



“Meet Lori Barr”

Lori Barr and her NFL-playing son Anthony started [Raise the Barr](#), their scholarship fund for student parents, in 2016. It was inspired by their own family’s journey of challenge and perseverance. When she found out she was pregnant at age 19, Lori dropped out of college. Motivated by the desire to provide a better life for Anthony, she eventually went back to school and earned a master’s degree in special education. Reporter Katie Thornton details how mother and son use their life experience as a springboard to help others.

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’ll meet Lori Barr. Lori dropped out of college after she got pregnant at age 19. But when her son Anthony was about 18 months old, Lori went back to school, working toward a degree in education that would allow her to get out of minimum wage jobs and spend more time with her son. Eventually, she got a Master’s Degree, and worked in education for two decades. Now, together with her NFL player son Anthony, the Barrs are using their platform to help other families like theirs: single parent households working toward a college degree.

Reporter Katie Thornton has their story.

Katie Thornton:

On a sunny September evening in 2016, the Minnesota Vikings did the thing their fans love best. They beat longtime rivals the Green Bay Packers, at home in Minneapolis. Fans and players rejoiced. And linebacker Anthony Barr, together with his mother Lori Barr, went to meet some very special guests: A mother, and her kids. Huge Vikings fans. But that day, they were celebrating a lot more than the game. This mother was the first recipient of a scholarship that Anthony and Lori were offering through their new non-profit [Raise the Barr](#). This is how Lori remembers it.

Barr:

I'll never forget it because she was the very first one. And her entire tribal community raised enough money so she and her kids could drive down from northern Minnesota and come to the game when we invited her.

Thornton:

Lori and Anthony co-founded Raise the Barr to help break cycles of generational poverty by giving single parents the resources to graduate from college. They offer grant money to single parent students in Minnesota and Lori's home state of California.

Barr:

You know, we were just all so happy and they were happy and we all cried. And it was like we've known each other our whole lives.

Thornton:

For Lori and Anthony, the power of this moment went deeper than just meeting a grateful student and fan. It was meaningful for them because, in this scholar's family, Lori and Anthony saw their own family. They saw a single parent college student—just like Lori had been when she had Anthony. Lori knew there were so many other people like her out there—after all, [more than one in five college students is also a parent](#). Offering this first scholarship was the culmination of Lori's dream to someday be able to help other families like her own. And it was the beginning of a scholarship program that would prove to be much larger and more successful than Lori or her son Anthony ever imagined.

Lori grew up in Los Angeles, the fourth of six kids. She came from a family of teachers. And she says that, though they didn't have much, they had what they needed. She watched her parents send her three older sisters off to St. Mary's College in Indiana, the women's college counterpart to Notre Dame. And Lori always assumed she'd do the same. But when she got to high school, her path started looking a little different.

Barr:

I wasn't a great student. I was more interested in being popular than I was, you know, what I was going to do with my life.

Thornton:

When she applied to St. Mary's to join her sisters, she didn't have the grades.

So instead, Lori enrolled in a community college in Indiana, close to her sisters. And like a lot of other students, Lori spent more time that first year getting used to living on her own and going to football games and parties than studying. School was kind of an afterthought. But at the end of her second year, Lori had a sociology professor who set her on a different course.

Barr:

She kind of took an interest in me and inspired me to work harder and think bigger.

Thornton:

Lori says that her professor's encouragement just made something click in her. Like, having someone at the college who believed in her made her see her own potential differently. She wanted to keep studying sociology. And so, inspired by her professor, she applied to St. Mary's again. And this time, she got accepted. But just as 19-year-old Lori started to settle into her educational aspirations, her world changed.

Barr:

And then that was the summer that I got pregnant with Anthony.

Thornton:

Lori knew she wanted to have the baby. But she didn't know much beyond that.

Barr:

I just remember thinking, now, what am I going to do? I'm at an all girls school, Catholic college. Soon I'm going to be showing that I'm pregnant, like I'm two thousand miles away from my family and, you know, his dad kind of had plans to go and pursue his dreams. How am I going to do this?

