

Hooked on Politics

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JESSICA JACKSON WOKE UP ONE MORNING during her junior year of high school wanting so desperately to be thin that she bought a box of diet pills and took seven times the normal dose. Ten minutes into her first class she was shaking so violently she could barely stand long enough for the teacher to write her a hall pass, and by the time she got to the school nurse's office, her heart was pounding like a piston.

"It was terrifying," says Jackson, 21, of Warrensburg, Mo. "I was really scared to close my eyes because I didn't know what was happening to me."

That experience made her determined to never let it happen again, to herself or to any other young person. Jackson couldn't have known it at the time, but her sense of mission about this problem would help her earn the prestigious Truman Scholarship this year. She urged her state representative, Deleta Williams, to sponsor a bill that banned the sale of diet pills to minors. Jackson, who was 17 at the time, testified before the House Public Health and Safety Committee.

"I knew that in order to gain the respect of the committee, I had to show them that I

had done my research and really knew the issues," she says, "so I practiced saying the word 'phenylpropanolamine' [the key ingredient in some diet pills] rather than the common abbreviation—PPA—because I thought it sounded more sophisticated."

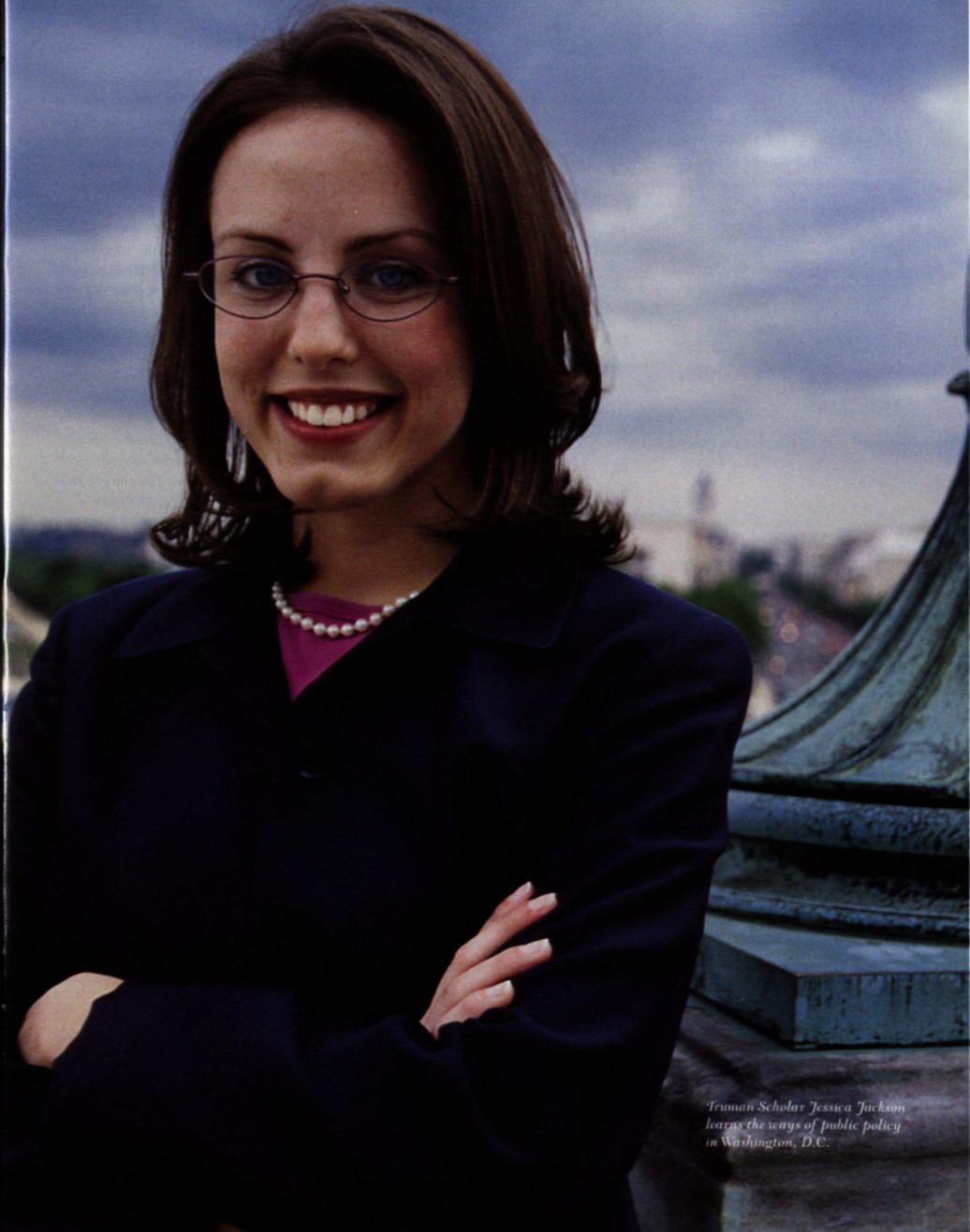
She got so much respect, in fact, that the Consumer Health Products Association, a trade organization based in Washington, D.C., sent one of its key lobbyists to testify against her bill.

"It was almost a caricature with this high school girl and her mom testifying against a Washington lobbyist," Jackson says. "My fight was sort of selfish at first because I knew these pills were at least psychologically addictive if not physically addictive, and I didn't want them available for me."

Since then, the Food and Drug Administration has determined that phenylpropanolamine can cause brain hemorrhages and strokes, especially in young women who use it over a long period of time.

"It's basically a legalized form of speed," she says.

