

Transcript of Stephanie Grass

Interviewer

Tell us your name.

Stephanie Grass

I'm Stephanie Grass. And it's spelled S-T-E-P-H-A-N-I-E. Grass, G-R-A-S-S.

Interviewer

And you are 30 --?

Stephanie Grass

I'm a 33-year-old single mom.

Interviewer

Tell us your story as you told me on the phone. Single. LDS mom. Got married, in love, four kids and you're playing by the rules, doing everything right and what happened?

Stephanie Grass

I was married to who I thought was the love of my life. We got married when I was 19. And while I was pregnant with our youngest son, Jackson, we ended up divorcing. I was about six months pregnant when we finalized our divorce. It wasn't a healthy marriage. As I like to tell my children, we didn't bring out the best in each other. But there was some verbal abuse and some other things going on. And so we parted ways.

Interviewer

And that was ultimately a good thing?

Stephanie Grass

Yeah, absolutely, it was a good thing. At the time it was really hard because I had two super young children, one a little bit older, and then I was pregnant. So that was really, really hard and I won't lie about that, which was extremely difficult to go through. And it was really hard facing the fact that I was going to be doing it on my own. That pretty soon I was going to have four kids, you know, a newborn, not quite one-year-old, not quite two-year-old to do all by myself. And it was definitely scary. But my far the best decision I think for both of us.

Interviewer

Talk about the stress. Overwhelming. Tell me stories. Young kids and being single.

Stephanie Grass

Oh, my gosh, it was crazy. I was super stressed. And I think that that's putting it

lightly. There were nights that I went to bed and just cried myself to sleep. Not because I didn't love my children, but just because I worried about how I was gonna take care of them. I worried about just making it through the day with them because -- as anybody will know, having one child by yourself is hard enough to do, but to have three super young kids that, that close in age, going anywhere was like going on an expedition because I had to plan everything out. So just to go to the doctor's office it was loading everything up carefully and trying to maneuver three kids in there. I didn't have a triple stroller so it was trying to carry one, push two in a stroller and not lose, you know, not lose one. It was just, it was really hard. I remember crying about not having diapers for my children, and wondering where that was gonna come from. And thankfully, I remember the day that the bishop here had learned about my family and they brought over, I don't know, probably four or five boxes of diapers and I just cried and cried and cried because it was definitely a blessing. You know, when you have three kids in diapers, it's super expensive. One is bad enough, but then you do it by three it's really crazy. So, but I remember just crying, just sat on my steps and just cried, probably for an hour because I was so grateful just to have that blessing brought to us.

Interviewer

This seems emotional to you.

Stephanie Grass

It does, it does. And I am going to start crying. It's just really hard because my ex-husband didn't get it. You know, I tried to explain to him, I tried to talk to him, and he just didn't listen. He didn't care. Just really, really didn't care. And so that was really hard because I was facing those challenges all by myself. And I still do, just because he's still not involved and so when you're thinking about feeding your kids or clothing them or even like I said, just diapers or formula, it's really hard when you know that there's another parent that should be helping with that, that doesn't. And he didn't pay child support for years. He finally does pay but not like he should and it's only because ORS has gotten involved. But for the first few years I didn't get anything. Not one single penny from him. And so those were, I think, probably even the more critical years just because of the expenses of diapers and formula and those kind of things. So for me, that was just one of those moments that I just -- I do get really emotional about when I think about because I was so grateful to have that blessing come to my family because I didn't know what I was gonna do.

Interviewer

What was your rock bottom? Do you remember that memory?

