access to resources that made the difference between struggling and succeeding.

Returning to school as a blind, single mother meant navigating an education system that wasn’t designed for students like her.

Thanks to FamilyU-driven institutional changes, she was able to access the services she needed, from reliable transportation to child care assistance. These supports allowed her to focus on learning, not just surviving.

*“You don’t have to do this alone. When you open up, you find a community that will support you.”*





*Kristina Fleming*

**ASSOCIATE DEGREE, GENERAL STUDIES,  
TRINITY WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**

Kristina is also currently enrolled at Trinity and pursuing her bachelor's degree in Social Work.

*“I’m not just  
breaking cycles,  
I’m building  
something  
entirely new.”*

## THE ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

Kristina Fleming walks across the historic campus of Trinity Washington University, her steps steady, her purpose clear. The late summer light catches the stone buildings that have stood for over a century, but she isn't focused on the past—she is shaping the future.

People greet her as she moves through campus. Professors, students, faculty—they all know Kristina. They stop to chat, to laugh, to share stories about her. She belongs here and her presence on campus is bright.

But not so long ago, that sense of belonging felt impossible.

Kristina grew up in foster care. At 14, she found out she was pregnant. At 17, she was homeless, sleeping in D.C. Metro's Union Station with her daughter, Key'Monie.

"I didn't have time to be scared," she says. "I had to go into mommy mode."

She bathed her daughter in a public restroom sink, terrified that if the wrong person noticed, Key'Monie would be taken away.

She worked—hard. She found emergency housing, saved every dollar, finally scraping together \$6,000 to secure an apartment while working in security. She earned her high school diploma at the Maya Angelou Young Adult Learning Center, juggling work and parenting alone.

At the time, college wasn't even a thought.

Then, everything changed.

One day, tired of struggling, Kristina applied to Trinity Washington University on a whim. A caring faculty member helped her navigate enrollment. Suddenly, she was a college student.

"I just knew I wanted more," she says. "And I wasn't going to stop until I got it." She poured herself into her studies, pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work.

By the time she found Generation Hope, she had already earned her associate degree on her own. But paying for college was daunting. She was living in a cramped studio apartment, but determined to keep pushing forward.

She applied to Generation Hope's Scholar program, joining at the height of the pandemic. With the support of the team, she received coaching, emergency assistance, tuition funding, and a network of people who believed in her.

At Trinity, she didn't just survive. She thrived. Now, she's building something bigger.

Kristina has launched Kris Advocates, a nonprofit advocating for youth in Washington, D.C. She dreams of building a transitional living program for young people who need stability.

"I'm not just breaking cycles," Kristina says. "I'm building something entirely new—something stronger, for me, my daughter, and those who come after us."

Then she smiles.

**"Stars are made here. And I want every girl to know—we run this."**





## VISION & SUCCESS

Kristina Fleming is a powerful voice in youth advocacy, public policy, and social entrepreneurship.

As the founder of Kris Advocates, a grassroots organization dedicated to youth empowerment, she's already influencing policies that support foster youth, young parents, and students experiencing homelessness.

Her next big project? A mobile shower and transitional living program for unhoused youth—an initiative inspired by her own lived experience.

Currently pursuing her degree in social work, Kristina is leveraging her education to design better systems for at-risk youth.

*“I just knew I wanted more, and I wasn't going to stop until I got it.”*

*“For the first time in my life, I wasn't just surviving—I was thriving.”*

## BARRIERS & SUPPORT

Kristina is earning her bachelor's degree in Social Work at Trinity Washington University. She first completed her associate degree without financial assistance, relying entirely on her own determination and resourcefulness.

As a Generation Hope Scholar, she received tuition assistance, emergency aid, and one-on-one mentorship, allowing her to continue her education without the overwhelming financial strain.

Additionally, Trinity Washington University—through FamilyU—has set a national example in supporting student parents, offering on-campus childcare and flexible policies that enable young mothers like Kristina to succeed.

Kristina's early years were marked by instability—foster care, homelessness, and uncertainty.

