



“Meet Shaquana Graham”

Shaquana Graham's family always held education in high regard, but she dropped out of high school when she found out she was pregnant at the age of 16. After that, raising her three children and keeping a roof over their heads became her first priority. While fighting through the darkest moments of her life — and with the help of her family and a program that helps lift families out of poverty — Shaquana committed to going back to school and raising her self-esteem. Reporter Sonia Paul chronicles Shaquana's journey back to the classroom.

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 spend time with Shaquana Graham, in New York City. Shaquana’s journey back to school has been anything but easy. The drive to provide for her family took precedence over a degree after she dropped out of high school. And housing insecurity threatened to keep her from reaching her goal of graduating college. But the single mother of three was determined to show her children they can overcome any obstacle with the support of family, and help from programs designed to aid student-parents.

Sonia Paul has Shaquana’s story.

And a note to listeners - this story contains descriptions of partner violence.

Shaquana Graham:

I felt like I was in a movie. I felt like I was literally in a movie.

Sonia Paul:

Shaquana Graham never saw her life playing out like this.

Graham:

Like, like, like 25 officers, people with guns is in my door with shields on and everything. And they had a search warrant. They kicked my apartment in. My children were in their bed, they pulled us all out of our beds and into the living room. And they searched my apartment for three hours, four hours to find any drugs or any guns. And I'm like, what, what are you talking about? Drugs and guns? This is my house.

Paul:

It's 2016, and Shaquana and her two young children are waking up to the sound of police breaking down her front door. She's three months pregnant with her third child.

Graham:

My mother was there, they put my mother in handcuffs. They didn't put me in handcuffs because I was pregnant and he was screaming to her, "She's pregnant, she's pregnant."

Paul:

Also living in her apartment at the time — her boyfriend. And Shaquana had no idea that what he did for work would cause her home to be raided.

Graham:

The officer said to me, he said, "You don't know who you dealing with" And I'm like, "Who am I?" Like, "What are you talking about?" He told me, like, "This man, you know, he's what he is. And he's, you know, he sells drugs in the streets," and I'm like, I was naive. I didn't know. I didn't know. He kept those things separate.

Paul:

The incident landed her boyfriend in jail. And Shaquana found herself without safe housing for her and her children.

She'd been in shelters before, but this time was different. This time, Shaquana decided she wanted to try something new.

Graham:

I was in a shelter at the time that I decided to go back to school. So they give you a choice. They ask you, do you want to go for the education, or do you want to work? And I said, you know what, let me try something different. I haven't went to school in a long time, so let me just go back to school.

Paul:

The timing was around her 29th birthday. She had just given birth to her baby girl, Miracle.

Graham:

It was my turning point and I didn't have the distraction of him constantly being there and antagonizing and abusing me. So once that was removed, I could be able to focus, and I was able to focus on myself. .And, um, I made it work.

Good morning, Miracle. Good morning. You still tired? Can I have a big hug?

Paul:

Nearly four years later, Shaquana Graham is now 32 years old. She's able to look back on her life with perspective and wisdom, but she also knows her story is still in motion.

Her mornings start early, at about 7:45 am. That's when she and her kids — 14-year old Shawn, 9-year old Shaquan, and 4-year old Miracle — start to get ready for school. They all share the same wide, expressive eyes that take their time to open this morning.

Graham:

Brush your teeth, wash your face, eat some breakfast. Change your clothes. Get ready for school. You have class online, alright?

Paul:

Shaquana's a single mother, like [nearly half of the county's 3.8 million student-parents](#). She's just finished her last full semester at Bronx Community College.

Graham:

Uh, and here comes the cat. Uh, good morning, Indie.

Paul:

Shaquana, her kids and their cat Indie live in an apartment in The Bronx. It's just across the street from the shelter she fled to five years ago after the raid. You'd never know by talking to her, though, that her life has been a roller coaster. She laughs at the way her life could read like a script from a Lifetime movie — she's faced poverty, domestic violence, and other experiences that have tested her endurance, including recent health troubles.

But Shaquana is also determined not to let the trauma she's experienced take over her sense of self.

Graham:

It wasn't like, it was just like a piece of cake, of course not. I wouldn't say that to anybody that's listened to my story. It was not a piece of cake at all.

Paul:

Shaquana was born in Manhattan and raised in The Bronx, the second-oldest of six children. When she was growing up, her mother wanted her kids to have a better education than she had. So Shaquana went to a specialized art school in Manhattan.

Graham:

I wanted to be a dancer. I loved how dance was a language — you didn't have to speak words, but your body and emotions and movement showed that emotion — so I love dance. Dance was always something I wanted to do.

Paul:

Shaquana studied all kinds of dance — jazz, African, ballet and hip-hop. But she put her dance dreams aside after she learned she was pregnant.

