“Meet Sydney Martens”

Sydney Martens grew up playing basketball and participating in mock trial at school. When injuries, and then an unplanned pregnancy, sidelined her dreams of playing pro ball, she turned to her other passion: criminal justice. She’s currently a pre-law student and legal advocate focused on social justice and racial equity. Reporter Ambriehl Crutchfield shows us how a holistic approach to student parent support, along with the irreplaceable strength of friendship, have helped Sydney find her path and her calling.

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’re spending time with Sydney Martens. All through high school and early in college her sights were set on being a professional basketball player. But after several injuries and giving birth to her daughter Amiyah she re-evaluated her life. And what she found was a renewed strength in her identity, and a passion for social justice.

Reporter Ambriehl Crutchfield has Sydney’s story.

Ambriehl Crutchfield:

Sydney Martens grew up playing basketball in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

She started at three or four years old, on the YMCA’s Mighty Mites.

Throughout high school, the six am practices gave her a sense of structure and a daily goal to work towards.

Sydney Martens:

So I'd be up at my house by 4:35, eat breakfast, go to the gym for practice. We would get out of practice around 8:00 AM, um, hit the showers and then go to class.

Crutchfield:

Sydney worked part-time after school, but whenever she could be, she was on the court. She'd sometimes travel three hours to Minneapolis just to hoop.

Martens:

When I was, you know, in a mood or a funk, that's what I would go do. I would go shoot, go shoot hoops, you know.

Crutchfield:

The basketball court was like a therapy space. And she needed that, as a Black girl growing up in an adopted white family. Fergus Falls is nearly 95 percent white.
One time she remembers waiting to checkout at Walmart and browsing the assortment of candies that tease customers.

When a white customer warned the cashier to watch Sydney to make sure she didn't steal.

Martens:

It's like people look at you like you're, you're non, not an existing human. Like you're like a creature from another planet is how I felt all the time, even when I was little.

Crutchfield:

But whenever she stepped on the court, she wasn't thinking about constantly code switching or how to define her Blackness under white people's gaze.

Martens:

I always feel good going into games, even if I know it's going to be a tough game. I always have good energy.

Crutchfield:

Sydney brought that same energy to another high school pursuit: mock trial in her American Government class. Her team would go toe-to-toe arguing their side in a mock murder case against other student attorneys.

Martens:

They would cross examine our witnesses. I would direct examine my witnesses and objections, like the real court procedure. Like you're really going through a court trial, essentially, is what it was.

Crutchfield:

Career judges and attorneys from all across Minnesota would critique the teams.
And it set a precedent that Sydney had the raw skills to be good at this. She was passionate and applied pressure during cross examinations.

So it made total sense that she decided to major in criminal justice when Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan recruited her for volleyball and basketball.

But in her first year, after effects from a back injury she'd had in high school began to act up. She developed arthritis in her spine.

Martens:

The intensity is so much higher in college than it is in high school. And my back, just couldn't keep up. So for volleyball, I actually sat out most of the season because I wanted to be ready for basketball. I had gone to a couple of specialists that had said, you know, that my, me at my age, shouldn't be playing athletics at all.

Crutchfield:

So after a year at Finlandia, Sydney left.

She could've stayed since she was on a partial scholarship but ball was life.

Martens:

If I'm not playing sports, I'm not going to stay here, basically, was my mindset.

She packed up and went home to Minnesota for a year. But she missed the feeling of independence she'd had at Finlandia.

So in March of 2018 she decided to take a risk and move to Lynchburg, Virginia.

Martens:

So when I moved to Virginia, it was really to, just to reset and restart and figure out who I am, where I want to go, what I want to be.

Crutchfield:

When Sydney packed up for Virginia, she had two goals, one was to rehab and sharpen her skills on the basketball court, since university coaches at Riverland and Augsburg college were still wanting her to play.

Her other goal was figuring out her identity as a Black woman, away from her mostly white hometown and family. She thought moving with a close friend from Finlandia, who is also Black, would give her the balance of comfort and challenge to push her beyond the limits of her hometown.

In Lynchburg, Sydney found employment as a CNA, a certified nursing assistant. She worked over 80 hours a week in hospitals and nursing homes.

At the same time, she was working on her game. Other people had written off her basketball dreams but she wouldn't let it go that easily.

Martens:

When I was out there I was really focused on my diet, exercise, working out, chiropractor care. So that's kind of what I was doing outside of work, was working out, working on ball handling skills.

