FROM OUTSTANDING SENIOR TO

OUTSTANDING CITIZEN



BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

A PROFILE OF JACKSON WILLIS ’15

Jackson Willis ’15 is a highly accomplished young man who thinks deeply, speaks thoughtfully, laughs easily, and is much less impressed by himself than everyone else is.

B B B B B B B a B B decidedly less lofty. “What I wanted to be more than anything, was to be the driver of a John Deere Bobcat Skid-Steer, which I called a ‘Bobcat Skidder!’ B b B , B B B B B construction worker if I could sit in his Bobcat Skidder, and we still have the photo of me beaming from the driver seat. Slightly more scandalously, my grandmother would whisk me out of preschool on Fridays to go visit construction sites and see the . B 5 B B B B B B B

That career goal eventually fell by the wayside as he progressed through Shorecrest, where his curiosity for learning and academic prowess prompted teachers across many disciplines to call him one of the top two or three, if not the best, student they ever taught. They also have as much praise for his unpretentiousness as they do for his intellect.

“He was an outstanding student—academically a B B a B B B says Dave Field, former Upper School Math Department Chair and teacher, as well as Jackson’s advisor. “He was very humble and extremely respectful of a B B B if there was anything Jackson wasn’t good at, he B B a B ' B

When Nic Baird '15 entered Shorecr
Jackson developed a friendship that is still going strong today. He agrees that despite Jackson's achievements, Jackson didn't seek the spotlight. "He never bragged and always downplayed his accomplishments. He was very good at always making the conversation about you." He adds t
nature was also evident outside of school. "We were always at his house—we'd play ping pong all night —but Jackson was never the main character. He wanted to make sure everyone else was happy and having a good time, and that m



THE THROUGHLINE OF JACKSON'S LIFE IS A DESIRE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND TO BE A FORCE FOR POSITIVE CHANGE.

PHOTOS: Clockwise - (Top) Jackson gives the Commencement Address at 2025 Commencement. (Bottom) Jackson is awarded Outstanding Senior by former Headmaster Mike Murphy and former Head of Upper School Tom Dillow at 2015 Commencement. (Bottom left) Jackson on the piano at his family's home in St. Petersburg. (Opposite page) Jackson photographed on the Shorecrest campus in 2025.

In addition to excelling in subjects ranging from math to economics; Jackson was also a lover of arts and culture. A pianist from a young age, he grew up in a home where everyone had pictures of their two favorite musicians up on the wall. His eclectic taste was refected in his choices of George Gershwin, renowned composer and pianist, and James C. Booker, a less well-known New Orleans rhythm and singer. His interest in art history and the visual arts blossomed under Charla Gaglio, Visual Arts Chair.

"He took an intro studio art class because he wanted to learn how to paint and had never painted before," she says. "All three of them had an absolute love of teaching. They saw it as an art. They were each there to open a world to you: art, mathematics, economics."

Jackson ended his Shorecrest experience on a characteristically high note by being named the Class of 2015's Outstanding Senior and Valedictorian. He was also one of 144 students to be named a U.S. Presidential Scholar by then-presi
Shorecrest student to receive that distinction.

His GPA because it didn't have the bump that honors and AP courses have. I think that was a credit to him and his parents for agreeing that he should take the class. The fact that, as an intellectual, he wanted to develop this skill set was fascinating to me."

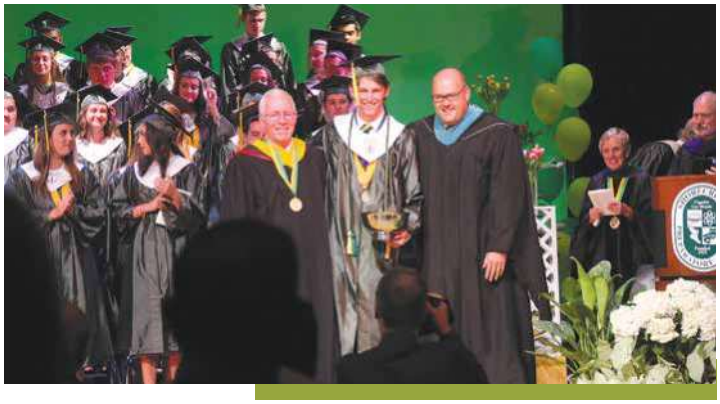
She adds that he became a very good painter; and was engaged and fun to teach in both art history and the studio class. "Speaking to him was like speaking to another adult who studies art. He doesn't come across as a snob or an academic intellectual. When you talk to him, he just seems like a bottomless well of information because he's so well-read."