Graham:

I found out I was pregnant in April of 2005. I remember I didn't, you know, get my, my menstrual and I was calling, I was calling my sister, and I was like, "Did you get your?" And she was like, "Yeah, I been got it." And I was like, "I didn't get mines," you know? And, um, I was like, okay, let me take the next step and take a pregnancy test. And when I did, it came out positive and, um, I was scared, you know? I was definitely scared.

Paul:

She had seen other pregnant girls studying at her high school. But despite what her friends said, Shaquana couldn't see that route for herself. She stopped going to school. She didn't tell her principal or guidance counselor.

Graham:

I'm trying to really think, like, was I embarrassed? I don't think I really wasn't embarrassed. I just, I was really sick a lot through the first trimester of my pregnancy and I just didn't want to go anywhere. I just was like, okay. And I just stopped going.

Paul:

The father of the baby was older than she was. They had met when she was 16 and he was 23 and already working. She got pregnant about a year into their relationship, when she was already living with him. When Shaquana told her parents the news, they supported her as much as they could.

Graham:

But my mother felt like if you want to be grown, then you would have to be able to know what being grown is. So, it was basically that lesson that she definitely taught and I learned, um, that it wasn't easy being on your own.

Paul:

Her son Shawn was born in December of 2006. For the first two years of his life, Shaquana was a stay-at-home mom. She stopped thinking about herself or school or her future, although people in her life would try to remind her.

Graham:

I think it was more so of my elders, like my grandmother and stuff like that. Like, "Okay, Shaquana, what are you going to do now? You know, what do you want to do, or how do you feel about?" I mean, I just told them, I would never regret my son, you know, um, if could have did things a little different and just been a little bit more, um, aware, and not so much careless, then it probably would have ended up differently. You know, my mom was a teenage mom, so, you know, um, it was just kinda like already in my life cycle. So it was just like, okay, now this is what we gotta do, pick up the pieces and keep moving forward, you know?

Paul:

When her son was about 2, Shaquana and Shawn's father split up. She turned to her mom as she was trying to figure out what to do and where to go.

Graham:

My mother told me about the shelter. She was like, 'ok, this is what you wanna do, these are the steps that you can take,' because she was in a shelter herself and she found herself.

Paul:

Once Shaquana was approved to stay at the shelter, she got a job cleaning New York's public parks. After nine months, she and Shawn moved into their own one-bedroom apartment in The Bronx with the help of rental assistance.

She took it all in stride.

Graham:

I had some crying days. I've had some days where I just wanted to just give up and not just want to do this anymore, but I toughed it out.

Paul:

Shaquana decided she wanted to try and get her GED again. But five years after she first dropped out of high school, and now pregnant with her second child...

Graham:

I went back to school for maybe about two or three months and, um, I took the test and I failed it by like two points, and I was devastated. And, um, I didn't try again. I don't know, I just didn't try it again.

Paul:

She moved back into her parents' house. Her mom and sisters helped out with taking care of her kids. But still...

Graham:

I was overwhelmed.

Paul:

Eventually, rental assistance helped her get her own place. Her partner at the time moved in, too.

Graham:

That didn't really, that didn't really go so well. He was abusive. I got my jaw broke by him in August of 2013 and um, yeah. He got arrested and um, you know, we separated from that time on.

Paul:

And Shaquana's brother stepped in

Graham:

When I got my jaw broken, once he found out he was just like, no, you know, not my sister. So he moved in with me.

Paul:

Shaquana's brother was a big help, especially when she had to work late nights or cover for sick co-workers. Tragically, just months after he moved in, he was murdered.

Graham::

And, um, that was devastating for me. I feel like I'm getting emotional, um, he was my only brother and um, it hurt. It still does hurt.

Paul:

After her brother's death, she became close with one of his friends. They eventually got into a relationship. But this partner turned out to be abusive, too.

The abuse became so vicious that when Shaquana called a domestic violence hotline, she asked the operator to help her go as far away as possible.

Graham:

And she said, "Well, where do you want to go?" And I said, um, "You know, I have family in Georgia," and she said, "Well I could set you up with something in a shelter out in Georgia."

Paul:

The operator made some calls and found a spot for her. But she had to be there within two days.

Graham:

I told my mother, my mother helped me. His grandmother also helped me. She knew about the situation and she knew about the abuse. And she seen my face — not like she could actually see physical evidence of my face, but she seen the sadness in my heart. It's a certain look when we look at a woman as in domestic violence. And um, she noticed it, she goes, cause she was a victim herself, and she said she noticed it. And um, I told her and she was like, "Get them babies out of there and do what you gotta do if you need anything," you know. She sent me some money and I also had some money saved up for me working.

