

“I’ve followed my heart and I have no regrets. The cubicle life is definitely not for me – I’m constantly screaming to get out and make a difference.”

— Portia Jackson



## Yearning to “Get out and Make a Difference”

**PORTIA JACKSON** DESCRIBES HERSELF as possessing an entrepreneurial spirit. “Even within public health, I’m constantly challenging myself to reach for the opportunities that best reflect me,” says Jackson, who recently completed her first year of Dr.P.H. studies at the UCLA School of Public Health.

After completing her M.P.H. education at the University of Michigan, Jackson spent two years as a public health analyst with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of its Emerging Leaders Program. The experience, in which she rotated through half a dozen offices, whetted her appetite for public health practice but also showed her the difficulty many public health infrastructure programs have in obtaining sufficient funding. In embarking on her doctorate, one of Jackson’s goals is to explore ways in which public-private partnerships might be able to help fill some of these funding gaps. “There are a lot of corporations seeking to engage in socially responsible work but lacking the knowledge capital, and a lot of nonprofit organizations that have the right goals but lack the funding,” she says.

Jackson is also interested in helping philanthropic foundations and corporations develop health and educational programs that effectively address gaps in the local infrastructure. Since arriving at UCLA, she has been working for the UCLA/Johnson & Johnson Health Care Institute, based at the Anderson School of Management, to develop curricula on diabetes awareness, physical activity, and nutrition and use it to train Head Start directors who will disseminate the information to parents. Jackson plans to focus her dissertation on the impact of the curriculum on health and knowledge outcomes for parents and children.

The Head Start project has special significance for Jackson, who has seen several family members suffer and die from the complications of diabetes. It was the realization that this is a problem better addressed at the public health level that led to her decision, while an undergraduate at Stanford, to move away from pre-med studies and consider a public health career. Jackson, who was majoring in anthropology, had become fascinated by how beliefs, cultures, and environments shape people’s health practices and outcomes. She did a project on African American women living with sarcoidosis, a rare auto-immune disorder, and in getting to know women with the disease, found that their experience was about much more than the pathology.

“It was something that completely reshaped their lives,” Jackson says. “At that point, the landscape of health became much more than just the practice of medicine to me.” She also began to see her own family’s experience through a different lens. “I concluded that prevention has to be a bigger focus – it’s too hard to wait until someone already has the illness,” she says.

Since deciding public health was for her, Jackson has been tireless in pursuing one opportunity after another to gain experience. “I’ve followed my heart and I have no regrets,” she says. “I’ve lived and worked in Chile twice, developed laboratory management programs in Honduras, worked with the state health department in Puerto Rico...my opportunities for impact have been incredible already. The cubicle life is definitely not for me – I’m constantly screaming to get out and make a difference.”