Crutchfield:

Physically recovering and scoring three pointers was always on her mind.

But after a couple of weeks of being in town, something else came into the picture. She met a guy, a friend of her roommate.

Martens:

And, you know, I hadn't really experienced someone like him necessarily. Um, so the time, you know, that we had spent together, we were really close. We're really close. We had amazing conversations and he always was at our house for dinners.

Crutchfield:

Sydney fell in love hard.

Then a couple months later, she found out she was pregnant. At first she was terrified

Martens:

I was like, first of all, I didn't believe it. I took like seven tests and I was like, there's no way I'm pregnant. Like, there's no way this is real. How is this possible? Well, we know how it's possible.

Crutchfield:

Typically women ball players have kids after they've cemented their career. In a blink, it felt like her basketball dream had died.

Martens:

I was like, there's just, there's no way that this was even going to be a thing anymore. So for me, I kinda just had to push that out of my mind and brought my head around the fact that things are just going to have to be different.

Crutchfield:

It wasn't just her career plans that fell through. Sydney's boyfriend got cold feet and wasn't ready for a kid. So they decided to end things.

But her mind was made up, if she had to raise her baby alone, she would.

Some of Sydney's family and friends discouraged her aim of becoming an attorney and told her as a single parent, she would need to rethink her career.

But for Sydney, being a thriving Black woman is all about beating the odds whether that's gender or race oppression.

Martens:

I'm a Black woman. So being a Black woman, in this society, you know, the statistics of single motherhood is not, it's not great.

Crutchfield:

American family structures continue to evolve as people are less likely to stay in long marriages and divorce has become more common. Yet stereotypes still persist about who a solo parent is, and how that impacts society.

Pew Research in 2015 found two-thirds of adults said that more single women raising children on their own was bad for society, and 48% said the same about more unmarried couples raising children. This attitude tended to be more prevalent among whites, college graduates, and Republicans.

Sydney's dream for her daughter was to limit all barriers that would stop her from becoming who she wants to be.

Martens:

I don't want her to go through a cycle of trauma. I don't want her to not be able to go to school and, you know, have a career and have a good life. I don't want my children, my child, children, to want for anything.

Crutchfield:

After thinking about it and talking to her adopted family about what to do next, Sydney decided it was best to move back to Minnesota so she could have more support now that she had a baby on the way.

And though she loved caring for people as a CNA, she was working 12 hour shifts, sometimes seven days a week. She knew it wasn't something she could do forever.

So she made up her mind to go back to school.

Martens:

So for me, it was like, you know, I got to kick it into high gear because the odds are already so high against me being a single mom, and a Black single mom at that.

Crutchfield:

But first, the baby.

On March 3rd 2019, Sydney gave birth to a baby girl named Amiyah at Alomere Hospital.

Martens:

Those first few months after birth, I was on cloud nine, just like the baby snuggles and just loving my baby. And, you know, just always having someone there, a little person there. I was very, just very overwhelmed with the love that I had for her.

Crutchfield:

Eventually, Amiyah began sleeping through the night and Sydney's mom helped lighten the load when she was tired. Eleven months after giving birth, Sydney enrolled at Minnesota State.

The Urban Institute says 40 percent of young parents have some college education but not a degree.

And they'll need some sort of credentials if they want to compete in the labor market with people who don't have kids.

Since Sydney had already attended Finlandia, applying for school and scholarships wasn't a hassle. She decided to try again with criminal justice, with a focus on pre-law. But this time, she had to figure out child care for her less than one-year-old baby.

Sydney learned about the Jeremiah Program from a friend. It's a program for single mothers and their kids that uses a holistic approach to support them in reaching their career and educational goals, and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

In August 2019, Sydney walked into the Jeremiah Program's empowerment class and saw a sea of white faces.

Martens:

I was like, no. And so I sat down, you know, I literally sat in the corner, like in a corner table and Alicia walked in.

Crutchfield:

The class is like group therapy, where everyone is going deep into their emotions which Sydney is still working on.

So seeing a caramel skin Black woman sitting there gave her a sense of comfort. Sydney isn't sure if she walked in and saw Alicia first, or vice versa. But their reactions were mirrors of each other.

Martens:

We were both like, "Oh my God, another Black person." And so that's how our, our bond started. And we were like best friends from then.

Crutchfield:

Here's Alicia...

Alicia:

We clicked right away. I was shy. She was outspoken. So if I had a problem, you know, she would back me up and say it out loud. So, and, our kids are the same age.