Thornton:

Lori made it through a semester at St. Mary's. But then she withdrew. She moved back to Los Angeles with her baby, and lived with her parents. She picked up minimum-wage jobs, like waiting tables and wrapping gifts at Williams-Sonoma. She didn't like wrapping gifts, but it paid the bills. Or, at least some of them. She got public assistance to help with groceries, and both her and Anthony went to the free clinic for health care. Those appointments were hard.

Barr:

I remember driving to the county offices in Compton and sitting, waiting for my number to be called. Anthony was on my lap and, you know, he was laughing. I was bouncing him on my knee, you know, and I was crying.

Thornton:

It wasn't that Anthony was the source of pain—exactly the opposite. When Lori looked at her son, she was worried that she wouldn't be able to see enough of him.

Barr:

I thought, I can't support my family off of, you know, the minimum wage that I was earning. I wanted to eat dinner with him. I wanted to teach him how to read. I wanted us to have the weekends. I wanted him to play, community, you know, sports or activities. And I wanted to be the one who was going to take him there and pick him up and be on the sidelines cheering. And I wanted us to have those experiences.

Thornton:

So when Anthony was about 18 months old, Lori went back to college. And like her parents and grandfather before her, she decided to study education.

With Anthony as her motivation, Lori felt more compelled to get her degree than ever before. But, with no financial cushion, that was easier said than done.

Barr:

Oh, man. Those days were kind of long and crazy. I picked up a couple odd jobs because I knew I needed to be able to afford our living expenses. And in between my two jobs, I went to school during the middle of the day.

Thornton:

In the mornings, she worked as a teacher's aide at an elementary school. Afternoons were for class. Then she'd wait tables in the evenings. She'd clock out just after ten at night, and drive back to LA. After kissing Anthony goodnight, she'd spend a couple hours working on homework, usually wrapping up at 2 a.m. Then she'd wake up at 5 a.m., shower, eat breakfast, and do it all over again. Lori was only a year and a half older than her classmates. But she just didn't have time or financial resources to do the things other students were doing.

Barr:

I wasn't involved in any campus activities, fraternities, sororities, groups, you know. I wasn't connected in any way and I was definitely isolated.

Thornton:

In fact, in all of Lori's time at college, she never had another friend who was a parent.

Barr:

I was kind of a novelty, you know, it was almost like, "oh, you're the girl with the baby." I remember distinctly there was a classmate of mine and asked she me one time why I always looked so mad. And I said, "I do?" And she said, "You always look so stressed." And I didn't realize that all of my emotions, you know, were visible for everyone to see. And so I guess having a friend, you know, maybe who was also in my situation would have made me feel like I wasn't so alone and so different.

Thornton:

For Lori, college was a strictly academic experience, not a social one. Because the social experiences of her college campus [weren't designed for student parents like her](#), who were often rushing from school to jobs or child care.

Barr:

I'd literally wake up before the sun rose and give him a kiss goodbye. And I'd get home sometime around 11:30 p.m or midnight. And kiss Anthony in the same place where I kissed him goodbye that morning.

Thornton:

In a way, Lori was fortunate. Her parents had the time and resources to help out. They watched Anthony during the days. It was a big financial help, and it was also an enormous

weight off Lori's chest—knowing that Anthony was in good hands, even when she couldn't be with him.

And then, on the weekends, there was finally some reprieve. Lori didn't have to rush off to her elementary school job in the mornings. And she worked an earlier shift at the restaurant, so sometimes she could get home closer to nine at night. She and Anthony developed a little ritual when she got home. Anthony still remembers it.

Anthony:

She worked at a restaurant called Vinces and she wore these big combat boots —Calf-high — like, they're pretty big boots. And, uh, she'd come back from serving tables all day, and I take her shoes off for her and uh, that was just kind of the moment that we had towards the end of the, end of the evenings.

Barr:

It was, you know, kind of our little thing. Just you know, "What did you do today? What did you and Grandma do, what did you and grandpa do?" Just connecting and just kind of being together. Those days I remember I felt grateful, but I always felt kind of sad because I felt like I was missing out on time with him.

Thornton:

For the record, Anthony says he never felt resentful spending time with the rest of his family.