When a student is as academically inclined as Jackson was, it's no surprise that he would value the relationships he developed with his Shorecrest teachers, particularly those who had the most profound impact. Gaglio, Field, and Richard Beaton, former Dean of Faculty and history and economics teacher, are several with whom he has kept in touch.

He describes the trio as deeply decent, caring and thoughtful people, and says, "All three of them had a love of teaching.

As a legacy student who followed in the footsteps of his father, Bob Willis '77, Jackson looks back at his Shorecrest experience with a decade of perspective and says, "Like all good schools, Shorecrest understands that the heart of it is the teachers; that the essence is the student-teacher relationships; and the belief that learning happens best in the company of friends and in dialogue with people you respect."



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Yale University was the next stop on Jackson's educational journey, where he began working toward a bachelor's degree in economics and humanities.

He balanced his studies with volunteer positions that reflected his interests, including serving as the director of the Yale Hunger and Homelessness Action Project and student curator at the Yale Center for British Art.

He had also been keeping an eye on the possibility of a Peace Corps position. Prior to his senior year, he saw an opening for a response volunteer to work on youth unemployment in Guinea. He applied and was accepted. It didn't matter that he had already moved into his dorm – he wasn't about to pass up an opportunity that resonated with him. The passion for making a difference that has marked every step he's taken since then had clearly taken root.



"I believe in the part of the Peace Corps mission that says we owe something to each other; and also, I believe in national service, and I think it's important to find a way to be a part of that," he says. "The experience changed me immensely—more than anything I've ever done. How it changed me is a lot about perspective [because] it's really different to read about economic theory in a book. I also learned about independence – what it's like to go from a place where you're pretty sheltered, to a place where you're on your own."

Beaton, who describes his former student as having a brilliant mind and a wonderful heart, recalls being impressed by the way in which Jackson prepared for the experience. "He constantly denigrated his ability to speak a modern foreign language, because he'd taken Latin. When he got this opportunity, he did a crash course in functional conversational French, so he was able to reach and speak to the people in Guinea, where the official language is French. That's just a reflection of who he is."

Jackson's undergraduate experience included winning the J. Edgar Meeker Prize, the John C. Schroeder Prize, and the James A. Haas Prize, the combination of which rewarded his creativity, character, leadership and intellectual achievement. He also graduated with distinction in economics and distinction in humanities, the highest tional distinction awarded in that discipline in more than 20 years.

In 2021, Jackson received a coveted Rhodes Scholarship, which is awarded to students who are chosen for "their potential to make a difference in the world." He was one of 32 applicants to be granted the opportunity to do graduate work at the University of Oxford, where he earned a Master of Studies in History of Art and Visual Culture, with distinction; and a Master of Science in Economics for Development.

