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Science lover's Ph.D. in physics caps pioneering journey at GSU

India Jackson followed her childhood dreams and blazed her own trail.

By H.M. Cauley
For the AJC

As India Jackson walked across the stage to accept her Ph.D. hood from Georgia State a few weeks ago, she also was marking milestones. First, she was the only physics Ph.D. in the ceremony. Second, she became GSU's first Black woman to receive such a degree. And, lastly, it marked the end of a personal journey that has taken years to complete.

A Decatur native, Jackson, 37, knew science was her field at an early age.

"Growing up, I was always interested in STEM," she said. "I also took naturally to math."

When it came time to select a college, Jackson said GSU was the best fit for her goals.

"I wanted to stay home and go to a university where I could seamlessly transfer into a graduate program," she said. "I knew eventually I'd get a master's or Ph.D., and I knew I could matriculate all the way through Georgia State if I wanted to. It had every single program I could think of."

Jackson earned a mathematics degree in 2010 and segued directly into a master's in math and statistics. At 26, she began teaching math at area institutions, including Morris Brown College and Clark Atlanta University, but she soon realized a Ph.D. would take her farther in an academic career. When she learned she could put her statistics background toward an astronomy degree, she applied to GSU's program.

"When my adviser said I could get a Ph.D. in astronomy with a math background,

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"I thought it was a dream," Jackson said. "I always loved astronomy and the stars, so I started by doing research around predicting the occurrence of solar flares."

Eventually, Jackson switched to physics. "Astronomy is one of the hardest disciplines I've been in; I was very humbled going through that program. Physics was more my strength, and I was much more successful because it's so deeply based in math."

During the seven-year Ph.D. journey, the single mom caught COVID twice and wound up taking exams while sick. In 2019, she accepted a NASA internship in Houston but needed a GoFundMe drive to raise the money to go. While there, she became seriously ill and underwent major surgery. Things improved last year when she did another NASA stint at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland, where she worked on AI and machine learning. She recently completed another NASA program around building space infrastructure. But in her Ph.D. program, she struggled to find a research topic.

"That was the biggest part: doing original research around a novel idea," Jackson said. "I had an extremely ambitious idea to do something interdisciplinary around video games and websites. I wanted to build



Years of hard work and overcoming obstacles all paid off when India Jackson earned her Ph.D. in physics. It's a milestone, too: She's the first Black woman to do that at Georgia State. COURTESY OF CONNOR RILEY

software from scratch, so I took some computer science courses that made me a better developer and engineer."

Jackson took so many computer science classes that she had enough to earn a mas-

ter's in that discipline as well. She's now shifting her focus to writing a book on the science behind zodiac constellations, and she's also helping her daughter move from high school to her own college

experience, which won't be around math or science.

"She's a dancer, and her goal is to be a kindergarten teacher," Jackson said.

"Most people just don't go into physics."