Crutchfield:

Alicia and her two children — Avalyn and Ashton — quickly became a part of Sydney's family.

The two single mothers were drawn to each other's personalities, which complimented both the more reserved and outspoken parts of each other.

Martens:

Alicia was really was my rock when I was in Minnesota, like my rock, rock. And we just helped each other so much. We would, you know, help each other, make dinners, make meals for each other and like take turns, switching off, going back and forth.

Crutchfield:

Alicia says Sydney has helped her just as much.

Alicia:

Every situation that I've prevailed in within the past year, she's pushed me. She pushed me to get my job. She pushed me to apply to a state job that I now have. She pushed me to get my own apartment that I didn't know that I could do. She pushed me, like, she's literally pushing me to do everything, but she believes in me. So that's why I'll do anything for her. Cause she believes in me and she pushes me to do things that she knows that I can accomplish.

Crutchfield:

In December 2019, Sydney officially moved to Fargo, North Dakota, to be close to the Jeremiah Program and her university. Both are in Fargo's twin city, Moorhead, Minnesota.

On Sydney's first day of class, she pulled up to campus wearing a blue dress and gray sweater with her hair straightened and a face of makeup.

That first day back on campus brought a slew of emotions.

Martens:

I bawled like a baby for the fact that my baby wasn't sad that I was leaving her at daycare. She didn't even cry for me, like when I dropped her off. And I think that's what made me cry even more. I was like, "Oh my gosh, my baby doesn't love me. She's not gonna miss me."

Crutchfield:

She also was so eager to be on campus, she arrived 30 minutes early. But she was also constantly checking Amiyah's daycare app to see how she was doing on her first day.

Martens:

So me having, you know, to just go to school and work and not get as much time with Amiyah is hard, yes. But I'm only doing it to set us up for success.

Crutchfield:

Since Sydney's work and class schedule started before the sunrise and often went past regular day care hours, having Alicia's help was critical.

The Urban Institute says it's common for young parents who are juggling education and training to rely on unpaid relative care for support. That's because parents with more education can afford and have easier access to paid center-based care.

Alicia and Sydney had access to child care at a reduced cost through the Jeremiah Program. But the limited hours didn't cover their needs with their work and school schedules, so they relied on each other.

Meanwhile, Sydney and Amiyah's dad were working through what co-parenting would look like from a distance.

In March of 2020, Sydney went to Round Rock, Texas, to visit her aunt and uncle. She met Amiyah's dad halfway so he could spend a week with his daughter. It was the first time Sydney spent more than a day away from her daughter.

Martens:

Moms need free time and people forget that. And so just having Amiyah spend time with her dad was really just helpful for me. And I was like, you know, I need this more often. I need, you know, more free time, you know, to do things that I enjoy. You know, sometimes I need a moment to myself.

Crutchfield:

The trip came when Sydney was starting to feel the crunch of not having a stronger network around her in Minnesota. Her adopted family was less than an hour away, but they didn't visit often.

So she only had Alicia and the Jeremiah Program in her corner.

She wanted her daughter to grow up in a diverse area where she would be around other Black folks.

With all that in mind, and knowing her aunt and uncle, and several biological siblings lived there, Texas was looking pretty good. But before she left, she heard the cry of a man that renewed her focus and drive for criminal justice.

In late spring, Sydney was relaxing at home, when her phone started blowing up with the news of George Floyd being killed after a police officer kneeled on his neck. A wave of frustration and anger rushed through her body.

Like so many Black Americans, this wasn't Sydney's wake up call to injustice.

Martens:

I've been followed in stores. I've been, you know, followed by police and questioned by police and in traffic stops. And so I've gone through all that stuff. I've seen it happen to my brothers. I've seen it happen to friends. And really, it's really been just for me, it's, I've always been awoke to things are different from me because I'm Black. Things are going to be different.

Crutchfield:

It's also meant uncomfortable conversations with white family members who don't have the life experience of what it means to be a non-white person in America. Sydney had had these conversations before but George Floyd, in Minnesota, felt different in more ways than one.

Martens:

I mean, I'm a mother. So watching someone call out for their mom, I mean, all moms were called at that point. I feel like. During George Floyd is really when for me is when I was like, yeah, I need to be on my game and I need to get this degree done so I can, you know, represent families and people in the system.

Crutchfield:

It gave her a new sense of urgency and motivation to finish her degree and force the system to give verdicts that bring justice to Black families.