Going public wasn't all that difficult, since Jackson's battle with her eating disorder was never private. During her freshman



*Truman Scholar Jessica Jackson
learns the ways of public policy
in Washington, D.C.*



Jessica Jackson was a high school student fighting for a ban on the sale of diet pills to minors when she first met state Rep. Deleta Williams. The battle convinced the young woman to seek a career in public policy and eventually to serve as an intern in Rep. Williams' office.

year, she got so skinny that anyone who saw her knew something was wrong. That was actually good, she says, because it allowed the family to talk about it openly. So openly, in fact, that Jackson began talking to civic groups about her experience. "Everywhere I've gone there's been someone who came up to me and said they had an eating disorder, or their mother or their sister or their best friend did," she says.

Jackson's parents found out she was taking the pills, and she quit ... for a while. After her junior year overdose, however, she sought help at the eating disorders unit at Baptist Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo.

On the way home after a two-week stay, she first told her parents that she wanted to see a bill passed banning the drugs for minors, according to her mother, Kathy Jackson.

"We could tell by the determination in her voice that this was something very important to her," Kathy says. "We told her to go for it."

Jessica's battle changed her life. She had always planned to be a teacher, but swimming in the stream of public policy only made her want more. As a sophomore in college she worked as an intern in Rep. Williams' office, where she was responsible for everything from answering the phone, to taking notes at meetings so she could brief her boss, to composing informational packets on the Equal Rights Amendment. She also worked as a page on the House floor and as a fill-in tour guide when constituents came to town. She was even elected majority floor leader during the interns' mock legislative session.

The following summer Jackson got an internship in U.S. Rep. Ike Skelton's Washington, D.C., office, where she spent days shadowing him.

"I met more guys with stars on their shoulders than I ever thought possible," she says. Skelton was ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee.

On top of all of that, she decided she wanted to be a delegate at the Democratic National Convention, so she stood up at a caucus meeting and said, "I know I'm young, but I really want to represent this congressional district," and they voted her in.

"When people meet Jessica they immediately recognize that she is a mature, intelligent young woman who has a wonderful idealism that they want to support," says Shari Garber Bax, an associate professor of political science at Central Missouri State University, who also was a delegate. "As much as I am impressed by her intelligence, manner and persuasion, I'm probably more impressed by her heart, which gives her a lot of passion and compassion."

Last spring, Jackson's efforts were recognized when she was named a Truman Scholar. About 700 college juniors competed for the prestigious title. The 75 who were chosen got \$30,000 scholar-

ships, along with mentoring, leadership training, and an opportunity to meet and mingle with some of the brightest, most politically active students in the country.

They're also among the toughest. Aside from a detailed application and a polished policy plan, applicants go through a grueling 20-minute grilling by a panel of four to six foundation representatives. The attitude comes from Truman himself, who was known to say, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Like most applicants, Jackson was certain she had failed the interview. "I walked out of there and I wanted to cry," she says. "I thought of so many things five minutes after the interview that would have made it much better. They were obviously looking for ways to see if I was strong."

A requirement of the award, in fact, is that successful applicants be "change agents," meaning they have the passion, intellect and leadership that in time should enable them to improve the way that public entities serve the public good.

The program, the official federal memorial to President Harry S. Truman, is an executive branch agency endowed with a \$55 million trust fund. It gave out its first awards in 1977. Former Clinton adviser and now ABC political analyst George Stephanopoulos was a Truman

Scholar, as was Jeffrey Toobin, *The New Yorker* magazine staff writer, and Janet Napolitano, the attorney general of Arizona. Jackson's aspirations are only slightly less ambitious. She had hoped to parlay her role as a delegate at the Democratic National Convention into an internship in a Gore White House, but that plan fell through when George W. Bush was elected. So she called a lobbyist she knew at Bracy Williams & Co., a

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Washington, D.C.-based firm that lobbies on behalf of cities, including St. Louis. She asked him if they ever hired interns. In fact, they never had, but they made an exception for her. Her primary responsibility was to keep an eye on education issues, but she also represented the firm every Monday at U.S. Conference of Mayors briefings. She also was sent to meetings all over Washington, including, for example, the Federal Emergency Management Administration, and she went often to Capitol Hill on behalf of clients to meet with members of Congress

and their staffs. "It was better than I had ever imagined," she says.

This year she's back at Mizzou finishing her bachelor's degree in political science. Since the Truman Scholarship is often the springboard to other awards, she also is applying for all of what she calls the "England awards"—the Rhodes, Fulbright, Marshall and Gates scholarships. If she gets one of those, she'll go to London for a year or two before returning to the United States to attend Georgetown University where she will work simultaneously on her law degree and a master's degree in public policy.

Then it's back to Missouri, to settle into her hometown of Warrensburg.

"I realize more and more every time I go home how much I love that town," she says. "It's the quintessential Midwestern small town, close enough to Kansas City, but far enough away that it's not just a suburb. There's real character there."

Her plan then is to open a law practice and eventually run for office. She'll start by aiming for her mentor's House seat, and then she hopes to move on to a statewide office.

"I really like Missouri," she says. "I appreciated that in Washington. Everyone there thinks they know something about politics, even the waitresses, and that's exciting. But I definitely felt like the country bumpkin out there. I missed the countryside and people who are nice and who have known each other since they were 5 years old."

Nothing would surprise her mother.

"I think it's entirely possible Jessica could become president or have some other high office in Washington," Kathy Jackson says. "Or she might own a lobbying firm or be a part of a lobbying firm."

Granted, that's a mom talking, but with Jessica's poise, determination and work ethic, anything's possible. ❁

Jessica Jackson walks with her parents, Jim and Kathy, near their home in Warrensburg, Mo. She plans to get a law degree and a master's degree in public policy before returning to her hometown.

