“Never give up on yourself!”

When Nicole Lynn Lewis became pregnant at 17, she refused to give up on her dream of going to college. And not only did her hard work and perseverance allow her to build a good life for herself and her daughter—but today, she’s using her success to help other young moms.

With their dinner orders taken, 32-year-old Nicole Lynn Lewis turned her attention to the 18-year-old girl sitting across the restaurant table. “So tell me, how are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” Emerita shrugged. But then tears welled in her eyes. “No, I’m not,” she admitted. “I’m tired. And stressed. Maybe I should just forget about college.”

Nicole’s heart squeezed. She knew Emerita had a lot on her shoulders. Working three jobs. Going to classes. All while raising her three-year-old son on her own.

Reaching across the table, Nicole took the young girl’s hands. “I know this is hard,” she soothed. “But I also know that you can do this,” she said, her voice confident.

How could Nicole be so certain? Because the Washington, DC, mom had once faced the very same struggles herself...

**Determined to Succeed**

College-bound: that’s what Nicole had always seemed. Both of her parents had degrees, and as an honor student, Nicole had a good chance of getting into the college of her choice.

But then, in her senior year, Nicole learned she was pregnant.

“I’m too young to be a mom! she panicked. But she already loved her baby, so she resigned herself to making it work. “I’m not giving up on my dream,” Nicole insisted when she told her parents about the baby. “I’m still going to college.”

“Oh, Nicole,” her mom said sadly, tears in her eyes. “You have no idea how difficult your life will be.” And her guidance counselor told her that even if she graduated, only 2% of teen moms ever go to college.

Pretty bad odds, Nicole gulped. Still... someone is in that 2%. Why not me? she thought.

Meanwhile, the hurt she felt that her family didn’t believe in her grew. I can’t live here, she thought. But her boyfriend didn’t have a steady job, and she found herself staying with people she didn’t even know and scrounging for food while she struggled to do her homework.

Somehow, Nicole managed to finish high school. But her baby deserves better than this, she thought.

Fingers crossed, she filled out an application to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, requesting housing in their on-campus apartments for students with special needs. Every day, she watched the mail—and three months after Nerissa was born...

There were nights when Nerissa was teething or just wanted Mommy’s attention and Nicole struggled to soothe her while trying to study. And the little money she made at her part-time job barely kept Nerissa fed and in diapers. Many times, she felt like throwing her hands up and shouting. “I can’t do this!”

But then she’d look at Nerissa and remember: You’re why I’m doing this. And not only did she graduate—she did so with honors! “We did it!” she exclaimed, hugging Nerissa.

Soon Nicole had a job in public relations and was able to move Nerissa into nice home and the things she needed. Still, as proud as she was, Nicole remembered how painful it had seemed their present to change. Then hit her: How many other girls were that were there being told to give up on themselves? Or had opportunities for teen moms improved in the 10 years since she’d had Nerissa?

An Internet search left her shocked and heartbroken: their chances of going to college were still only 2%! It’s not right! Nicole fumed. These girls need someone to say, “You can do it!” They need to hear from someone who beat the odds. Like me, Nicole realized.

In 2010, she started Generation Hope, a nonprofit dedicated to providing emotional and financial support to teen moms. Along with money to help with tuition, girls are also offered a mentor, a former teen mom who, like Nicole, succeeded in beating the odds. Their very own 24/7 cheerleader.

And Nicole is head cheerleader, taking each girl out for a monthly “pep talk.” Like the one she was giving Emerita. “Knowing you’ve got your back makes all the difference,” Emerita told her.

In the last two years, Nicole has helped a dozen teen moms. “Nicole gave me back my future,” says Jenny, a Generation Hope criminal justice major who became pregnant at 15.

With every thank you, Nicole’s heart swells. And like she tells Nerissa, now 13... “Even when things point to failure, if there is a dream within you, it can flourish. Never give up on yourself!”

—Kathy Fitzpatrick

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“Never let anyone dictate your future but you!” says Nicole, with her daughter Nerissa, her inspiration.

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**Forget all the reasons why it won’t work and believe the one reason why it will.**

**Unknown**

Hands trembling, Nicole tore the envelope from the admissions office and through tears, she read: Congratulations!

Hope stirring in her heart, she applied for every grant and scholarship out there. And, joyfully, she was awarded enough money to cover tuition and room and board.

I really am going to make something of myself! Nicole rejoiced.

**Inspiring Hope**

Still, once at college, juggling her three responsibilities and school was difficult.

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**Find a mentor!**


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Wish someone would encourage you, like Nicole does her young moms? Find a mentor by:

- **Sharing skills!** Have a friend who excels at a skill you’d like to learn? Try peer mentoring! She can teach you, say, a new computer program while you mentor her in a skill she’s interested in. It’s win-win!

- **Searching this way!** Find a support group related to your interest, then hit their online forums. If you're, say, a new mom, try the chat room on a site like TheBump.com. It's full of women willing to help!

- **Using this LinkedIn trick!** Do an “advanced people search” and scan specific categories—like a job title or alma mater—to find the top mentor for you. Then filter the results by your ZIP code!

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