Anthony:

It was just the norm. And there were so many people around all the time that I never felt lonely or sad.

Thornton:

Anthony loved hanging out with his grandparents. And Lori's younger siblings, who were 17 and 12, were around the house, too. So Anthony was always surrounded by loving family members. But that didn't change how Lori felt.

Barr:

Having to separate was the hardest part. I was too sad, like, I don't ,I don't think I can do this because I can't be away from him. That feeling was overwhelming and I didn't think it was worth it, to be honest.

Thornton:

In that first year back at school, this guilt often made Lori seriously consider dropping out.

Barr:

I always felt like this is time I'm never going to get back. I'm missing you grow up. And looking back on it, you know, it was such a short period of time in our lives. But at the time, it seems like it's everything. I remember telling my mom, you know, that he would think that she was his mother.

Thornton:

What made you get to graduation day?

Barr:

Him. Him just thinking about what, what being a teacher would afford a person like me.

Thornton:

For Lori, being a teacher would allow her to get Anthony his own pediatrician, who could work with him and watch him grow—not to have to rely on the free clinic. It would mean they could move out of her parents' house. She could be home at night, read to him, watch him learn to ride a bike or shoot a basket. She wouldn't be working until midnight. Being a teacher would mean being with her son.

Barr:

So that's why I kept going.

Thornton:

When Anthony was three years old, he watched his mom graduate from Loyola Marymount University with a degree in education. Lori got a job as a kindergarten teacher at Anthony's school. For the first time, they had decent health care, they rented their own place. And their time together was no longer limited to the occasional weekend morning, or catching up over the unlacing of boot strings before Lori tucked Anthony into bed.

To get to graduation day, Lori had to do more than just work multiple jobs. She, like many other students, and especially student parents, took out loans. A lot of loans.

Lori started college in 1993. To get through her undergraduate degree, she took out about \$40,000. And when she eventually decided to go back for an advanced degree and other coursework, she had to take out even more. Over the course of her educational career, Lori borrowed \$125,000.

Barr:

There was that like, obligatory counseling session, like, 'oh, you understand what you're doing?' Sure. Sign the line. You know, I just knew I needed money. I needed to pay my tuition. And I could take a little extra to help with our cost of living. Ok, sign away. Not really thinking about the long term implications of taking on that debt.

Thornton:

Lori says that, even if she understood what she was getting herself into, she doesn't know what she would've done differently. She didn't know how else to move forward.

Barr:

Being in a space of desperation, you almost don't care. You almost think, well, this is the only way I'm going to be able to get this done.

Thornton:

Today, student loan borrowers take out a median amount of \$17,000. With so many additional bills, [most student parents end up taking on a lot more debt than non-parent students](#). Lori earned a Masters Degree in special education, and eventually became a school counselor. She had achieved her goal of getting jobs that gave her a family-sustaining wage. She got to watch Anthony grow up. She was there on the sidelines cheering him on as he played football and ran track in high school. She instilled in him that same drive for something great, and eventually sent him to college on a football scholarship. But over the years, between deferments and interest, her \$125,000 in debt swelled to \$200,000. And nearly two decades after she first graduated from college, she felt like she might never break free.

Barr:

I just remember thinking, like, this is ridiculous, I'm never going to pay these off.

Thornton:

And that debt proved to be a vicious cycle. Like when she went to get her first car, her credit score was so low that it was considered risky to loan to her. So her interest rate was pushed up, which only meant more financial strain. Eventually, Lori made some decisions she regrets. Like in 2010, she started charging personal expenses to a work card. And it got out of control. Sometimes she bought necessities. Other times she bought comforts and luxuries. Lori says she got addicted to the feeling of being able to pay the bill for a nice dinner, or have her family stay overnight somewhere they could have never afforded.

It eventually caught up with her: she was fired, paid restitution. She served time in jail. She says she's still learning how to separate her own self-worth from money. But living with a criminal record and being in constant debt made that hard.

Barr:

Just when you think you're ahead, you know, you get that next bill and you're like, man, is it ever going to end?