Paul:

She packed her bags, and she and her two sons boarded a bus to Georgia. Her kids were about nine and four at the time, and confused why she was pulling them out of school. But Shaquana also knows they had heard the abuse she faced.

A counselor at a YMCA just north of Atlanta motivated Shaquana to find a job — she realized she needed to do something to get her life back on track.

Graham:

My counselor, she was younger than me. I was 27 and she was like 22, 23 years old. And I was like, what? Like, I was just like, you counseling me? You know what I mean? And it just kinda like gave me a wake up call, like, okay, now you really need to figure out what you wanna do with your life.

Paul:

But as much as Shaquana was determined to move forward, like so many people in abusive relationships, it was hard for her to truly get out.

Shaquana:

Even with the abuse that was going on, I didn't leave completely. I left, but I didn't stick to, you know, actually fully coming out the relationship. I went back. So yeah, I fell in love with my abuser, I would say, I mean. How else would you really put that...

Paul:

Almost immediately after she came back to New York, she found out she was pregnant. And as the abuse continued, she found out that her partner wasn't even who she thought he was. The police officer's words during the raid opened her eyes.

Graham:

You know, right in front of me and my mother, he said, "Jesus, so you don't — he's living a double life." And I'm like, "What do you mean? He works, you know, with his uncle." So he's like, "No, no, we've been following him for quite some time." And I'm like, "Oh my God." So that's how I found out that he was a drug dealer.

Paul:

It was her final stay in The Bronx shelter, after the raid, when everything changed. Eleven years after she had first gotten pregnant, she was able to focus on her education again.

That winter, she finally got her GED, thanks to help from the [Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center](#). It's a free academic and career training program for qualifying New York residents.

She was elated when she saw her test results.

Graham:

I passed (laughs). I passed and I got my GED!

They motivated me and they supported, you know, of me going to college, like, you know, listen, no matter you, 29 years old, doesn't matter, you know, you can still do it.

Paul:

Their encouragement pumped her up. Just like [42 percent of all student-parents](#), she decided to study at a community college. For her, that was the Bronx Community College, which was not far away from where she lived. At the same time Shaquana enrolled in classes, she started working again.

And five months after she first checked her family into another shelter, Shaquana found her own place — right across the street.

Graham:

I can look out my window and see my shelter right in front of me. It's literally directly across the street from my building.

Paul:

At this point — 2018 — Shaquana was operating on auto-pilot, trying to pick up as many hours as she could at work while also studying.

Graham:

To be honest with you, Sonia, I don't even know how I did it. I was just like a machine. I did it, I did it. Whatever time I could get hours, I would do hours because the kids were in daycare. During the day that I didn't have class, I was working. So yeah, sometimes I would work at six o'clock in the morning - so I would work and then go straight to class and then come get the kids and then do dinner.

I am in a different state of mind. I found my sense of self at that time, you know.

Paul:

Part of Shaquana figuring out her sense of self was fully realizing the toll her circumstances were taking on her.

Graham:

I was taking a health class amongst my courses at Bronx Community College. And, um, we were on the mental health subject at that time. And they had us do like a personal questionnaire, and we didn't have to hand it in, it was just something for us. And, you know, I checked off a lot of, of things that was on the box. And after the class I, um, met with my professor and I told her, I said, I think, I think I need some help. You know, I gave her a specifics, like listen, you know, I'm suffering, I believe I'm suffering with depression and I'm suffering with anxiety and, um, I'm a victim of domestic violence.

Paul:

Shaquana is not alone in this experience. A [2011 study](#) from researchers at York University and the University of Western Ontario in Canada found that nearly a third of single mothers on income assistance will at some point meet the criteria for a probable diagnosis of PTSD. But to Shaquana, up until that point, her situation had just seemed normal.

Graham:

I just felt that it was a part of life. It was a part of, of, of my life. You know, everybody else has circumstances, situations, that probably were worse than mine. And I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed. And I was in denial, you know? I would be in my room for periods of time...I would sleep, you know, constantly when I could. I would sleep, try to sleep all day if I could. I was going through a lot of mood swings and a lot of breakdowns, emotional breakdowns, and I knew something was going on. I just didn't, I couldn't put a finger on it until, like I said, I did the survey with my health class and I was like, okay, yeah, I think I got depression and I think I have anxiety. So, I was able to put a name on it.

Paul:

The professor Shaquana confided in advised her to seek medical help, and she eventually connected with a psychiatrist. She also started working with a social worker. Shaquana says she started to feel better. [Research has shown that women of color](#) tend to tackle mental health issues on their own, with African American women like Shaquana only half as likely to seek help compared to their white counterparts.

She kept working all the while. She was motivated to establish structure for her family. When her daughter's father came back into her life, she tried to stay focused — but his eventual murder again forced her to pause her studies.

