

Allison McCarley Jackson '87

Allison McCarley Jackson '87 came to her career as Division Chief of the Child and Adolescent Protection Center at Children's National Health System in a kind of roundabout way. You could almost say it found her, as opposed to the other way around.

She'd always known, even as a child, that she wanted to be a doctor; that's probably why she lists former middle school science teacher Eugenie Podogil and current Upper School science teacher Don Southard as among the more influential instructors she had at HB. It's also why, after receiving her undergraduate degree from Harvard, she headed to Columbia University for medical school.

Jackson started out studying psychiatry but soon realized that "I actually liked to touch my patients, so that wasn't going to be a good choice." She spent her residency as a general pediatrician and got her first post-residency job in the same field, working with underserved communities in Baltimore, Maryland.

Though she "loved (her) patients dearly," Jackson kept feeling she was called to do something different. After reconnecting with her residency director Jackson learned about an open position in child protection; she's been working in the field ever since. In addition to her current position at Children's National Health System, Jackson has served on multiple high profile teams and committees on child abuse and neglect. She's also an assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics at George Washington University.

"This is challenging work," notes Jackson, who provides direct medical care to children and also advocates for them within human services and law enforcement arenas. Even so, she adds, when she is able to successfully connect with abused children and their families and get them to open up, the results can be both "profound and very rewarding."

Having a "wonderful husband and two great kids," ages 5 and 7, has given her a new perspective on her job. In addition, she says, "being able to provide tenderness to a child who has experienced abuse or neglect, even if it's just for the twenty minutes of a physical exam and visit - that's a good thing."

After her big career-shift, Jackson hopes other aspiring doctors understand that, even in medicine, "where the path is spelled out so clearly," it's not impossible to change tracks. She is also quick to point out that science teachers weren't her only mentors at HB: former English teacher Kavita Syed and current Middle School Music Teacher Deb Dressell Southard, she says, both have "a special place in my heart." Her biggest takeaway from the school? "HB equipped me with the confidence to pursue those areas where there may not be as many females."