Last June, when protests were at their peak throughout the United States, Sydney packed up her car and made a two day drive to Austin with Amiyah.

The Jeremiah Program has a branch there like the one in Minnesota, and it offers child care and housing. Studies have found improved health, school and work outcomes for families when childcare and housing are in close proximity or intertwined.

Having the support of the Jeremiah Program made the transition to a new state during the pandemic much smoother. Plus this time she connected easily with the more diverse staff. Even after moving to Austin, Sydney kept protesting in her new and old town.

Martens:

I can't imagine myself sitting at home and continue to see Back people being murdered by the police and not using my voice to be out there.

Crutchfield:

She joined local Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Austin, and started volunteering with the Minnesota organization Families Supporting Families Against Police Violence.

Since she doesn't have her law degree, she started working as a legal advocate.

And she's been able to help arrange a team of lawyers to help clients.

Martens:

I feel so powerful. So it's like, I feel like I can do anything. And I know people telling me all the time, Sydney don't overwork yourself. MJ specifically.

Crutchfield:

She's talking about MJ Korpela, a Family Services Director at Jeremiah Program in Austin.

MJ Korpela:

It's not as much, we have to help Sydney be something as much as the like, we're about breaking down all the stuff out there that's preventing Sydney from already being incredible, because she is.

Crutchfield:

MJ met Sydney seven months ago when she relocated.

Korpela:

Any amount of time spent with her and really getting to talk to her, it's pretty obvious that she's like exceptional, right? There's a lot about Sydney that blows my mind.

Crutchfield:

MJ has been helping Sydney work on time management skills, and being more vulnerable when communicating so that she can flourish.

While school was out for winter break, Sydney started working with a nonprofit as a full-time legal advocate.

She spends her work days taking calls from prisons and arranging team meetings. That's on top of going to school full time and taking care of 22 month old Amiyah.

Martens:

My daughter's yelling in the background. It's never quiet with kids.

Crutchfield:

But fitting work and school together is uniquely challenging for student parents like Sydney. Amiyah's daycare in Austin is open during limited hours. Monday, Wednesday and Friday — that's one day less than what she was used to in Minnesota.

Martens:

It's been a big impact as far as like finding a full, full-time job is just really not, like, possible.

Crutchfield:

Sydney is planning to up her hours at work to make sure she can financially provide for her family.

Studies from Ascend at the Aspen Institute shows current eligibility policies for relief can lock families out of getting the support they need if they try to get a modest increase in income.

It could cause them to lose their child care tuition subsidy, or it could keep families constantly earning less.

Still, Sydney's momentum continues. This semester, she's working with two social justice groups to get seven client's sentences commuted by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

Martens:

I just love helping people that, you know, needed because a lot of people forget about men that are incarcerated and they get thrown away, like they're just a number.

Crutchfield:

She eventually wants to attend Baylor School of Law in Waco, Texas, which is a top 50 law school.

Martens:

When I apply for law school, I have a very like, overachiever high mentality, but only, not only that, like, it's, I love this, I love doing this and I love being involved in what I'm involved in. And so for me, I don't feel like it's work. It's just what I love to do.

And now that she's living in Texas, near more supportive family, she gets a chance to have free time and have fun as a 22-year-old.

Every other week Amiyah goes with her dad and that allows Sydney to go on walks or to brunch with friends.

She still loves watching basketball, but for now it doesn't play a major role in her life since her spine still has pain flare ups when she does a lot of physical activity.

She says maybe one day she'll coach young girls. But that might have to wait. She wants to make it onto the Supreme Court, too.

Martens:

One of my really good friends, every time I say "I I'll try"or whatever, he's always like, "Why are you using that word? I hate that word, try." And so like, I don't have that headspace and it's like, "I can do this, I will do this." Like, we speak a lot of positive affirmations and meditations in this house. And so, you know, I don't have a negative mindset when it comes to the things that I can do and that I will do.

Kirkland:

Ambriehl Crutchfield reported this story.

Jeremiah Program offers one of the nation's most successful strategies for transforming families from poverty to prosperity two generations at a time. Learn more about their work at JeremiahProgram.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 Elizabeth Nakano with Cedric Wilson and Kojin Tashiro, who also wrote our theme song. 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.

CITATION:

Crutchfield, Ambriehl. "Meet Sydney Martens" 1 in 5 Podcast, Ascend at Aspen Institute, April 13, 2021. Ascend.AspenInstitute.org.