It was in the fall of 2019, when Shaquana was back in school, that she came across the national anti-poverty nonprofit [LIFT](#).

Graham:

I was a part of [CUNY Edge](#), which was with the program into my college that dealt with public assistance, so they were like advocates for us in school. And they were having, like, workshops and they were mandatory. You had to go to workshops if you were on public assistance. And I loved to go. It wasn't whether it was mandatory or not, I loved to go because they had different workshops, and like I said, I always loved to learn and I wanted to know new things.

Paul:

At LIFT, parents are paired with clinically trained volunteer coaches who are social work students. They offer one-on-one support and accountability as parents identify and set their own goals.

When Shaquana first started with LIFT, she was paired with a mentor named Tiffany. Every month, they would sit in a cubicle in LIFT's office in the South Bronx, with photos of families the program had supported surrounding them.

Graham:

Me and Tiffany could talk. We would talk, we would talk. Because she was also a college student as well.

Paul:

Time with Tiffany was a chance for Shaquana to get things off her chest — how she was coping and moving forward from the grief, abuse and trauma she had endured. And learning what she and her kids all needed. With her coach's help, she started a vision board.

Graham:

I wanted to build my credit. I wanted to be more organized, as far as with my finances. Do a budget. Stick to my budget. Self care. Every time I seen her, she asked me, you know, she'll get different resources that can help me with that. And, you know, she would ask me how close am I to, you know, uh, achieving the goal.

Paul:

Shaquana receives \$150 every three months. It's one of the ways the program tries to relieve stressors like financial anxiety, which also helps parents stay invested in the program.

This fall, Shaquana is transferring to a four-year degree program at [Lehman College](#). She wants to study criminology.

Still, finding quiet time for herself to get her work done is not easy. And she was recently diagnosed with lupus, so some days, she just needs time in bed to rest. But on evenings when she's reviewing her to-do list, and thinking about the influence her path can have on others, she's talking to the people most dependent on her — her kids.

Graham:

Mommy is flooded with so much stuff. I have. Well, thank God I did my schoolwork already, so I did that in advance.

Paul:

Late nights these days are part of her routine, since that's when she can have the peace and quiet to focus on herself —whether that's studying or meditating.

Graham:

And I'm just going over these emails. Yes?

Miracle:

Shaquan says, I have to fix the robot.

Paul:

Sometimes, because of the work she has to do, she keeps fairly nocturnal hours.

She knows it's not ideal, but she's grateful for the support she's had, and the capacity to continue to try to figure out how to balance it all — her kids, school, health, and goals.

Graham:

I just slowed down, but still dealing with school, you know, I'm still in school, obviously. So, it's just taking, it's just taking my time.

Paul:

Shaquana recently started to take advantage of some of the group workshops LIFT offers. She says LIFT has opened her eyes.

Graham:

I wish LIFT was around years ago when I was going through what I was going through. As far as now, um, I think I'm more, uh, grounded in myself and who I am as an individual and as a Black woman, as a mother, as a student.

I just like kept on going day by day as a parent, as a student, I never really just took the time to really just acknowledge myself and say, "Damn," you know, "You're doing the damn thing," you know what I mean? I just kept on going.

Paul:

Shaquana is now trying to pass on her journey toward self-understanding, self-love, and being a goal-getter onto her children.

Graham:

This weekend I told my children that I want them to do a vision board. Like we're going to go to the 99 cent store and get like these big boards and I'm going to get magazines and I want them to cut it out and I want them to show me what they see themselves doing in the future.

Paul:

She knows it's taken her time to develop her self-esteem, but she's made it part of her daily practice to remind herself of who she is.

Graham:

You know, now we would say affirmations in my house, my children, "I am blessed. I am abundant. I am at peace. I am joyful through my circumstances, it doesn't overcome my life." So those types of affirmations we do. I think that one thing I tell my children, the word "I am" is a statement, it's speaking into the atmosphere. So when you use the word, "I am" know that you are speaking that into yourself. So, yeah I try to teach my children that just to be more self-aware of their surroundings and just be thankful of every moment.

Kirkland:

Sonia Paul reported this story.

Shaquana finished her last semester at Bronx Community College and plans to start courses at Lehman College in New York this fall to earn her bachelor's degree. She'd eventually like to get her master's.

[LIFT](#) is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit with the goal of working with families to break the cycle of poverty. It has offices in four locations across the country — Washington, DC, Chicago, LA and New York. They believe in using a [two generation approach](#)--that positive outcomes for children come from investment in their parents and pave the way for healthier social, educational and financial outcomes for their kids. Learn more about LIFT and what they do at liftcommunities.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.

I'm Pamela Kirkland and I edited this episode. Sound design and mixing by Elizabeth Nakano with Cedric Wilson. 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. Subscribe 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

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