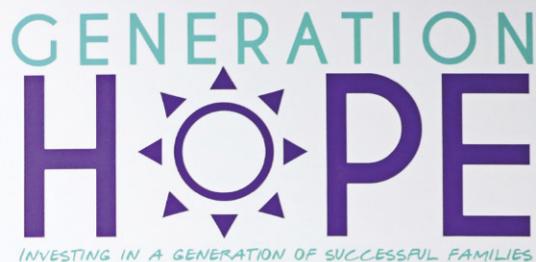


# Nicole Lewis earned her college degree as a young mother. Now she's helping other teen parents stay in school.



**HER MISSION:** Nicole Lewis, founder of the nonprofit Generation Hope, wants teen parents to feel 'supported and believed in.'

COURTESY OF GENERATION HOPE

By David Karas / Correspondent

**A**ROUND the time she was accepted at several colleges, Nicole Lewis learned that she was also on her way to becoming a mother. Determined to still earn her degree, she persevered, but the journey was not without challenges.

"I didn't have a circle of friends, or a group of people, who were also raising kids who I could talk to. That could be lonely at times," Ms. Lewis recalls. "Financially, it was really hard because I had to make tough decisions between buying diapers and buying a book for a specific class."

But regardless of the obstacles, Lewis graduated with high honors from the College of William & Mary in 2003, and she proudly walked across the graduation stage with her daughter in tow.

"It was just an amazing moment to accomplish something people tell you is impossible," she says. And in some ways, it was just the start: "I knew that other young parents could achieve the same success if they had the support and resources

to get there."

After working in both the private and nonprofit sectors, in 2010 Lewis founded Generation Hope – a nonprofit that provides those resources to teen parents living in the Washington metropolitan area who are attending college.

It was a groundbreaking venture. "I was just really flabbergasted that an orga-

**Nicole Lewis 'encourages us to knock [down obstacles] and be the greatest mom, dad and scholar we can be.'**

– **Tanzia Matthews**, a beneficiary of Ms. Lewis's nonprofit

nization focused on teen parents in college didn't exist," Lewis says. "I had the life experience as well as the tactical experience to start and lead an organization to fill that gap."

According to Generation Hope, it's the only organization of its kind in the D.C. region to concentrate on teen parents, and is a rarity nationwide. Its model revolves around the two major obstacles Lewis identified that prevent many teen parents from earning a college degree – lack of support emotionally and financially. Those barriers are reflected in the statistics, says Lewis: Less than half of teen mothers earn a high school diploma and less than 2 percent earn a college degree before age 30.

**A cheerleader and financial backer**

Generation Hope intervenes by pairing each teen participant, or scholar, with a sponsor who provides personal mentoring and as much as \$2,400 per year in tuition assistance. That sponsor can serve as a "cheerleader," lending the sort of emotional support that can be lacking for teen parents, Lewis says. And the financial backing can be critical to the continuation of the teens' education.

But Generation Hope is about much more than academics, Lewis says. It also responds to crises confronting the teens

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– domestic violence, lack of child care, and housing instability – and helps with matters such as immigration-related hurdles and policy changes. Then there are the basic challenges of being young parents without adequate resources to live comfortably.

“We are a college completion organization, but on any given day we are dealing with all the ancillary issues that go into a teen parent getting a degree,” Lewis explains. “We kind of have to do all things, and be a wraparound support for them.”

Generation Hope’s staff also offers case management, training on everything from academic planning to life balance, tutoring, and career preparation. Child care is factored into each program.

A key part of the organization’s mission is to facilitate not just college access, but completion as well.

“Teen parents on college campuses are usually the young people that fall through the cracks,” Lewis notes. “We want to make sure that they get that degree and move forward,” she says, adding, “We aren’t just focused on getting them in the door at a school.”

At present, the nonprofit assists more than 100 teen parents attending a two- or four-year college. Since its founding, Generation Hope has seen 30 scholars earn degrees – with 18 earning four-year degrees and the others working toward a bachelor’s after completing two-year degrees.

“Our alums are amazing: We have teachers working in different school systems, we have professionals working for the Department of Defense, [and] we have a mechanical engineer working at the [Johns Hopkins University] Applied Physics Lab,” Lewis says.