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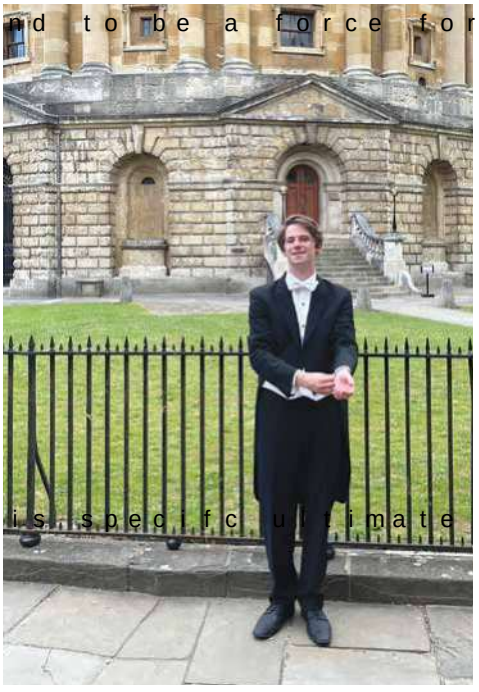
The throughline of Jackson's life is a desire to make a difference and to be a force for positive change. He is very clear about the genesis of that motivation and says, "It would start with two loving parents – these were values they held dearly. I'm grateful every day to have been part of a loving family, including a brother I'm very close to; to have dear and inspiring friends; and to have experienced the educational environment I've had. I think anyone who has received a lot has an obligation to pay it forward."

Choosing law school as his next step was a well-thought-out decision, even though he wasn't sure what his specific ultimate career choice would be.

"I went to law school for three reasons: 1) I'd had a liberal arts education through Shorecrest and college; and the beauty of











law is that it translates liberal arts thinking into the practical; 2) law aspires to help people; and if you want to think seriously about how policy gets substantiated, it's through law; and 3) law is a humanistic discipline; we have to answer the question of who we are in order to best construct our relationships and our political views as Americans and citizens of the world."

His frst two years at Yale Law School have been an intense mix of study, teaching, and research and writing, including a stint as a legal intern for New York Solicitor General Barbara Underwood; and an opportunity to conduct research in intellectual property, contracts, and art law for the Executive Director of the Dalí Museum, Dr. Hank Hine. Jackson has also found time to serve as the managing editor of the Yale Journal on Regulation, as well as a volunteer for the Brooklyn Legal Services Tenant Rights Coalition.

Although the list of his activities and accomplishments may make it seem like Jackson is indefatigable and does nothing but work, he is quick to say he needs his downtime, "I have to relax. And my friends are a huge part of that. We stay in touch with texts, calls, and an occasional group Zoom. Things like Wordle and correspondence chess are a great way to keep up with people. I still play the piano, but I don't have much time to paint. I also enjoy sous chef-ing for my brother [Walker '19], who's become a phenomenal chef." Nic Baird's perspective on his online chess matches with Jackson offers some insight into their friendship. "We love playing chess and play all the time. I'm a phenomenally better player than Jackson. If we play 25 times, I beat him 24. And he's ok with that! I wouldn't be … but he's just happy to play. He really values his friends, and he always shows up—he just came to my bachelor party, where he didn't know a single person. I love him, as we'll be friends forever."

It's easy to rely on superlatives to describe Jackson and his slate of achievements; however, those words fall short of acknowledging the man he is at heart. His approach to life embraces all fve Shorecr responsibility, respect, integrity, knowledge, and compassion.

Per Shorecrest tradition, as the Outstanding Senior from the Class of 2015, Jackson returned to campus to deliver the Commencement speech to the Class of 2025.

Next May, Jackson will gr Law and stand at the crossroads all graduates do. He is interested in First Amendment rights and the boundaries of public discourse, as well as economic and community development that creates thriving communities. "But Law is also multi-faceted and segues into all areas of the Humanities. The Humanities, in particular Art, is a serious study and a deep interest of mine. I hope to use my knowledge and love of Law and the Humanities to join the development of St. Petersburg's artistic community. No telling wh me over the years, but my hometown is a rich and wonderful place

PHOTOS: Clockwise - (Top) *Jackson with the Class of 2025 when they were second graders.* ***(Top right)*** *Brothers Walker '19 and Jackson with their father, Bob Willis '77, on a trek in Antarctica in 2024.* ***(Bottom)*** *The Willis family—Jackson, Sally, Bob, and Walker.* ***(Bottom left)*** *Jackson in academic dress at Oxford.* ***(Top left)*** *Jackson with new friends in the Peace Corps in Guinea.* ***(Center)*** *Jackson at his graduation from Yale as an undergraduate.*