Thornton:

And then, in 2014, Anthony was drafted to the NFL, picked to play for the Minnesota Vikings. The news was the culmination of years of sweat and hard work by Anthony, and support from Lori and it promised to bring some financial stability to the family. But it also gave the Barrs a metaphorical megaphone—a boost that made them realize they might be able to reach people in similar circumstances to Barr: single moms, student parents in debt, maybe others who'd had run-ins with the law. An idea clicked when Lori and Anthony put on a free youth football camp at Anthony's Los Angeles high school.

Barr:

it was a huge success, you know, with 300 kids out there. We had like 80 volunteers. And I just felt like if we could harness this energy and enthusiasm for something like a football camp, imagine what we could do that would have a wider, a further reach, for something that's far more impactful.

Thornton:

That “something” was helping college student parents make it to graduation. Less than two years later, she and Anthony launched Raise the Barr, their scholarship program for student parents.

Barr:

And that's really where it started, was really, how do we help families like my own avoid taking on all of this debt?

Thornton:

In 2016, Raise the Barr awarded their first three scholarships—one in Anthony’s new home of Minnesota, and two in California. The next year, they gave out five scholarships. 14 in 2018. And every year since then, their program has grown. As of early 2020, they’ve supported nearly 50 scholars—each with at least one child of their own. And with their lived experience to back up their support, the Barrs’ work has been wildly successful. Prior to the pandemic, [96% of their scholars had graduated or were still enrolled in college](#). That’s significant, because national surveys show that less than [half of college students with dependents graduate within six years](#).

Barr:

The playing field isn't level for a student parent. They have limited time to do everything, you know, attend school, provide for their family, study, take care of their child, and then, like, maybe take care of themselves.

Thornton:

Most student parents who graduate do so in about six, sometimes seven years. After all, nearly half of student parents are working full time—on top of going to school and raising their child. But that expanded timeline is a problem when their [financial aid runs out after their fourth or fifth year](#). Lori knew from her own personal experience that one of the reasons why student parents take on so much loan debt is because, oftentimes, their federal financial aid expires before they’re able to graduate.

Barr:

And they end up having to decide whether to take a loan or just stop altogether. Neither are good options.

Thornton:

According to data from 2015-2016 analyzed in a report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the median amount of student debt among student parents is more than two and a half times higher than the debt taken on by students without dependents. And, across the board, [student loan debt is far higher for Black students](#) than it is for white students because of inherited generational wealth.

So Raise the Barr steps in, often at the time when students’ federal aid runs out. Funded by foundation grants and personal donations, Raise the Barr doesn’t provide loans. They

provide grants that don't need to be repaid. Lori says students have used their funding for tuition, to pay rent, to cover the costs of child care and health care, and to advance their careers by taking on unpaid internships. That financial support has been a lifeline, because about 90% of Raise the Barr's scholars are at or below the poverty line. And being part of Raise the Barr also gives the scholars a common bond — with other students, and with Lori, whose own personal experience assures the scholars that they're not alone.

Barr:

When you feel connected to something and someone you know outside of your own family, you feel like somebody believes in me. I can believe in myself and I can keep going.

Thornton:

When Lori and Anthony first started Raise the Barr in 2016, Lori really took the lead. After all, Anthony was still in the early days of his football career. But as Anthony got to know their scholars, the parallels between their families and his own started to really hit him.

Anthony:

You know, I kind of see myself in the kids and my mom and the parents. And so it became personal.

Thornton:

His devotion to the organization grew.

Anthony:

As a young athlete, there's a bunch of things that I wanted, materialistic wise. And so once I was able to step outside of myself and realize, like, there's so much more going on in this world than getting some new shoes or, you know, a nice car, like there's a lot of work that can be done. And that's really when I think I start taking it more seriously.

Thornton:

Anthony started using his platform as a professional football player to promote the work that he and his mom were doing. In fact, their first scholar found out about the scholarship through a Facebook post from the Minnesota Vikings.

But Anthony and Lori both know that Raise the Barr's funding and platform alone can't solve all of the difficulties that a lot of student parents face. A lot of student parents [experience housing instability or food shortages](#). So Raise the Barr partners with other local organizations in Minnesota and California so they can [refer their scholars to greater help](#).