Stephanie Grass

You know, I don't remember my lowest moment, but I remember some pretty low moments. I remember taking a nap. I thought my kids were asleep. And I was just so exhausted. And waking up to find that my kids had gotten lipstick and

colored all over everything. And also had done cave man drawings, if you know what those are, it's where you take off the messy diaper and you color everything with it. So I think that was probably one of my lowest moments because I think I just lost it and just cried because I felt so overwhelmed. And the thing about having three kids so close in age is that they teach each other everything. So you know, while one may not have thought of it, the older one would show them, like hey, and they didn't even have to talk to each other. They, you know, babies communicate really well with each other without actually talking. So they taught each other to do quite a few things: Climbing out of cribs earlier than most kids would, that kind of stuff. And they would help each other. It was kind of funny but. [Laugh] So I kind of have to laugh, because it is kind of funny but yeah, I definitely think that was probably one of my lowest moments just because I was so overwhelmed that I just, I cried, I lost it emotionally because that was just all that to clean up. It was not fun. Needless to say, it was not fun at all. [Laugh]

Interviewer

Cave man drawings.

Stephanie Grass

Yeah, and that's putting it the nicest way possible. [Laugh] Yeah, everything. Walls. Floor. Bedding. Everything had to be washed. Yes, it was everywhere.

Interviewer

Talk about getting through the day. You were saying you were just trying to get through the day and you're stressed.

Stephanie Grass

I remember at one point somebody telling me that she's like, "You're trying to survive." And at the time I was like what is she talking about? I didn't get it then. I can look back and now say that's absolutely what I was doing. It was okay, what do I have to do to get through the day? Okay, I've got to feed them. And it really was just what do I have to do today? It wasn't about planning anything, it wasn't about looking forward to the future. It was, I just need to make it through today. So each day that I got up that was my prayer, was Lord, just help me get through today because it was just super overwhelming every day. It's like if you get one down for a nap then maybe you can get the other two. And so they're into everything and then trying to get them all to nap at the same time didn't always happen. Sometimes there were great days and they did, and then there were other days where not on your life could I get even two of them to nap at the same time. So it was just one down, two up. Another one down, two up. But I just remember that it was -- my house was probably the biggest disaster that ever -- that there ever was. I like to say a tornado blew through my house every day because it didn't matter if I picked it up, the next day it looked like I never cleaned anything. Other than you could tell that you know, I did clean, it was just toys or if my kids happened to get into food they would just dump an entire box of cereal all over the floor or anything and it would just be like, oh, my gosh, another

thing to clean up. And then wasteful of food. So it was hard.

Interviewer

So you're saying day to day.

Stephanie Grass

Yeah, I was living day to day. Just making it through each day and that was my goal. Every day was just let me get through today because there was no planning of anything. I knew I wanted to do something more with my life, but I also knew at that moment in time, all I could do was look for each day. There was no planning of anything. I didn't go anywhere unless I had to, like a doctor's office or something, but we didn't really leave the house, I want to say, just because it was so, so hard to go anywhere. So if I did know somewhere, like the grocery store I would have my mom come with me because you put three kids in a shopping cart and there's nowhere to put any food or anything else. There's just no where to put anything. So I had to have somebody come with me just to go grocery shopping.

Interviewer

Family support and community or LDS support, tell us where that was.

Stephanie Grass

My mom was a great help to me. I worked part-time on the weekends when I went through my divorce and after I had Jackson I still continued to do so. So it was just Saturdays and Sundays. So my mom would watch the kids for me. And then I went and got a different job that was just more hours. Because I was only working I think 16 hour as week. At the time it was like eight hours and eight hours. So my mom helped a lot. My brother, if I had a doctor's appointment, he would help me. And at first, when I first moved here, I didn't have a ton of community support but that's because I wasn't leaving my house. Nobody knew I even lived here because I never left, except when I had to just because it was so hard. So even to go outside, you know, you've got three kids running in different directions, yeah, it didn't work so well. So we just really didn't go anywhere unless I had to. So when the people found out about me, they were fantastic with helping. Like at one point my mom had a heart attack and they were fantastic about helping watch my kids so that I could work and it was right at that point then I went to graveyards and I worked graveyards so that I didn't have to have regular full-time childcare because that was really hard to do with my mom really sick, and so I worked all through the night and then would get up and I just had one kid in school at the time, so it was just -- I lived off of very little sleep, I was a zombie, [Laugh] I have to say. It was, again, living day to day, just making it through.

