

# *The Big Picture*

An Agnes Scott alum helps ensure that folks in New York City don't see the "public" in public health. by michelle roberts matthews 91



**A**s a ninth-grader, Hilary Parton '05 had an "aha moment" when she knew she wanted to major in math. It was, she remembers, when she solved a difficult problem in Algebra II class.

"It was so exciting and rewarding," she says.

Majoring in math at Agnes Scott led her to her present position as special assistant to the deputy commissioner in the Department of Epidemiology at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where she has worked for the past three years following a graduate school internship. Immediately after graduation from Agnes Scott, she went to Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, where she earned her master's in public health with a focus on epidemiology.

After living in Dallas and Atlanta, Parton says New York City was her first choice for graduate school because of its great diversity. "I've always liked big cities," she says. But even in the Big Apple, she's been spotted by other Scotties who have recognized the distinctive class ring. Last year, many of the New York alums met in her Brooklyn home for an Agnes Scott Book Club event.

**parton says that while at agnes Scott,** she "didn't really decide on public health until the beginning of my senior year. I hadn't known it was an option." She recalls that in an AP class in high school, Environmental Science, her teacher assigned *The Hot Zone*, Richard Preston's bestselling biothriller.

"I was fascinated with the 'disease detectives,'" she says. "I didn't even think of public health as a field, but kept seeking similar books about problem-solving in public health settings."

She credits Agnes Scott's Myrtle Lewin, professor of mathematics, with helping her see the possibilities in public health and connecting her with a biostatistician at Emory University so she could learn more about the profession.

Parton says it's difficult to define her job, in which she works closely with the head of the Division of Epidemiology. The NYC Health Department has more than 6,000 employees, who until recently worked in several buildings throughout Manhattan. The health depart-

ment's recent consolidation into one building will help make things easier to coordinate, she hopes, since one of the biggest challenges of her job is working within a bureaucracy.

"There's a lot of vetting that has to be done when we release information," she says. "Data have to be double- and triple-checked, and press releases can be last-minute."

**among her ongoing projects and tasks,** Parton coordinates a monthly lecture series, Epidemiology Grand Rounds, in which she finds people within the agency to present their quantitative research on a variety of topics.

"We put out a large number of publications, and we're always pushing data to providers, to the community, to nonprofits and to anyone who needs it," she says. "Epidemiology Grand Rounds is an internal way to do that."

She also helps with planning on the agency's incident command system — an emergency structure that comes into place during a crisis such as H1N1. The reaction to the "swine flu" virus, beginning in April 2009, was "the largest activation I've seen here," she says. "In such an emergency, anything you're doing every day gets pushed to the edge of the table and the emergency becomes your everyday work. It's simply a different job."

**much of her work consists of short-term** projects such as checking and analyzing data and collaborating with other agencies to develop and implement surveys.

"At the Department of Public Health, I'm a generalist," Parton explains. "I have the big picture and know how to put people in contact with each other. I love my job because I get to be a generalist. The reason I took it is I thought I could see the different facets of the agency and where I would like to be."

She says budget cuts are a big challenge, and she's thankful the health department is proactive and committed to quantitative research and that it's strongly supported by NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Parton also admires first lady Michelle Obama for putting public health in the spotlight.

"We're starting to shift toward preventive medicine, which is so important in public health," she says.

Parton's greatest professional joy is to "put pieces together" and "see the wheels turn" when a program becomes successful.

"When public health is working, the public doesn't see it," she says.

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CHARLES LUDKE



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