With support from Generation Hope, she is now finishing her bachelor's at Trinity Washington University. Thanks to FamilyU-based initiatives, she's studying in an environment that truly supports student parents.



POLICY & ADVOCACY INSIGHTS

# Why We Must Fund Scholarships for Student Parents

The journeys of Bri, Ariana, and Kristina prove one thing: when student parents receive financial aid, emergency support, and institutional backing, they don't just graduate—they lead.

## Takeaways and Call to Action:

Scholarships do more than pay tuition—they change lives. Most student parents would be unable to complete their degrees without direct financial aid.

Emergency aid prevents student dropouts. Small grants for rent, childcare, or unexpected medical bills can mean the difference between staying in school and leaving.

Institutional support should be the norm. Universities must integrate flexible housing, on-campus childcare, and transportation assistance into their core services.

More robust scholarship funding is needed, especially funds that support basic needs security.

For student parents, poverty isn't a temporary obstacle—it's a daily crisis that threatens their education. According to Generation Hope's [Child Care Barrier Report](#), 82% of student parents live below the federal poverty line, and 55% work more than 20 hours per week while enrolled in college.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, many must choose between paying for food, housing, or tuition.

- 53% of student parents experience food insecurity.
- One in four student parents say childcare is not affordable, and one in three wish they could afford better child care.<sup>2</sup>
- 68% face housing insecurity, and 17% experience homelessness.<sup>3</sup>
- Out-of-pocket college costs for student parents are two to five times higher than for their non-parenting peers.<sup>4</sup>

Institutions and state and federal policymakers must bridge the gap between basic needs assistance and higher education pathways. When universities and policymakers address these barriers, student parents don't just survive—they thrive. Without intentional support, too many are pushed out—not for lack of ability, but because their potential isn't fully supported.<sup>2</sup>

Lack of child care is one of the **greatest threats to college persistence for student parents**. Inaccessible or unaffordable childcare forces many to reduce their course loads, take longer to graduate, or drop out entirely.

A **minimum-wage student parent would have to work 54 hours per week for 50 weeks per year** just to afford both childcare and tuition.<sup>2</sup> This is **not sustainable**.



The call to action is clear:

*Scholarships don't just pay tuition—they change lives. Without direct financial aid, most student parents cannot complete their degrees.*

Emergency aid prevents student dropouts. When unexpected costs arise—rent, child care, medical bills—small grants can mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out.

Generation Hope has already invested more than \$1.5 million in tuition assistance, but the demand far outweighs the supply. Millions of student parents are ready to enroll in college—if they have the financial support to make it possible.

Investing in student parents isn't just an education policy decision—it's a strategy for economic empowerment.

**Advocate now. America's future depends on it.**

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Green, A. (2020, October 6). Student housing is scarce for college students who have kids. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/student-housing-is-scarce-for-college-students-who-have-kids-145162>

<sup>2</sup> Generation Hope. (2023). *The child care barrier: The impacts of inaccessible and costly child care for student parents*. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed7f7e97e1c361545410fe4/t/641c90b52c78726ab19fc841/1679593654587/Generation+Hope\\_Childcare+Barrier+Report.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed7f7e97e1c361545410fe4/t/641c90b52c78726ab19fc841/1679593654587/Generation+Hope_Childcare+Barrier+Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Welton, C.R., & Coca, V. (2020). *Parenting while in college: Basic needs insecurity among students with children*. The Hope Center. [https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019\\_ParentingStudentsReport.pdf](https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019_ParentingStudentsReport.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Williams, B., Bitar, J., Polk, P., Nguyen, A., Montague, G., Gillispie, C., Waller, A., Tadesse, A., & Elliott, K. (2022). *For student parents, the biggest hurdles to a higher education are cost and finding child care*. The Education Trust & Generation Hope. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/For-Student-Parents-The-Biggest-Hurdles-to-a-Higher-Education-Are-Cost-and-Finding-Child-Care-August-2022.pdf>





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