Interviewer

Let's talk about your kids and the divorce and their reaction. Were you protecting them emotionally? How did they respond to the divorce?

Stephanie Grass

My oldest took it kind of hard at first because he had had a relationship with his dad. The other three -- obviously I was pregnant with one and then the other ones weren't quite one and two yet. So it was very different for them. They don't really remember. My oldest took it the hardest. My ex had kept promising to take him snowboarding because that's something my ex always did and I remember one year just taking him myself. Like finding somebody to watch the kids and they used to do the Utah Winter Games and you could go for like \$10. And so you could go take a lesson. And so I took my son to go snowboarding because his dad had promised him every year that he would and never did. And then eventually my ex just fell out of the picture pretty much all together. He sees him once a year for Christmas. So.

Interviewer

That's not enough.

Stephanie Grass

No, it's not. But you know, and I've told my ex, I'm like, "I don't care what you pick, but you have to pick. Either be in their life or don't be in their life, but you need to make that decision and you need to stick with it because when you come and go, it's really hard for them. They don't understand and then they ask well when am I gonna see him again, when am I gonna see him again? And my answer is I don't know. I don't know." So it was really hard. I mean even now like they'll ask about him and you know, I tell them that their dad loves them very much and that he misses them because I don't know what else to tell them. And I don't believe in the parents who don't talk kindly about their spouse. It doesn't matter what happened in the marriage, that's still their dad. And he'll always be their dad. So I guard that relationship very much as well because I want them to love their dad. And if they decide they don't like their dad when they're older, then that's their choice, but it will never be because of something I did. I want it to be their choice.

Interviewer

Talk about the reality of parents struggling, (like you) so desperate that they have to choose between food and heat. Did you ever have to choose?

Stephanie Grass

I definitely have had to make choices between food and heat or paying another bill for sure. I've definitely had to make that choice myself. And a lot of times it's the other bill that kind of wins out because you have to have housing, you have to have heat. There are certain things that you can't go and even doing a nutrition class they say the first thing that somebody has to cut a budget, the first thing that goes is food. And that seems so silly because you need food to survive, but if you don't pay your rent then you're kicked out and you don't have a

place to live. If you don't pay your utilities, you have no heat. You have no air conditioning or gas going on in your house. So there's certain things that you have to take care of first that food sometimes is a second thing. So we've lived off of mac and cheese or ramen noodles because that's what we could afford. And it's a hard choice you have to make but sometimes those choices have to be made between that. And so I remember there were a lot of times that I would go without eating just because my kids. You know, if you make so much food and that's all you have to make, I'll make sure that they eat before I ever do. And it's even true now although it's not as bad now as it used to be. But at the time it was, okay, if they're still hungry, I would feed them the food that I had set aside for myself, I would feed it to them and make sure that they had plenty to eat.

Interviewer

Sometimes nutrition is compromised. Can you talk about that?

Stephanie Grass

Yeah, I struggle with anemia because of not eating enough food or not eating right. Thankfully my children have always come back healthy and I haven't had a problem with them. But they definitely have not had all the nutrients that they should've had growing up in terms of fruits and vegetables because you buy what you can afford and fruits and vegetables can sometimes be considered a luxury where mac and cheese is \$.79 a box. Ramen noodles, \$.12 a package. You just need water. So that's sometimes what you live off of is what you can afford. And so you definitely don't get all those nutrients that you need.

Interviewer

So where did you take your first two kids to school. We're moving to Head Start now. So talk about as the years go by.

