



“Meet Savannah Steiger”

When she had her second child, Remy, Savannah Steiger’s life was forever changed. The complications from his birth, and the support system she discovered in the aftermath, helped her find the direction she longed for. Reporter Rhana Natour chronicles Savannah’s journey overcoming trauma, entering the world of higher education, and clarifying her purpose.

[Family Futures Downeast](#) is a two-generation program that improves economic outcomes for low-income families in Washington County, Maine.

Pamela Kirkland:

Welcome to 1 in 5, which takes its name from the one in five college students in the United States who are also parents.

In this documentary series, we meet student-parents from across the country who are balancing school, work, and full lives --- while creating a better future for themselves and their families.

I’m Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and audio producer, and narrator of 1 in 5.

In this episode we meet Savannah Steiger, in Harrington, Maine. Savannah’s life changed forever when her second son, Remy, was born. His birth, and the traumatic experience of the aftermath, helped Savannah find the direction she always craved, and helped her recognize the support she could count on.

Reporter Rhana Natour has Savannah’s story.

Rhana Natour:

It’s 2018. Savannah Steiger is a student parent taking college classes near her home in the small fishing town of Harrington, Maine.

With only a 1,000 or so residents, lobster and blueberry fields outnumber humans there.

Savannah’s also a few weeks shy of her due date for her second child--a boy she’s decided to name Remy---when one day, while swimming laps, Savannah feels a sharp pain shoot across her stomach.

Savannah Steiger:

I didn't know what that pain was, and I just kind of ignored it. I was like ugh it's probably a ligament. And then the next day I remember making jam and I went to class. And then I slept horribly, like I had in my nightmares. I just couldn't get to sleep. I was uncomfortable and I woke up. It was a Friday morning. And I called my friend and I was like, 'I hadn't felt the baby move at all, I don't know what's happening.'

Natour:

That shooting, sharp pain--Savannah would later learn-- was her placenta detaching.

The medical term for it is "placental abruption" and it's a rare but very serious complication because it can suddenly deprive the baby of oxygen and nutrients. And because it can lead to heavy bleeding, Savannah's life was in serious danger too. Savannah remembers everything that followed happened very quickly.

She rushed to the hospital. Doctors performed an emergency c-section but the baby's vital signs were dire. He stopped breathing several times and had to be resuscitated.

They would need more sophisticated equipment to save him.

Baby Remy, only minutes out of the womb, was put on a medical helicopter and sent to the closest hospital with a fully-equipped Neonatal intensive Care Unit.

It was a two-hour car ride away.

Steiger:

I think I remember hearing the helicopter. I have very vague memories of it. And then they put him on a cold pad, which kept him cold for three days. I got to be transferred to the hospital that he was at. And then my husband later that night took me to the NICU.

Natour:

In the NICU, doctors inform her that baby Remy had suffered a stroke. And they found injuries from the stroke in two areas of his brain. After seeing her newborn hooked up to a web of tubes and machines, Savannah braces for the worst.

Steiger:

When we were in the hospital, my plan just kind of died. Like I was like, well, I don't know what now. This was not what I planned. I don't know how to parent this type of baby, I don't know how to take care. I don't want this type of baby. What do I do? And so my only thinking was like, I'll get a really good job and I'll get really good benefits. So that way I can take care of him or other people can take care of him and meet those needs that I don't think I can meet.

Natour:

Savannah feared her son would need extensive, round-the-clock care. That he would never be able to fully take care of himself. But time has clarified these worries.

Steiger:

Do you want this?

Remy:

Ya!

Steiger:

Ok go out there with it.

Natour:

Today, baby Remy is two years old with chubby cheeks and bright blond hair, and he has recovered beautifully from his turbulent entry into the world.

Remy:

Ma?

Steiger:

He's fine, as far as I can tell. I mean, he walks into stuff. But, like, that's because he's two.

Natour:

For Savannah, Remy's traumatic birth marked a turning point in her life. It imbued her with a sense of purpose, a kind a serious-mindedness that she didn't have before. When it came to school for instance, Savannah's interest had always waxed and waned.

Throughout her 20s, Savannah would take college classes -- an art class here, a writing class there -- but with no actual plan, her interest would eventually just taper out.

