

One of 15 Merage fellows, Melissa-Sue Angus-John is pursuing her dream to teach and study immigrant and minority issues.



MILL EVANS

In pursuit of the American dream

Jamaican-born Melissa-Sue Angus-John earned a \$10,000 annual fellowship.

BY ZAK STAMBOR *gradPSYCH* staff

In 1999, as Melissa-Sue Angus-John emigrated from Jamaica to attend Hunter College in New York City, she was confident she would enroll in medical school after graduation.

Her dream held strong—until she walked into her first psychology class.

The professor, Peregrine Murphy, PhD, “had a presence and passion for psychology and research,” Angus-

John says. “I wanted to emulate her teaching style and become a psychologist. She encouraged us to think about the broader sides of psychology and stressed the scientific nature of psychology.”

Angus-John was hooked on becoming a psychologist—despite balancing a marriage and a three-year-old daughter, Alyssa. She wanted to examine the effects of gender and eth-

nic stereotypes on educational and occupational outcomes.

“She’s fantastic in her ability to juggle family and academics,” says Teceta Thomas, PhD, who worked with Angus-John in a social psychology laboratory on ethnicity, identity and immigration at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). “She did it in a way I’ve never seen in an undergraduate.”

Since June 2002, Angus-John has held research internships at North Carolina State University and Pennsylvania State University and conducted research at both the Graduate Center and Hunter College campuses of CUNY. She's made presentations on topics such as gender differences in emotional complexity, the relationship between dopamine and the sexual behavior of female mice, and rat sexual behavior and oxytocin response to stress. And last August, she enrolled in the social psychology doctoral program at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.

However, were it not for fellowships from her university and the Merage Institute for the American Dream—which is providing her with a \$20,000 education stipend for two years—she wouldn't have been able to attend graduate school.

Angus-John is one of 15 fellows sponsored by Merage's fellowship program, which helps immigrants who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents pursue their American dreams. Her dream is to teach, design intervention programs and serve as a role model for other underrepresented students.

"The fellowship has allowed me to have the financial heart to continue my studies," says Angus-John. "It also has motivated me to do better things."

In addition to her research, Angus-John works as a mentor at the University of Connecticut's Minority Advancement in Psychology program, mentoring and advising high school and undergraduate students about furthering their education, strengthening their graduate school applications and academic research.

"People have always said to me, 'Melissa, you're a dreamer, but you can't change the world,'" Angus-John says. "But the fellowship has allowed me to meet other students who are also dreamers and who have the will to make those dreams come through."

The foundation—founded in 2003 by Paul Merage, an Iranian-born immigrant who achieved success in America after inventing

Hot Pockets—connects young immigrants with mentors, funds studies of immigration issues and develops DVDs for classrooms that document the success of various immigrants. For the fellowship, the foundation works in alliance with 21 universities across the country to identify potential fellowship candidates.

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University of Connecticut, Storrs

"When we met Melissa we were impressed with the tenaciousness in her research," says Marshall Kaplan, the Merage Foundation's executive director. "Her desire to link different

cultures and ethnicities to American culture should help immigrants become proud of who they are and where they come from."

Angus-John is one of two Merage fellows pursuing psychologically based research: Ani Martikyan, who conducts neuropsychopharmacology research at the University of California, Los Angeles, with David Jentsch, PhD, is the other.

After moving to the United States from Armenia in 1992, Martikyan not only had to cope with a new culture and language, but also two emotionally disabled parents.

Inspired by her family situation, Martikyan declared a psychobiology major and began doing graduate coursework as a freshman. She aims to help people with mental illness lead more normal lives.

Other Merage fellows are pursuing such diverse fields as international law, medical journalism, global health-care policy and biomedical research. ▶