Stephanie Grass

Okay, so as my kids got older, things got a little bit easier to do. It wasn't so living day to day. I could start to plan for the future. I remember I got this card in the mail just saying that Head Start, you know, you could go do this free preschool and I was like, okay. Because I couldn't afford preschool, it wasn't gonna happen. I had, you know, no extra money to put into that. And so I went and I sat, and I did it, it was for my four-year-old at the time. Ronan was four. And I went and sat through a really long line. There are lots of parents who need the help and that shows by the long line that there was. I was there for a couple of hours waiting in line to even apply for Head Start. And then I found out I could get my three-year-old in. That there was a chance. It wasn't guaranteed, but there was a chance. So I came back home, got his birth certificate and everything that I needed and I went back and sat through that line again to try to get him in. Especially with him having hearing loss I thought okay, this would be really beneficial for him to do.

Interviewer

So parents.

Stephanie Grass

Yeah, so there's -- they had this little boy in Jackson's preschool last year at Head Start that needed dental work. And so they were able to get him the donated dental service to help fix his teeth. And I remember them saying just how big the kid's smile after having his teeth fixed. I'm not entirely sure what was wrong, but I realized that there was something pretty major going on because I had heard about it later. But the kid just had like the biggest grin. Like after I saw him after that, just the hugest smile on his face because he felt good about himself. So Head Start does require parents to have a physical exam done and a dental exam done. And if the parents can't afford it, they do offer free clinics that they have to do it. So cost isn't a factor, but it's to make sure that there's not going to be anything that's going to hinder the kids from learning because if a kid has problems with his teeth or he's got like a tooth infection, that can cause him not to learn or to miss school. And so they really focus on making sure that the overall child is healthy and is able to learn and gets them services if they need it. But they do, they refer out for food services or help with clothing or anything that parents need I think in general, they try to help. If they can't get it for them, they try to refer it to another resource out there that may have that service available to help the parents to make sure that the kid's needs are being met.

Interviewer

And so the parents' needs, do they have resources for parents?

Stephanie Grass

They do. They refer out --

Interviewer

Head Start does have resources.

Stephanie Grass

Head Start does have resources for parents as well. Head Start is part of Salt Lake Community Action Program. And Salt Lake Community Action Program has job readiness training, help with resume writing, to help refer parents to get jobs. They, I believe they have a clothing closet, so like donated clothing to help parents have outfits to go to job interviews with. And then they also do a Sauté program which is a kitchen training program that parents can go and get jobs at restaurants working in the kitchens to help them, to develop a skill so that they can actually get a job and get employment. And that actually came as an idea from a parent. A parent had suggested the Sauté program. It was before I started In Head Start, but in one of the policy council meetings had mentioned job training for parents and that kind of came about from that idea and the fact that the food was so horrible. So it kind of came as two things coming at it, that they needed to address, and so it developed into this great program.

Interviewer

The food was horrible?

Stephanie Grass

For the kids to eat. So the Sauté program, it not only does the job training for parents, but for a lot of the Head Start classrooms, it cooks the food. It makes the food and then takes it to the Head Start classrooms. And I do know they contract out and do, I think they've done like the Boys and Girls Club for food and things like that. And so it helps -- it helps the parents with job training and then helps give the kids quality food. And they focus on good quality food. So a variety of food. Sometimes food kids may not have seen before. Sometimes the kids won't eat it or don't like it. And then other times they love it, but it gives them that opportunity to try food that they may never have tried and they balance it out with good quality nutritious food. And food that the kids will eat but maybe in a healthier way.

Interviewer

So does Head Start provide meals for the kids?

Stephanie Grass

Head Start provides meals for the children. If you're in morning Head Start you get breakfast, a snack, and lunch I believe, or breakfast and lunch. And then afternoon Head Start gets lunch and a snack.

Interviewer

So it's part-time either AM or PM.

Stephanie Grass

Right. And they do it -- they do have a couple of occasions that are full days but I don't know much about them because I'm not experienced with the full day Head Start program.

Interviewer

What did it do for your boys? What was the developmental change Head Start?