And by the time her daughter born, her first born, Savannah was living with her husband Norbert---a carpenter-- in a town abundant in blueberry farms but very much lacking in job opportunities.

So Savannah decided to be a stay-at-home mom.

Ocean:

Mommy, can I put this stick in your hair?

Steiger::

No.

Ocean:

Why. Why?

Savannah:

Because I don't want it in my hair.

Ocean:

But it is not dirty!

Natour:

But after a few years, her interest in that began to taper off, too.

Steiger:

The next letter is Na-Na-Na like Norbert. Don't put pencils in your mouth.

Well, today I cleaned the house and did these chores and grocery shopped. But I also built this fort with Ocean and we climbed some rocks and she learned her letters.

Natour:

School had always been an antidote of sorts for Savannah--something she could turn to when she needed a change, when she was looking for something more. But going back to school this time--- now with a young child to care for-- was an expense she just couldn't afford. Since Norbert's job is very seasonal, their budget needs to stretch to cover those slow winter months, which means expenses like tuition and childcare just didn't make it into their budget.

But Savannah's friend told her about a potential work-around to her predicament.

It's a program called "Family Futures Downeast" ----or FFD for short----and their goal is to help low-income mothers go back to school as a way to reduce poverty in Washington County, Maine, where Savannah lives.

Steiger:

And I was like, I should try that. And so, um, I did!

Natour:

So Savannah applied and was accepted to FFD in 2018, one of 10 participants accepted into that program that year.bFFD officially launched in 2016, designed from feedback from parents like Savannah.bCharley Martin-Berry was involved in those early framing conversations

Charley Martin-Berry:

They said it has to look and feel like this. If we're going to go to college, we have to have help with transportation. We have to have real good child care, not just any child care. We don't have laptops. We don't have Internet. But we also really heard the other types of barriers that were more social or emotional ones like, people didn't they didn't have anybody cheering for them. So we heard both types of barriers and knew we needed to build responses to those things. So if they said they needed child care, the program had to include child care. They said they needed transportation supports, the program had to include flexible funds for gas cards and car repairs.

Natour:

The importance of childcare cannot be overestimated here. But these kinds of supports are often absent from college campuses. Even though student parents [make up 22 percent of college undergrads nationwide](#), a 2017 analysis by the Institute for Women's

Policy Research showed that from 2005 to 2015, access to [campus childcare actually declined in 36 states](#).

In a 2016 Urban Institute report, [about half of low-income student parents](#) with children ages 5 or younger relied exclusively on family members to care for their children while they were at work or at school.

But if family is unavailable or too far away, the odds of a student parent being able to succeed and even just finish school can perceptibly drop from there.

Over at FFD, it was not only important that they provide childcare to participants, but high-quality childcare as well. Here's Savannah:

Steiger:

So when you start with them, you have two nights a week that you have class. And what you do is you go to campus and, both campuses, cause there's two campuses, have a child care center, and you take your child to the center and you get to have dinner. They prepare dinner for you. So you have a family meal, that you sit down, eat together, and then you go to class and you leave your child there. And for me, since my baby was new, like I got to take him to class until he was six weeks old and then I would leave him in the infant / toddler room. It was just a beautiful thing, there were moms there. Two of the moms both had five kids, and they knew, like, they could come to class and their kids were fed, and then they were entertained, and, while we got to do things. And it was like, really good, like, I think every child that has been in the program has, like, shown growth in all different ways, like I think they keep track of it.

Natour:

Today FFD accepts about 25 families annually into the program, across two college campuses in Washington County, Maine. Participants must have a child under eight to qualify and be within 200% of the federal poverty line, which for a family of four is around \$50,000 a year.

They also provide gas cards, financial planning and help tackling all those curveball costs that can quickly derail a goal when money is tight---things like medical expenses, housing issues and even car repairs. To understand why FFD provides these specific resources, it's important to understand what life for many families looks like in Washington County. It's the third least populous county in the already pretty rural state of Maine.

Martin-Berry:

Things are also far away. We have students in Family Futures down east driving an hour, which can be 50 or 60. It can be 50 miles an hour. Isn't like these aren't urban miles. These are country miles. And so that's just a long drive to get to places. It adds up. It's wear and tear on vehicles. It's fuel. Technology doesn't always stretch to our rural places, so it might mean you're paying a lot more for Internet, because you need satellite Internet, like that, that stuff is just it can just be hard on a budget.

