



WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

2021 Distinguished Young Alumna Award Recipient

Acceptance Speech, March 13, 2021

Jade McKnight '09

I am so honored to be this year's recipient of the Distinguished Young Alumna Award. I'll be honest, when Lauren called me, seemingly out of the blue, asking me to talk about my past work and accomplishments, I wasn't sure what to think. I was about a year removed from the hardest job I'd ever worked in my life, trying to forget and recover from what was almost a distant memory of trauma and somewhat dark times. It was admittedly difficult recounting that time in my life. I'd been so used to faces of horror every time I would re-tell a story of reversing overdoses with Narcan on my way to and from work; seeing the color leave peoples' faces when I talked about the Hep A outbreak in the building I worked out of. I was used to describing my time working at the syringe exchange as, "the craziest most chaotic time of my life." And it was. But by the grace of God, and a lot of help from my friends, I made it to the other side.

After graduating from Westridge, I left Pasadena and headed up to the humid hills of the pioneer valley in western Massachusetts. My time at Amherst College felt eerily reminiscent of Westridge—full of passionate learners, supportive instructors, and beautiful scenery. I credit my ease in adjusting to life at the College to Westridge. I had no problems letting my voice be heard, whether in class or during a combined workout of the men's and women's track teams. Was I mouthy? Absolutely. Bossy and pushy? Probably. But I was also a damn good leader, because I was formed in the forges of Madeline Drive.

Moving from Amherst to Philadelphia was a culture shock that jolted me into reality. The idyllic bubbles of Pasadena and Amherst needed to be popped. I felt excited at the opportunity to start over, to leave a familiar space and experience life in a city so different from that which I had known. The visuals of the snow-capped mountain ranges of my youth were swapped with trolleys, trains and skylines and clouds of cigarette smoke. I never pictured that in May of 2013 I would be rolling down grassy hills, dancing in open fields and by December of that year I would be in a windowless building tracking attendance of someone's substance abuse treatment.

Before moving to Philadelphia, I had a very limited concept of what life was like for a person living with a severe chronic disease, beyond the basic understanding that life was hard, and that I, a young woman who lived a privileged upbringing had no *real* idea. My work shifted into less reporting and more action, as I served as a housing paralegal at the AIDS Law Project. I was often the first face or voice that potential clients would interact with, so I learned to develop a type of legal bedside manner. Folks often came to the Law Project in housing crisis—I can't count how many frantic calls we received from people who'd been

locked out of their home for failure to pay rent on time. This was but a simple reminder that all people, regardless of health status, gender, housing status, or any socially constructed identifier, deserve and should be given respect and kindness.

My decision to leave the Law Project came after further exposure to the deep damage caused by the opioid use epidemic. Stories of overdose in the most public places permeated the news, more and more of my work shifted to supporting those living with opioid use disorder. In 2015, Philadelphia was the center of this global and national crisis. With high rates of injection drug use comes a myriad of other issues like the transmission of communicable diseases and infections like HIV, hepatitis C, and others. I was offered a position to help high risk individuals navigate the healthcare system in attempts to cure their hepatitis c infection. This was a landmark program in the city at the time, as there were only robust testing programs designed with surveillance in mind—this was the first elimination project and it was an absolutely wonderful experience. I was able to spend my days working with high-need, underserved populations in North Philly and trekked across town to spend my nights pursuing my graduate study in public health at UPenn. Constantly code switching, I worked tirelessly to keep my cohort informed of the very real issues affecting Philadelphians, while also working to uplift and amplify the struggles of the folks I worked with, and the community that I was serving.

When I completed my graduate studies and decided to pack up and move back to California, I started work at a health district in Redondo Beach. As you can imagine, it was a shift from providing frontline testing and treatment support to folks at the lowest point of their addiction to creating programs for high-school students in one of the most affluent areas in Los Angeles County. We shifted and transitioned to providing disaster services amid the pandemic—creating mindfulness meditation videos for students and families, hosted conversations on the high rates of substance use during stay-at-home order. I again donned gloves and masks and provided front line health services, staffing the test site, providing emergency care to people in all walks of life. As shift to providing vaccines to the County's essential educators and school support staff, I am again thankful to be in a position to provide health services during such a confusing and uncertain time.

I think about the many lessons that I learned throughout my career, and how my strength is attributed to those that came before me, those who paved the way and sojourned through dark nights so that I could attempt to shine a light. I am reminded that the inquisitive, sometimes challenging nature that has always been in me, was forged and fostered at Westridge.

Westridge School is a cornerstone in my upbringing. I entered campus at 8 years old and I've matured along with Westridge. I learned what it was like to be different, to feel alone, but also to challenge the norm and not stand for status quo. The last few years have reminded me that it is critical to give people their flowers while they can still smell them. To the friends I made at Westridge, I love you and I am so blessed to know you. I have the gift of so many

memories with you and I cherish them all. I want to say the names of some of the Westridge faculty and staff that supported me and uplifted me throughout my journey: Janice Neely, Kristen Kittscher, Kashmir Blake, Kya Blake, Danae Howe, Karen Hanselman, Sandy DeGrijs, Bonnie Martinez, Willa Greenstone, Juanita Jimenez, Karon Conwright, Jasmine Love, Dr. Barbara Shannon, and John Zilboorg.

I thank each and every member of the Westridge Black alumnae who came before me and to the Black students in classes after me. I dedicate this award to all Black girls who have walked the campus, and I offer encouragement, strength and power. I am because we are.