Stephanie Grass

Definitely had them ready for -- Head Start, sorry. Head Start definitely helped prepare my boys to be ready for kindergarten and helped them. And I also noticed my son, my youngest son Jackson had needed speech therapy and I would not have known that had the preschool teacher not caught on to that and said I think that he needs services and then had him, asked if he could be tested and had him tested for special needs services because of the way that he talks and his speech. And I just thought that he was -- my youngest -- I didn't even think about it, I didn't realize that he was doing it, and the way that he was talking. And so they helped him get services sooner than he would've because

otherwise if he had started in kindergarten he wouldn't have had any intervention until kindergarten that he needed speech therapy because I had no idea.

Interviewer

That's a really interesting thing that perhaps a stay at home mom wouldn't have picked up on that.

Stephanie Grass

Correct. A stay at home mom -- like I said, I would've never -- never. And his doctors didn't even notice, you know, because you're in, when you go to a doctor's visit you're in ten minutes and you're back out. You're not in very long and so they generally don't pick up on those kinds of services that kids may need.

Interviewer

So you said for you, Head Start, you gained a lot of self confidence which is huge from where you came from. So talk about where you came from, no self confidence to where you are now.

Stephanie Grass

So Head Start gave me a ton of confidence. When I first started with my boys in Head Start, I had zero confidence. And a lot of that came from just being divorced, being a single mom, and just those struggles. Like I really didn't believe in myself. I really doubted myself and I didn't really look to the future so much. And getting involved with Head Start I became one of the policy counselor representatives for our location and then I became on to get involved more with the Policy Council Board and then the Salt Lake Community Action Program Board. And through that it's had me speaking to people. I'm actually a very, shy, shy person, and it's helped me to kind of come out and be more open with people and talk about the things that I've gone through, because I do tend to keep it very much to myself. But it's given me that confidence to feel good, like hey, I've made it this far, I've done amazing things -- even though I don't necessarily feel that way -- but because of the things that I've done, it just made me feel good. And it made me feel good to give back, to say hey, when they ask for a policy council representative, they were asking, it was one day a month for I believe it's like three hours. I'm like well, they're teaching my kids, I can give one day a month for three hours. I can do this. I can give back and say hey, this is my way to say thank you. And from there I progressively just got more involved because I just loved being involved and it made me feel good, and I wanted to do more and more and more and as I did more, the confidence just grew and grew and grew. And then I've had other opportunities to do things.

Interviewer

What do you think people don't know about Head Start?

Stephanie Grass

I think people think that Head Start is just a free preschool. I don't think they really think about it. And I think a lot of people take for granted being able to put your children in preschool and all the things that preschool does to prepare your children for kindergarten and kindergarten readiness is so important because education is the key to ending poverty. If you don't have an education you're not gonna get anywhere. You're gonna be working really low-level jobs. And so being prepared for kindergarten is so important. And kids -- studies have shown, kids that start off already behind start into kindergarten, tend to stay behind and they tend to keep falling further and further behind because they don't make the progression that other students do. And so Head Start really helps these children from these low-income families that wouldn't have this opportunity to learn in a preschool, to help them be more prepared for kindergarten so that they can thrive in school instead of falling further behind.

Interviewer

And talk about your education and future. You're a CNA? And what you want to do.

Stephanie Grass

I've always wanted to work in the medical field. That has been my dream since I was a little, little girl in kindergarten myself. And so with my children going to preschool, I was able to start really going back to school. So I just completed my CNA classes. And I'm getting ready to apply to nursing school so that I can become a nurse and continue helping people because that is a huge passion of mine is to help people. And then also to be able to take care of my family on my own and not be living in poverty anymore with my children.

Interviewer

And your kids all now go to charter school, all of them. And you said it's so you could work full-time -- it runs in the summer too. So talk about the importance. You wanted year-round.