Lewis serves at the helm of the nonprofit, which has an approximately \$1 million annual budget. Funding comes primarily from private foundations, business partners, and individual contributors.

Lewis remembers all too well the attitude that others can have toward teen parents. She recalls disparaging comments and a lack of faith in her ability to be a young mother while furthering her education – and she strives to reverse the effect of those comments on Generation Hope scholars.

“We want them to walk through our door and instantly feel cared for, instantly feel supported and believed in,” she says. “It is really about knowing that people believe in you, that you have the ability to do great things.”

She’s seen results. “What I have been

## Nicole Lewis’s ‘palpable passion and commitment to the cause of supporting teen parents ... will impact our region for years to come.’

– **Destiny-Simone Ramjohn**, director of community health for Greater Baltimore with Kaiser Permanente

just so inspired by is that our students just don’t meet the expectation – they exceed the expectation.”

### One Generation Hope scholar

Tanazia Matthews, who has a son, was a senior in high school when she found out about Generation Hope. “I thought, wow, people do believe teen parents can make a difference and continue with school even after having a child,” she says in an email interview.

She is now in her last year of college and credits Generation Hope with providing financial help not only for school, but also as she looked to secure a place of her own for her and her son. Yet the support has gone beyond a financial boost: She has made many friends through the organization and considers her mentor a close friend.

“The impact Generation Hope has had on my life is unbelievable; we are a family and my son loves it,” she says.

She also found comfort in the tone Lewis has set, learning that “not everyone shames you for becoming pregnant as a teen – people do believe in you.”

Ms. Matthews speaks highly of Lewis.

“Nicole is the best; she always has an answer to complex situations and she encourages us to push ourselves,” Matthews says. “She sees the struggles and obstacles that we face, but she encourages us to knock them down and be the greatest mom, dad and scholar we can be.”

Destiny-Simone Ramjohn is director of community health for Greater Baltimore with the health-care firm Kaiser Permanente, which has supported Generation Hope’s gala for the past few years.

At one Generation Hope event, Dr. Ramjohn learned the story of one scholar who came from a single-parent home and spent time in foster care, but now lives on her own with two children and holds an associate

## How to take action

**UniversalGiving** ([www.universalgiving.org](http://www.universalgiving.org)) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects are vetted by UniversalGiving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause. Below are links to three groups that support continuing education:

■ **The Small Things** (<http://bit.ly/SmThings>) creates care plans for orphaned children and at-risk families in the Meru district of Tanzania. Take action: Be a volunteer for workshops promoting adult education (<http://bit.ly/AdultEdVol>).

■ **Miracles in Action** (<http://bit.ly/MirAction>) provides Guatemalans living in extreme poverty with opportunities to help themselves through sustainable development projects. Take action: Contribute to funds for teaching mothers how to grow food that could reduce malnutrition (<http://bit.ly/GrowFoodM>).

■ **Seeds of Learning** (<http://bit.ly/SeedsLearn>) fosters learning in developing communities of Central America while educating volunteers about the region. Take action: Support this organization’s Learning Resource Centers in Nicaragua (<http://bit.ly/LearningRC>).

degree thanks to Lewis and her team.

“This is the unforgettable lasting impact Generation Hope’s work supports,” Ramjohn says in an email interview. “By breaking the cycle intergenerationally, their efforts support teen parents not just immediately, but in the long-term health of the young families they serve.”

Ramjohn also sees the effect Lewis is having. “Her palpable passion and commitment to the cause of supporting teen parents in becoming college graduates and professionals will impact our region for years to come,” she says. “Nicole’s personal testimony and connection to this issue, which drove her to start Generation Hope in the first place, continue to inspire me.”

Lewis envisions expanding her work to other cities in the future. But for now, the Washington nonprofit continues to grow via the successes of its scholars.

“I am so inspired by what is next for them, what is next for their children,” she says. “Their stories are absolutely amazing, and their ambition and dedication really fly in the face of the stereotypes around teen parents.”

■ *For more information, visit [supportgenerationhope.org](http://supportgenerationhope.org).*