





THE ROAD TO WELLNESS

Melanie-Anne ATKINS'00
draws on her own experience
to drive her passion for
mental health literacy

BY DIANA BALLON / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF KIRK

When Melanie-Anne Atkins got her job as wellness coordinator at Western University in 2016, she was also completing her PhD full time, singing and dancing in a Broadway show choir, and teaching dance. Her ability to multi-task was already legendary, and it hasn't stopped.

On this Tuesday morning, she has already conducted a two-hour workshop for post-docs on stress management, run to the Wellness Education Centre to speak to students at the front desk, and is heading out to a training session to represent the London, Ont.-based institution at the upcoming Ontario Universities' Fair. She will then return to her office to edit some bi-weekly wellness newsletters that one of her students has produced, before working on an award she is developing for professors who support mental health in the classroom.

None of this will come as much of a surprise to her former Branksome classmates, who will easily discern the same drive, determination, strong work ethic and compassion for others that she displayed as a teenager.

That passion is now funnelled into her work, where she develops curriculum, gives presentations around mental health literacy — from stress management to empowerment issues — and regularly consults with faculty on how to support their students' mental health. She also trains and supervises the 15 students who work as peer educators in the Wellness Education Centre. And Melanie-Anne recently welcomed Blaise O'MALLEY'16, who joined the Wellness Education Centre front desk team — two Branksome grads, 16 years apart, working together to decrease the stigma of seeking help for mental health challenges.

Yet while Melanie-Anne's path in education, and particularly mental health literacy, now seems clear, it wasn't always so.

"My parents never knew what I would come up with next," she recalls with a bemused laugh. She attended Branksome for Grades 12 and 13, with the support of a new scholarship for outstanding black students from the John Brooks Community Foundation in partnership with the school. And, in two short years, she got involved in many activities: she led the concert band, sang in both the chamber and regular choir, participated in the dance club, performed in the musical production of *Anne of Green Gables* and studied piano, achieving her ARCT in piano performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music.

She received many kudos along the way: the Spirit Award for the
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McAlpine clan in Grade 13; the tour guide award for her work showing prospective families around Branksome; and the Carter-Ledingham prize for outstanding contribution to the school. In fact, Melanie-Anne attributes her achievements more to her extra-curriculars than to her academic standing, but her calculus teacher, Pam Young, recalls: “Her love of learning and desire to always reach for the top made her a star in the classroom.”

Still, her interests and focus on the arts were not exactly what her parents had envisioned: they hoped that she would become a doctor. Her parents had worked tirelessly to overcome lives of poverty in Jamaica, Melanie-Anne says, by immigrating to Canada and achieving a middle-

class life here. Her mother became a nurse and her father became the race relations coordinator, and then a principal, for the Etobicoke Board of Education, delivering the much-needed work around multiculturalism and anti-racism to these schools.

Eager to please them, Melanie-Anne did a four-year degree in life sciences at Queen’s University, and an additional year of upper psychology classes to improve her marks so that she could then apply to do a master’s degree in neuroscience. “I chose neuroscience for the sole reason that I thought it would be almost as prestigious as medicine,” she says.

She embarked on the graduate neuroscience program at Western as planned, but took a semester off when she was diagnosed with

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depression. Although this was a particularly difficult episode, which included being briefly hospitalized, Melanie-Anne says she has suffered from low mood for as long as she can remember. When she was younger, there was less awareness around mental health issues, she explains, and the narrative for healing was more about having willpower, working hard, praying, or, as her father would say, “putting a song in your heart.”

After that, she decided to drop neuroscience and pursue something she felt more passionate about — education. She recalled having loved her time teaching dance and musical theatre at summer camps. She got her master’s, then began her PhD in education, with a focus on applied psychology, in 2012.

It was that same year that a close friend — and fellow John Brooks scholarship winner — died by suicide. At the time, Melanie-Anne had been studying black, Canadian, race-conscious high achievers — students who proudly embrace their African Canadian heritage and believe they can thrive despite systemic oppression. But in response to the mental health struggles she and her friend had shared, she made a big shift.

“Before, I had never told anyone that I had depression,” she says. “I thought I could keep my low mood a secret. After she died, I realized that it was my responsibility to be involved in decreasing the stigma about mental illness and increasing people’s ability to seek help.”

So, now, she uses this personal experience — her own and her friend’s — toward greater openness and safety for people to talk about mental health problems and steer their own path toward wellness. And, she takes care of herself by exercising regularly, eating well and getting occasional counselling when she needs it.

And, of course, she continues to multi-task. Melanie-Anne dreams of making the Wellness Education Centre an applied research hub where students can be involved in every stage of the research. And in the long term? Maybe one day she’ll end up as dean of students at a university — or even a school like Branksome Hall. Chances are she’s up for the challenge. **R**

Diana Ballon is a Toronto writer and editor.