Stephanie Grass

Actually it's opposite of that, but yeah. [Laugh] So I deliberately put my kids in a charter school. We actually got into the one furthest away from my house which is kind of the down side. But I deliberately did that because on the year-round school, I would have my children off in months and when it was just my oldest in school, that wasn't a big deal. But as he's getting older, then you have a kid in junior high who is on a traditional school system which is the three months off in the summer. But if you're on year-round school, you go to school in June and August and you have random weeks and months off throughout the year. And I knew going into nursing school that that would not be an option for me. I would have to find then full-time daycare for my children when they're off-track, that actually would work with my school schedule to be able to continue to go to school. Otherwise that would've been a problem. And so I deliberately put them into a charter school so that they would be on a traditional school year and that

way that all my kids would have the same time off. Same days off. Go to school the same hours versus having one kid go to school in October and then having three of my kids home in the month of October because depending on what track system you're on, you'll have different months off throughout the year.

Interviewer

And you're working too.

Stephanie Grass

Yes. I do work, I work for 1-800-Contacts. I work part-time. I work a really weird crazy schedule that most people don't understand. I'm just very fortunate enough that they were able to help me work around my children's schedule, school schedule with having a child still in kindergarten, and then also around my school schedule. So I typically work 12 hours on Sundays. I do a split six-hour shift. So I work six hours, have a couple hours so I can make dinner and spend some time with my kids, and then I work another six hours until 11 at night. And then on Thursdays and Fridays I work a couple hours in the morning and then I have time to take my kids to school. And then I work a couple hours, and then I'm off so I can pick up Jackson from kindergarten. And then on Thursdays I work again for a couple hours so that I can try to get my hours in. And then I try to pick up periodically throughout the week when I can as well.

Interviewer

So since this is a zero to five year program, tell us who Jackson is and what he's like and how he's doing in kindergarten.

Stephanie Grass

Okay. Jackson is my youngest child and he's five years old. And he's doing all right in kindergarten. He would much rather be in preschool still. He doesn't really like the fact that they don't feed him in kindergarten. I think that that's the biggest complaint although I'm not the only parent that hears that. I've heard that that's a common theme for children in kindergarten, that they complain they don't even get a snack in school. But he's doing quite well. He's just -- he's got a sassy little personality so he's kind of bossy, kind of tells you like it is, kind of attitude. And if he doesn't want to do it, he doesn't want to do it and good luck making him because he's very stubborn that way. So sometimes the teachers have a harder time getting him to focus because if he doesn't want to do it, he'll just sit there and doesn't care. He'll wait until he can go do something else, or he'll get up and do something else. I've gotten talked to about that because he just doesn't like it. But there are days that he comes home and he's had a good day and he likes it. And there's the days where he'll tell me, "Oh, it wasn't so good." And he'll actually tell me that he wasn't good at school, and he'll tell me why he wasn't good at school, because he didn't want to do something. But he also goes to see his speech therapist weekly to work on his speech development because he doesn't pronounce his words correctly or the sounds, make the proper sounds. And he'll speak really quickly so he can be really hard to

understand and now that he's gotten older, it's a little bit easier to understand him. But even when he was younger, I actually would have his brother's interpret for me half the time, his older brother's would interpret, or I would tell him to show me. Because sometimes you would have no idea what that child was saying. It was just something -- I think he would make up words for things, is what I think he was doing too. Making up his own language.

Interviewer

There's some in the state that believe that women should stay home with their children and you mentioned --

Stephanie Grass

You're going to have people who judge you either way. I've had people judge me both ways, for working and then not for working. I've had people who judge me for working because I have four children and they think that I should stay home and take care of them. Well that's all fine and great but how am I gonna pay for things? When you're a divorced single mom, what do you do for finances if you don't work? And then I have people who judge me for -- who, sorry, where did I go? Judge me for not working and then you have those people who judge you if you didn't work saying, you know, why don't you work? I've had judgment from people who have told me that they can't believe I would let my 11-year-old walk home from a lacrosse practice because I had school. And it's like, well, I can't win. I can't please everybody. And so I stopped trying because people, unless they've walked in your shoes, don't fully understand the choices and the decisions you have to make. Every choice I make, I do for what I feel is best for my family and what's going to help us move forward. Yeah, would I wish some things could be done differently? Sure. But I have to do what's gonna work for my family. And so sometimes it would be my 11-year-old walking home from lacrosse practice. Now is he walking across busy roads? No. It's at a park not too far -- less than a mile from my house. But I've had people judge me for that because I'm going to school so I'm judged because I go to school. You should be focusing on your children. Well I want to focus on my children, but if I don't go to school too, how are we gonna ever end the cycle of poverty? You feel it -- I feel it both ways. I feel the judgment from people who think I should stay home full-time, which would be great, but again, how do I support my children? And then I have people who think that I should go out and work full-time. Well great, how am I gonna get my kids picked up from kindergarten? How am I gonna get them to and from school? You know, if you can solve those for me, then sure, I'll maybe try something differently. But I feel like I do the best that I can do with the choices that I've given to make.