Barr:

A student parent will not succeed if we're not filling in those gaps — mental health issues, housing insecurity, food insecurity, ensuring that they have quality, affordable child care — we try to find community partners who can help us address those needs because we just can't do it all.

Thornton:

The urgency of this work isn't just about community partnerships and other nonprofits filling in these gaps. It's about colleges and governments stepping up, too. Like at the University of Minnesota. According to the University, their Student Parent Help Center is the longest-running such program in the country, with [supports like child care and peer mentoring](#). But a lot of universities [don't have that kind of resource](#). And some might not even know that it's needed.

Barr:

A lot of universities don't even collect data on who their students are. They don't collect data on their applications to even identify student parents.

Thornton:

So some schools may not know just how bad their retention rate is for student parents.

Barr:

The first step is to identify — ask the question, identify the amount of students you have on your campus who are responsible for a dependent.

Thornton:

Lori wants to see colleges and universities considering family-friendly housing on campus, and daycare options. And she wants them to look at the unique needs of different kinds of parents. Lori recognizes she's had privileges that not all single parents get to fall back on. She came from a family of college graduates, she had family to help with child care, she was born in the US, she's white.

Barr:

There are unique experiences and challenges that a single mom who is, you know, an immigrant to the country deals with differently than I had to. Or a single parent who is a person of color. They know best. They know what resources they need to be able to be successful. And so their voices matter. That would be my message is take a good look, know who your students are and provide the supports that are necessary for them to thrive.

Thornton:

If schools, as well as federal and local governments, step in to provide some of the funding and support that Raise the Barr currently provides, the national trends of low student parent graduation and high student loan debt could edge toward Raise the Barr's impressive results. Because studies show that student parents really want to succeed, [if they're able to stay enrolled](#).

Barr:

If you look at the profile of a student parent, they have higher GPAs. They overall pursue more challenging degrees. They do far better than a more traditional student overall. And that is directly related to their motivation, which is their child.

Thornton:

As a single mother and a student, Lori didn't get much of an opportunity to show people who she really was. Her classmates and her coworkers didn't necessarily see just how hard she was working to try to build a better future. Sometimes that lack of understanding, that inability to see the depth of someone's efforts, ends up perpetuating common misconceptions about single mothers. Like that they must regret something about their life. Or that they're always looking for a way to get a break for their kids. Lori says that she's faced some of that same mistrust as a single parent herself: like when her classmates regarded her as a novelty, or her coworkers at her first teaching job found her aloof because she didn't stay for happy hours—really, she just wanted to get home to Anthony. Lori wants people to look past those misconceptions, and to recognize that investing in a student parent isn't just an investment in one person, it's an investment in two generations.

Barr:

There's a ton of research behind a small child being more likely to attend university if they see somebody in their immediate network, primarily a parent, attending university.

Thornton:

And the benefits of investing in student parents goes far beyond the family.

Barr:

By investing in student parents, you're creating an opportunity for them to elevate their own lives. And they become the professionals in the community, you know, the stories in the community that are told of success.

Thornton:

When Lori was 19, she got pregnant, and dropped out of college to raise her child. When she went back two years later, she worked long hours and got assistance to pay the bills. She took on massive amounts of debt to make progress toward getting a job that paid a family sustaining wage. It's no wonder she feels like trying to make that process easier for others is a calling. And the fact that she gets to do it with her son makes it all the sweeter.

Anthony:

This foundation wouldn't be what it is without my childhood experience and my mother doing what she did. And this entire work is a result of that.

Barr:

It's like we've come full circle. This is a labor of love and to see that he cares as much about this as I do, it makes me feel like I've done something right.

Kirkland:

Katie Thornton reported this story.

For more information about Raise the Barr and the scholars they support, go to RaiseTheBarr.org

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 and Jen Chien edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Michael Aquino. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Our theme song is “Ascenders” by Kojin Tashiro, who also contributed to mixing. Sarah McClure, Ryan Katz, Erica Hellerstein, Emily Vaughn and Ava Ahmadbeigi fact checked the series. I’m Pamela Kirkland. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

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