Natour:

And Maine winters, well they are infamously brutal affairs -below freezing temperatures, massive piles of snow. This means many industries--like Savannah's husband's job in carpentry---basically shut-down in those long winter months.

Martin-Berry:

So that means that things can get lean in the winter months and it might look like reliance on various financial assistance programs in order to make ends meet. And just like no buffer for emergencies, and this is the kind of thing that parents were saying is so frustrating, like a little thing, a car repair, a furnace repair, things that might take three or four hundred dollars to fix, there just isn't a financial buffer for that. There isn't savings for that. And so not being able to respond to those types of relatively small emergencies can mean people are cold or people can't get to work. I'll never forget the mom who said I have bald tires and I don't want to put my child in the car on bald tires in the winter, but I have to also use the car to get to work. Like this, this sort of double bind around seriously, a 400 dollar set of snow tires.

Natour:

After Remy was born, Savannah's FFD coach stepped in with extra gas cards after she heard he was being treated in a hospital two hours away.

Steiger:

Like that is how they could support me as part of the program, they were like, here's gas cards to help take the edge off, like financial burden off of you, so that way you don't have to keep paying for the gas to go back and forth. And if I had texted her and said 'do you mind going to my house and getting me some sweatpants?' she would have done it. And like that's how FFD is, like they're just like, OK, what do we do to help you?

Natour:

With the help of FFD, Savannah had managed to find a way back to school, and felt it would fill something that was missing in her life. But what exactly she was going to do with her education was still up in the air.

Steiger:

I think I was just going back to school for something to do. I felt kind of like, locked up in being a parent, just to my daughter and just kind of bored. And it was like, I can't get a good job. I don't have a degree. I can get okay jobs, but I can't climb up the ladder. And so I was just it was just like a whim. I was just like, I'll just go back to school and see what happens.

Natour:

Reassured by all the resources she knew she could count on, Savannah took a leap of faith and enrolled in the University of Maine at Machias. Soon after she enrolled, well, that's when Savannah found out she and Norbert were expecting Baby Remy. She was nervous to break the news to her new mentors at FFD, but was quickly comforted by their reaction.

Steiger:

And they were like, 'no, we have lots of babies born during the program.' When I was pregnant, I was just like, yep I will just have this baby. And it will be healthy and happy and I'll just go to school with it and then it'll go to daycare.

Natour:

The next few months went along smoothly. Savannah grew close to her mentors and fellow classmates at FFD, she loved her classes and her pregnancy was problem-free up until the point where it wasn't.

Lori Joy is a coach with Family Futures Downeast and remembers when Savannah called from her hospital bed to fill her in on what had happened.

Lori Joy:

She told me, and I have to be honest, I was really scared. And I was scared for her and I knew she was really worried about Remy.

Natour:

Lori immediately swung into action.

Joy:

You know I said, just don't worry about your school, we'll deal with it when you get back. I talked to her professors for her. I think one of the biggest things was making sure she had the support she needed to get through the mental health piece of it.

Natour:

Back at the hospital, 'the mental health piece of it,' - the trauma of what had just happened - did not set in right away. But once it did, it was swift and brutal. Savannah says she plunged into a trauma-induced haze.

Steiger:

I shook a lot, like for two weeks and even longer, I just shook all the time. I do remember one of his nurses telling me 'I'm going to change his diaper later if you want to come help and you can do it.' And I was like 'OK, I do'. And then I went back to my room and I, like, fell asleep and I just never went back. And the nurse came and was like, 'hey, I just wanted to make sure you were OK. You never came back to see Remy,' And I was just like, 'yeah, I was asleep and I didn't want to.' So.

Natour:

Savannah herself was in the hospital for three days but Baby Remy remained in the hospital's NICU for 9 days. While she was in the hospital, someone--perhaps recognizing she might be in crisis--asked Savannah a simple question.

Steiger:

Somebody I don't remember who it was like, 'are you OK?' And I was just like, 'no, I need to talk to somebody. I can't, I just can't function.' And like, within minutes, they had a social

worker and I just sat there and listened to me and helped me sort out my feelings. And I just, like, realized, like, I want to do that for people.