Interviewer

Policy wise, how do you feel the state can support you?

Stephanie Grass

Stephanie Grass

I really think that policy makers should think about helping parents go back to school, especially the parents living in poverty, because the focus needs to be education and it's the only way to end the cycle of poverty is to get an education, to get a better job where you can make more money and support your family. But it also starts really young. It's so important to have that funding for children in preschool so that they can be ready for kindergarten because they start off behind, they continue to fall behind. They don't continue to move forward if they're struggling just to even catch up, to be where the other kids are. And so the main focus I think policy makers need to focus on is education for both the young children and for adults. And even all through school I think that all the ages need good quality education and that should be the focus of everybody. If they want to change the face of poverty, education is the answer to that. Jackson!

Interviewer

Talk about that you're active LDS and you said sometimes neighbors will watch your kids. Your support system with the LDS, but you said that you like to do as much as you can by yourself.

Stephanie Grass

So I like to do as much as I can do by myself, but I am active LDS, although I work 12 hours every Sunday, so I don't make it to church. But it's just because I'm working. But I do try to do other things when I can. So if they offer something else going on, I try to attend. But my children go to church usually. One of the neighbors will usually pick up my kids and take them to church and then bring them back home for me so that that way they can attend church and learn and that way I can work. So they do that. And then my oldest is involved with Scouts through the church and in Young Men's, and so he does that. But the neighbors have helped watch my children. Like my mom had her heart attack. I think for like an entire month my kids were going to different neighbor's houses while I was working just so that I could continue working and not lose my job because prior to that, my mom had been watching my children while I worked. And that was when Jackson I think was about a year old. So it's been a long time ago that that happened, but they did that. And on occasion now, I went to take my CNA skills test and one of my neighbors watched Jackson for me. The other kids were at school, but watched Jackson for me so that I could go take that test.

Interviewer

And the last question about resources. Talk about food stamps, activities and expenses, gas, car—the expenses of life. Talk about that and the reality of being a single mom and finances. Do you find yourself in a coverage gap where if you make too much you don't qualify for services you need? But if you make too little you're not able to afford the cost of living?

