

Rob Strong



HOME IS WHERE THE HEALTH IS

MEGAN SANDEL MED '96 FIGHTS FOR CHILDREN: For the child struggling to breathe because his family's apartment is laden with mold. For the child being poisoned by the lead that lurks in her home's water supply. For the child who has no home at all.

As a nationally recognized expert on housing and its connection to children's health, principal investigator with Children's Health Watch, associate professor of pediatrics at the Boston University School of Medicine, and associate professor of environmental health at the Boston University School of Public Health, Sandel has made it her mission to build safer, healthier futures for families everywhere. But before she set out to change lives, the professors at Dartmouth Medical School (now Geisel School of Medicine) changed hers.

Early in her journey through medical school, her path began to take shape when she enrolled in a course taught by Joseph O'Donnell MED '72, who advised his students to connect with the community. Sandel teamed up with local K-12 instructors to teach students about health.

"It was a pivotal moment for me," Sandel says, "to realize that community service was as instrumental to my learning as what I was learning in the classroom."

Then, in her third year of medical school, she spent a week shadowing Dartmouth-Hitchcock pediatric neurologist Richard Nordgren, MD, who built on that foundation.

"He really lifted me up," Sandel says. "He taught me a lot about being a healer and taking care of patients holistically and thinking about different factors that either made people sick or made people healthy, and it was at that point that I decided to become a pediatrician."

During her pediatric residency at Boston Children's Hospital and

Boston Medical Center, she "fell in love with research" when she discovered the impact it could have. "Through individual interactions inside a clinic, I could heal one child at a time," says Sandel, "but by tackling entire systems—working to create policy-level changes—I could heal so many more." To further this goal, Sandel went on to receive her master's degree in public health from the Boston University School of Public Health.

Over the course of her career, Sandel has conducted numerous peer-reviewed studies that reveal the detrimental health effects of homelessness and subpar housing on children, and she has served on many national boards and committees that explore these issues. She is the former pediatric medical director of Boston Healthcare for the Homeless program, and in 1998, she collaborated with other doctors at Boston Medical Center to publish the DOC4Kids report, the first national report on how housing affected child health. Currently, she is also involved in community programs to create safe, affordable housing in urban areas, and partners with lawyers to push landlords to improve unhealthy living conditions, particularly for children living with asthma.

She spends her remaining time in Boston Medical Center's Grow Clinic, where she serves as associate director. "It's an amazing multidisciplinary team of health workers, nutritionists, outreach workers, all trying to get malnourished kids growing again. It's really phenomenal," Sandel says. She adds that it's

especially rewarding when children who were once homeless walk through those clinic doors—children who now have stable homes and beds to be tucked into at night.

Sandel devotes herself to transforming lives every single day, and as she encourages other hospitals throughout the nation to follow her lead in addressing housing disparities, she will forever be grateful to her Dartmouth professors for lighting the way. Dartmouth gave her the space she needed to grow, and now—through the underserved children she treats, the families she advocates for, and the future doctors she mentors—she is determined to carry on that legacy.

KERRY BENSON

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