Natour:

That experience gave Savannah a newfound purpose--to be a counselor. It took a while to know what the repercussions might be from Baby Remy's brain injuries. Doctor's monitored every developmental milestone closely.

Thankfully, Remy consistently met these milestones. But the first two years of his life were a blur of doctor's appointments, specialists visits, and close medical monitoring.

When Savannah returned to school after Remy's birth, her coach Lori Joy noticed a change in her almost immediately.

Joy:

She was extremely traumatized, scared to let go of the baby at all. Definitely wasn't her bubbly self. She was very drained, tired, scared, worried. It was not the Savannah I knew. And that's why I knew she needed help. So I picked up on that pretty quick and so did her instructors. So we just really supported her any way we knew how.

Natour:

Savannah remembers how Lori, her classmates and others at Family Futures Downeast really showed up for her.

Steiger:

If I hadn't been in FFD, I would not have gone back. Just like I was like in this, I was like, I can't do it. And I remember my coach, like, gave me a bunch of gas cards and was checking in on me, like every other day. It gave me another reason to go because I didn't want to let them down because that's a great chance on me. They signed me up. They're like, you know, they're providing that child care for the kids at night. And they fed us dinner there and they gave me gas cards and they paid for my books. And like, you know, like they're really rooting for me.

Natour:

Savannah says this traumatic experience was one reason she chose to major in psychology.

Steiger:

I want to, like, help people like me, that needed some help and maybe did not get it in the ways that they needed it, like when I was a teenager, a different counselor would have made that better and then for like people who have been through trauma, like I was in this traumatic place and I needed help and I got it. And like, I've seen what it does.

Natour:

Since she's gone back to school, Savannah has also become an advocate for student-parents, like herself.

Steiger on webinar:

One of the requirements is that we want to hear from a student parent.

Natour:

She is currently a Parent Advisor with “Ascend at The Aspen Institute,”

Informational Webinar:

I’d like to invite Savannah back for the Q&A portion.

Natour:

Part of Savannah’s role is to work with a group of other parent advisors to design and implement the “Parent Powered Solutions Fund. It’s a grant program that provides funding to community organizations across the country with a mission to support students raising families while attending school.

For Charley Martin-Berry--a kind of fairy god-mother to FFD - it is Savannah’s unbridled enthusiasm that stands out, day and after day, year after year.

Martin-Berry :

Every opportunity that we've offered Savannah, she has seized, she's just she's just grabbed these opportunities to when we said, do you want to go to Aspen? Would you like to be part of this? It was ‘absolutely yes.’ ‘Would you be willing to serve on the policy committee?’ It was ‘absolutely,yes.’ She's going places

Natour:

For Savannah....

Steiger:

It was amazing work. And it was the first time I'd ever done anything like that. And um, I'm so happy to have that part of it. Like, it's, it's been life changing.

Natour:

Savannah is on course to graduate with a bachelors in psychology in winter 2021. After she graduates she plans to work as a school counselor

Steiger:

I have been in counseling since I was probably like 15 or 16. And when I was a teenager being counseled, I'll be honest, like I lied to my counselor every time I went, and it was not a productive thing for me. And one of the groups of people that I want to do it for, like so badly are like, are youth like are teenagers, like preteens, and teenagers, like I love them, they are like so hormonal. They have so much to say and they know what they want-

Natour:

And now Savannah knows too.

Kirkland:

Rhana Natour reported this story.

[Family Futures Downeast](https://familyfuturesdowneast.org) is a two-generation program that improves economic outcomes for low-income families in Washington County, Maine. Learn more about their work at familyfuturesdowneast.org.

Post Secondary Success for Parents initiative, or the PSP initiative for short, is a partnership between Ascend and Imaginable Futures within the Aspen Institute. Savannah is a Parent Advisor for that initiative, informing their work through his lived experience.

CREDITS:

Thank you for listening. 1 in 5 is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. and presented by Ascend at the Aspen Institute – the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, visit ascend.aspeninstitute.org, and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter.

Virginia Lora edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Michael Aquino. Alexis Williams is the Ascend producer on the show. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Our theme song is “Ascenders” by Kojin Tashiro, who also contributed to mixing. Sarah McClure, Ryan Katz, and Erica Hellerstein fact checked the series. I’m Pamela Kirkland.

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