Stephanie Grass

Absolutely there is financial struggles with being a single parent, and there is that gap, there is that necessary need. For instance, I work so I make too much to receive health insurance through the state for myself. With the Obama Care I'm now able to afford it, and I pay for it myself, but there was that huge gap. So some services you can make too much money for despite the fact that I'm a single mom that works part-time. I work about 21 to 25 hours a week. It varies because some weeks I'm able to get a little more hours in, and sometimes it's just the 21 hours in a week. And you make, you know, not very much money per hour and paychecks aren't very big. And so trying to find the resources to pay for everything really is a balancing act. And as sad as this is to say, I have credit cards and that's how I make it every single month. I wouldn't be able to keep gas in my car if I didn't. It digs you further into debt each month, but how else do you survive when you have to worry about rent and you have to worry about food and you have to worry about a vehicle to drive anywhere. Those costs are huge. And especially for me, I drive 20 miles round-trip every time I drive to my children's school. It's about ten miles one way, and then ten miles back. When you've got a kindergartner, you're doing it three times a day. So that's 60 miles a day just for that one child. And then you have a son that plays lacrosse and I'm driving him to and from practices, I'm driving him to and from games. Sometimes they're farther away. Sometimes they're closer. So that's just those day to day expenses on gas. I think I fill up my car twice a week. And cost of gas is expensive. And then having four children, I have to have a bigger vehicle to fit them in safely and into car seats, the booster seats. And so I think I pay \$50 or \$60 every time I fill up my gas tank. So that's just once. So you figure if I'm putting \$60 in twice a week, that's \$120 a week just on gas, just to drive to and from the necessary places. And I try not to drive anywhere I really don't have to go. For instance, we don't go for a drive just to take a drive because those expenses are huge. But it is a huge balancing act. And it's what has to be paid. And then you have kids that want to play activities. Well that costs money. Lacrosse costs money but that's my son's passion and him not having a dad involved in his life after our divorce, I said, "You pick any two activities you want, I don't care what they are, I don't care if it's chess club, I don't care, but you're going to do something. You're going to be involved and you're going to do something." And so he found lacrosse and fell in love with it. And so he plays lacrosse in the fall and in the spring. And he even plays on a competition team because he loves it so much. And so all of that is super expensive. But I know that keeping my son involved in something is gonna pay off in the long run in terms of keeping him out of trouble. It's going to keep him out of trouble and it's going to help him build teamwork skills and give him a passion and a drive to help him stay out of drugs and to help him focus on school because he knows he has to get good grades to keep playing. And so it's really important for kids to play activities but they're really expensive. For lacrosse alone you have the ULA fee which is the national fee that you have to pay. There's a Lacrosse Association fee that you have to pay. And then you have to pay a fee to be on the team. That helps pay for the refs. I mean there is a valid expense to it. And

then you have the team fees to pay for the uniform. And then you have all the lacrosse gear. And that is really expensive.

Interviewer

Does your X help with activity fees for your boys?

Stephanie Grass

The last time I did that, the response I got back was, one, that he would pay it, and then he didn't pay it. And then later he said, "Well, I pay child support." Well, I looked back and that month I think he paid \$80. And that was the response that I got. So my ex-husband doesn't really care. I have a son that has a hearing -- wears a hearing aid, and I had to get him a new hearing aid and I took a picture with my phone, sent him a picture, text message of the cost of the hearing aid bill and just said, "You owe half." And his response back was, "Send it to my attorney." I'm like, dude, we can't even -- I can't ask him for anything because that's the kind of answers that I get back are just -- so I of course have paid that hearing aid bill because my son sees that audiologist and ENT doc every few months. You know, I have to pay those. Those are bills that if they don't get paid, they'll go against my credit, they'll come collecting for me.

Interviewer

And these are all the little details..

Stephanie Grass

These are the things that people don't realize that single parents deal with, are all those extra expenses that come up. And the needs, you know, a hearing aid, my son can't go without a hearing aid, that's a necessity, it's not a want, that's a need. And without it he wouldn't perform in school. So that's just a need. And then you have -- I realize that playing sports is a want for my son, but I feel like that in my mind, that's a need to keep him involved in something because it's gonna help him build long-lasting friendships and keep him involved and help keep him out of trouble, help keep him on a good path. Not to mention, that he has gotten some great coaches that have been great role models in his life, that he really looks up to. And I tell him all the time, "Be that kind of person. Not exactly them, because you're not them, but be that kind of person that people can look up to. Look at them and model their behavior and their choices that they make."

Interviewer

That's where the community can be involved.

Stephanie Grass

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Is to mentor your boys, that's my first thought.

Stephanie Grass

Absolutely, the community being involved in mentoring my children, that is the biggest way that anybody can be involved in any children's life is to be a great mentor. And even if you're not a single parent, even say you have both parents, there are two parent households where the parents work all the time. Just being that good role model and having somebody that the children can talk to or if they don't have a good relationship with their parents, somebody that they can look up to that is always a way that the community can be involved. And the coaches that my son has had have been fantastic and they volunteer their time. And without them, I don't know where my son would be.