

# ASHLEY MCKINNEY

## The Chemist on the Case Uses Curiosity, Logic, and Creativity to Decode Famous Brands

By Tim Fox      Photo by Kevin Hopkins

**While growing up in Washington Park, Ashley McKinney loved** getting gifts, but her grandmother, Johnella Meitzenheimer, gave her gifts that changed her life.

"Most little girls wanted dolls, but my grandmother always gave me books. She never put a limit to how many books she would buy during a visit to the bookstore," she remembers. "And I loved books. Especially Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes got me interested in science."

Today, McKinney is a kind of detective herself. As a formulations chemist for the St. Louis company Vi-Jon, she helps make store-brand versions of famous label products, like Purell hand sanitizer. Because the big brands like to keep their most important ingredients secret, McKinney has to look for chemicals that will do the same thing.

"It's a lot of trial and error, just like detective work," she says. "I have to use the resources I have at hand, plus my understanding of chemistry. I know in theory what should happen when you put two things together, but I have to use creativity when something unexpected happens. It's like baking—taking separate ingredients to create something else."

McKinney's understanding of chemistry is for real. The eldest of four children of Kimberly Meitzenheimer Granger, her passion for science—started by the famous detective with the funny hat—grew as a student at A.M. Jackson Math & Science Academy and then at East St. Louis Senior High. There, she took a course in analytic chemistry, and her guidance counselor, Cecil Bedwell, encouraged her to pursue the sciences.

By the time she took organic chemistry and physics classes at Elmhurst College in Chicago, she was hooked.

"I wasn't into medicine," McKinney says. "I wanted to get into research and development. So after college, I signed up with a temp agency that found me a tech job at Vi-Jon, washing beakers and things in the lab."

Vi-Jon recognized McKinney's talent. The company—which also makes its own brand name hand sanitizer, Germ-X—eventually hired her full time and promoted her to chemist. She now oversees projects for the personal care team.

But as much as she loves her job, there is something else she loves just as much—dancing and singing.

"I started dancing at age four. We'd turn the living room of our house at 47th and Caseyville into a dance floor when company came over."

Later, McKinney started taking dancing and acting lessons with the Katherine Dunham Center for Performing Arts.

"That's where the bug bit me," she laughs. "One day when I was eight, I actually got to meet Katherine Dunham there. I couldn't believe it. There I was, a little wannabe dancer/actress and there was this phenomenal woman whose name is on buildings, sitting right in front of me! She had actually come to talk to the students in her dance company. I couldn't believe it!"

McKinney kept taking dance classes until she was thirteen, and in her early twenties she joined a church choir in East St. Louis.

"All the scientists I know are closet entertainers," she says. "They have that logical side, but they need to activate their creativity, too."

McKinney sees that mix of logic and creativity as a formula for success for many of today's kids. She urges them to step outside of the classroom, research industries they are interested in, then companies in that industry. Next, she suggests asking about internships and not being afraid of temp agencies.

"My grandmother gave me something that no one can ever take away from me," she says. "Besides Sherlock Holmes, she encouraged me to research all the schools I was interested in. I had all the support I needed from every side and the right people making the right decisions for my life. You don't realize until you're grown up how important that is."

Asked about moving back home, McKinney says she'd still consider moving back to East St. Louis some day.

"It would be nice to say I brought some life back to my city," she says. "Stories like mine and the other ones in *I Am EstL*, *The Magazine* need to be told so that young people don't give up hope."

